

Appendix II – Cheetahs of Orissa

If archival records are anything to go by, Cheetahs were well distributed in Orissa as well. Within Orissa, all the Cheetah references come from central and western Orissa, as well as from the deep south with some of the last alleged Cheetah sighting reports surfacing from the Orissa-Andhra Pradesh border.

Space constraints however won't allow me to go into a detailed discussion on the Cheetah's distribution in the state; perhaps I will have to write another paper for that. So even though I won't be quoting each and every Cheetah reference from Orissa that I have at my disposal in detail, I will try to quote most of them here, which hopefully will provide the readers a general overview of the species' distribution in the state.

L.S.S. O'Malley – who apart from other administrative books also has dozens of District Gazetteers to his credit in the period between *circa* 1905–1930 – in his book *Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Sikkim* published in 1917, wrote:

“A few cheetahs or hunting leopards have been shot in the Orissa States.” (O'Malley 1917).

In those days, much of present day Orissa was under princely rule, divided into a number of “*tributary or feudatory states*”, as the British used to call them. Only the districts of Sambalpur, Angul, Puri, Cuttack and Balasore were under direct British rule. So naturally, the details of fauna in most of the Tributary states are sketchy, though a few insights into the faunal wealth of *Gangpur* and *Bonai* states in northern Orissa can be found in various books and archival records.

Sundargarh's Cheetahs : Hemgir or Himgir, is a block in the present day Sundargarh district of Orissa, located on the north-western border of the state with Chhattisgarh. In the days of the Raj, this area was a part of the 'game-rich' princely state of *Gangpur*, one of the two princely states (the other being *Bonai*) that were merged to form Sundargarh district. The terrain around Himgir is very similar to that of other Cheetah-bearing areas of southern Jharkhand – a ~60 km and ~15km forested hill range to its south, a maze of broken forested hills to the north and east, and the *Tamnar* & *Ghargoda* valleys (roughly of the same dimensions as the southern hill ranges) with their open tracts, to its west. In these very broken hills to the north-west of Himgir where



Cropped map of Orissa from the Imperial Gazetteer of India's map of Bengal and Sikkim, 1907

two Cheetahs were shot, while 2 others were seen to the south, in *circa* 1905. *L.E.B Cobden-Ramsay* recorded this in one of the volumes of *Bengal District Gazetteer* series titled *Feudatory states of Orissa*, published in 1910:

“The chitah (*Felis jubata*) or hunting leopard is not supposed to inhabit Bengal, but there are a few to be found in the west of the State of Gangpur in the Himgir zamindari. Two have been shot in the Garjan hill in the north-west of that zamindari and two more have been seen in south Himgir on the border of Kodabaga.” (Cobden-Ramsay 1910).

Kodabaga was also a zamindari, south of Himgir. And although there are no documented records to prove the same, it's very likely that Cheetahs also occurred in northern Sundergarh's Saranda landscape (near its border with Jharkhand's Singhbhum district) given the fact that *Jaraikela*, is hardly 10-12 kms away from the Orissa border.

Cheetahs of erstwhile 'Greater Sambalpur' district: The British-era Sambalpur district has now been split up into three districts—Jharsuguda, Sambalpur and Bargarh. And it's been mentioned time and again, right from the mid 19th century to *circa* 1920 that Cheetahs weren't uncommon in this part of the country. The earliest evidence of the Cheetah inhabiting Sambalpur comes from this hitherto unrecorded reference of the species in the book *Jungle life in India: Or, The Journeys and Journals Of An Indian Geologist* published in 1880. Written by Valentine Ball, among the country's foremost geologist in his days, he mainly operated in the area of Orissa and Chota-Nagpur plateau and became a pioneering ornithologist of the area as well. In the book's appendix '*On the Mammals and Birds occurring in the area which extends from the Ganges to the Godavari rivers*', Ball writes:

“*Felis jubata*, Schreb. — The hunting-leopard appears to have been obtained in Sambalpur.” (Ball 1880).

W.T. Blanford, the famous geologist and naturalist, and a good friend of V. Ball would later quote him in his celebrated book *The Fauna Of British India Including Ceylon & Burma* published in 1888, while describing the distribution of the Cheetah in India:

“I once saw a skin that had been brought in by a local shikari at Deoghar, in the Sonthal Pergunnahs, south of Bhagalpur, and Ball saw another, under similar circumstances, at Sambalpur.” (Blanford 1888).

In yet another hitherto unrecorded reference, *L.S.S. O'Malley* in his District Gazetteer of Sambalpur, published in 1909, writes about the Cheetah's as well as the Caracal's presence in the district:

“The chitah or hunting leopard (*Cynaelurus jubatus*) is also met with occasionally, more especially in the more open country to the south and west. The red lynx (*Felis caracal*), though very rare, has been seen and indentified on more than one occasion. It is found in the south-west of the district, and one is known to have been run-down with dogs a mile to the east of Sambalpur.” (O'Malley 1909).

This is the last time Cheetah is mentioned in Sambalpur; and so in all probability they disappeared from Sambalpur in first quarter of the 20th century. The Caracal followed suit in a few years, for there have been no Caracal reports from anywhere in Orissa in the last 30-40 years. The last such report was one from Mayurbhanj district in 1962 (Behura and Guru 1969).

A Cheetah shot in Talcher: *Talcher* is one of the 4 subdivisions of Angul District in Central Orissa. A cheetah was shot here in 1932 by *Sir Arthur Cunningham Lothian*, who remorsefully wrote in his book *Kingdoms of Yesterday*, published in 1951:

“In Talcher one day, when out for a Tiger, I fired at an animal moving through the jungle, and found to my great regret that I had shot a specimen of that very rare animal, the Indian cheetah.” (Lothian 1951).

Alleged Cheetah Sightings From Orissa: Orissa has reported at least two alleged Cheetah sightings post the killing of the last 3 Cheetahs in 1947. A gentleman named James Milne claimed to have seen one near the Orissa-Andhra Border in 1951 while the local villagers opined that there were more Cheetahs in that area (Seshadari 1969). And then a Shikari is said to have seen one in an isolated corner of Dhenkenal forest in 1960 (Behura and Guru 1969). It's worth noting here that Dhenkenal forests are about 50 kms south-east of Talcher town, and it's quite possible that the Cheetah killed by Arthur Lothian in 1932 was shot somewhere around this very forest area of Dhenkenal.

An embarrassing controversy arose in last months of 1990, when the then Field Director of Similipal Tiger Reserve inadvertently referred to a large Leopard he had seen on his trip along the Baniabasa-Bhajam-Jenabil road of the park, (Singh) by its vernacular name viz. *Cheeta*. The story was picked up by the press who reported that the long extinct Indian Cheetah had been rediscovered in Similipal by the Director and Deputy Director of the park! The story caused a bit of flurry in the conservation quarters before the matter was cleared up.