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One of World's Most Mysterious Cats Caught on Camera

New videos give a look into the daily life of a marbled cat, a critically endangered species in China.

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China may be famous for giant pandas, but new videos might make you fall in love with another beautiful and extremely rare mammal that roams its hilly forests: The marbled cat.

A series of recent camera -trap videos, taken in Yunnan Province's the Gaoligong Mountain National Nature Reserve of Yunnan Province, shows at least one of the housecat-size species looking about curiously, trotting down a mountain trail, and even peeing.

"This is not the only video of a marbled cat, but [it's] still very exciting to see," Jim Sanderson, a small-cat expert and program manager at the Texas-based Global Wildlife Conservation, says by email.

That's because the secretive Southeast Asian cat is one of the least understood wildcats in the world: All that's known about it comes from a study of a single female in Thailand.



MYSTERY FELINE

For instance, the new videos show the strikingly patterned cats holding their long, bushy tails rigidly behind them, supporting the theory that they use their tails for balance while in the trees. (A cat that's constantly climbing up and down trees would have to keep its tail straight back, not dangling over its back and head, Sanderson says.)

The marbled cat can turn its feet backward, an ability that makes it more agile in trees. The only other cat species with that skill also lives in trees, South America's margay—and it has a similarly lengthy tail. (See "[Here Are 7 Cats You Never Knew Existed.](#)")

Though "we have no idea" what's on the marbled cat's menu, Sanderson suspects the species may take advantage of their lofty lifestyles by eating bats.

And in some ways, it turns out the marbled cat is like any other feline.

"As with many cats, including the big cats, this video shows the male marbled cat marking his territory by spraying urine onto nearby vegetation," Sanderson says.

Likewise, in the same way as "many other wild cat species, this

individual walks on a trail in the forest"—likely due to the ease of travel.

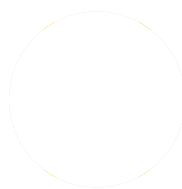
RARE AMONG CATS

Despite such snapshots into its daily life, "very little is known of marbled cats or the threats to their continued existence," Sanderson says.

Forest loss due to agriculture and palm oil plantations is likely reducing their numbers, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Because the cats are so hard to find, their total population is unknown, though rudimentary survey data suggests more than 10,000 animals exist, the IUCN says.

Its huge geographic range—stretching some 2,000 square miles from Borneo to Bhutan—has patchy, uneven populations, with some much higher than others. That's why, species wide, the IUCN ranks the species as near threatened. Regionally, however, its conservation status varies; China, for instance, considers the cat critically endangered.



Christine Dell'Amore is the online natural history editor for National Geographic News; she also founded the popular blog Weird & Wild.