

NOTES

A SIGHTING OF THE BACK-STRIPED WEASEL (*MUSTELA STRIGIDORSA*) IN NORTHERN THAILAND

The Back-striped Weasel (*Mustela strigidorsa*) is listed by BURTON & PEARSON (1987) as one of the rarest animals of the world. Very little is known about the status and biological habits of this animal. Although LEKAGUL & MCNEELY (1977) stated that only 8 specimens of this species were known, a recent review by WIRTH (1989) shows that there are 21 specimens in the British Museum (Natural History) alone and 10 others in the Kunming Institute of Zoology, China, making a total of 39 museum specimens. Of these, 18 are from Burma (upper Burma, the Naga Hills and Tennasserim), 5 from Sikkim, northeast India, 2 from Nepal, 1 each from Thailand and Laos and another 2 specimens are from unknown localities. All 10 of the Chinese specimens were collected in Yunnan. In addition, there are more than 10 specimens of this weasel in the Biology Museum of the University of Hanoi and in the Mammal Collection of the Institute of Zoology, Hanoi, Vietnam (John MacKinnon, pers. comm.). This suggests that the Back-striped Weasel may not as rare as previously thought.

I encountered a Back-striped Weasel during a wildlife survey of Phu Luang Wildlife Sanctuary on 29 January 1988, near Huai Bang Sub-station, Amphoe Wang Saphung, Loei Province (17° 18' N and 101° 34' E). I saw it in secondary forest along a small stream northeast of the sub-station, situated in the foothills at about 350 m above sea level. The forest contained some big trees, including many *Lagerstroemia* sp., with bamboos.

At about 1030 h, while I was sitting in the shade of a big tree about 50 meters from a dirt road which extends up the mountain, I saw a reddish brown animal on the ground moving towards me. It was unaware of my presence and approached to within about 3 m, running along a rotten log lying on the ground. It stopped at frequent intervals to sniff at the log. It was about 60 cm long from head to tail and somewhat resembled the common mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*) in shape. It had a creamy white stripe running from the nape along the middle of its back to the base of its tail. The cheeks and throat were pale buff. The only other similar species which might be expected in the sanctuary, the Siberian Weasel (*Mustela sibirica*), does not have a stripe on the back. I watched it for about 2 minutes before it moved out of my sight.

This is only the second record of this species for Thailand. The first was collected at 700 m elevation Ban Na Kha, Amphoe Muang, Nan Province (18° 46' N, 100° 98' E) about 185 km northwest of Phu Luang on 7 June 1969 by Mr. Kitti Thonglongya (specimen no. 54–1401 in the Thailand Institute of Scientific and Technological Research, Bangkok). According to LEKAGUL & MCNEELY (1977) the specimen was taken in a small hill tribe hamlet, 20 km from dry evergreen forest. It was shot in a hole 3–4 m up the tree. However Mr. Preecha Luecha who accompanied the expedition, reported (pers. comm.) that the animal was collected in a small woodlot

along a dirt road in mostly deforested hills. Another sighting was made in Yunnan in 1978 by Wang Ying Xiang in scrubby habitat close to a rice field. According to WIRTH (1989), the species may live in dense scrub, secondary forest and grassland above 600 m elevation. In India, the species can be found between 1220–2135 m elevation (PRATER, 1980). The elevation at which I found the weasel at Phu Luang is thus below the known altitudinal range of the species.

At present, we still know very little about this weasel. It might be possible to study its biology and habits at Phu Luang Wildlife Sanctuary. Such basic data might be useful for the future conservation of this species.

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