

# The Marsh Mongoose

by  
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Less than an hour's car journey from the heart of Calcutta takes one to the vast, unbroken tract along the city's eastern fringe, popularly known as the Salt Lakes. Upto the last century, the area retained its connection with the great mangrove forests, the Sunderbans, which have today retreated further south. Accounts of the region's natural history date back to that period, when a great number of important finds were made. In 1851, the naturalist Edward Blyth, who greatly influenced Charles Darwin in his early days, described the Indian pilot whale for the first time, a shoal of which was carried by a current into the Salt Lake, from the Bay. Also documented from the area by Blyth and other pioneer naturalists were such avian delights as the peregrine falcon, Baer's pochard, spoonbill and swamp partridge, in addition to

many other species, several of which have ceased to exist in the area. Over the years, the river channels were blocked up and the land reclaimed, which resulted in the disappearance of the mangrove vegetation, and with it, the birds that depended on it, like the mangrove whistler and brownwinged and storkbilled kingfisher. Nearing our time, more alteration of habitat was to follow; the dense reed beds, home of many species, disappeared, being by and large replaced by open water suitable for pisciculture and roads through which countless vehicles ply daily.

One of the survivors in a changed world is a small carnivore, which had managed to elude science till the mid 1960's, when the Zoological Survey of India described the marsh mongoose *Herpestes palustris*, from the marshes of Salt Lake. The most recently described, and consequently the least known of all carnivores, the marsh mongoose today survives precariously in a small area, in the north Salt Lakes. Its highly restricted distribution thus may qualify it for the position of the world's rarest mammal. With its small head, low-slung body and tapering tail, the species closely resembles the small Indian mongoose, but may be immediately

differentiated from it in the presence of a black patch in the area around the muzzle and in front of the eyes, and the possession of webs between the digits of both the fore and hindlimbs.

Field studies, as a prelude to conservation, have resulted in the emergence of considerable data on the life-history of the marsh mongoose, some of which have become causes of pessimism about the species survival outlook. The little carnivore lives in self excavated holes on inundated banks, beside the waterways, which are a few feet deep and situated under cover of dense vegetation. The monsoons are perhaps the most difficult period in the year, as the water level rises, flooding the holes, and making food difficult to obtain. The adjoining scrubland is the only area saved from floods, and here the mongoose finds refuge. Breeding season is the winter months, when generally two young ones are born, and protected by the female in the burrows. Freshwater crabs and snails are the chief constituents of its diet, though fledglings of waterbirds, discovered among the water hyacinths, as well as snakes and fishes may also compliment it. Major competitors of the marsh mongoose are the jackal and yellow monitor, both being common and have the same choice of food as the mongoose. Jungle cat and possibly the Fishing cat, also inhabit these marshes, but are of rare occurrence, and are unlikely to seriously affect the species.

In line with its preference for soft mud and shallow waters, the mongoose displays well-developed webs in both the limbs. Though field observations have not indicated that the species takes to water, there is almost no doubt that it can and does swim, especially during the high water periods. A captive marsh mongoose, however, shunned water, and even avoided moist places. Despite its small size, the otherwise tame specimen displayed a remarkably aggressive behaviour, and managed to get the better of a full-grown Alsatian dog.

The vistas are continually changing. The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass today sweeps through the area, and numerous new roads creep towards the best marsh mongoose habitat. In recent years, there have been frenzied building activities in the area—a 150,000 capacity sports stadium, a snake park, a safari park and numerous housing projects. Hence, every year the habitat continues to shrink and shrink, while the human population increases carving out more land for its multifarious activities. In addition, the mongoose is trapped in large numbers for sale in the city by professional trappers and killed at sight by fishermen, for its alleged fish-destroying potential. And while endless bitter wars rage on for the protection of Salt Lake's wild flora and fauna, the last of the marsh mongooses roam the marshes, in their last stand, unaware of their impending doom.

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