

Appendix VI – Jharkhand's lone Caracal Reference: Hazaribagh

Cheetah's habitat in Western, Central Indian and East-Central Indian Landscape almost completely overlapped with that of another elusive and little-understood wild cat – the Caracal or *Siyah-Gosh*, its Persian name by which it's commonly known in India. Back in the days when the sport of *Coursing with Cheetahs* was at its zenith, it wasn't uncommon to find the sport of *Cheetah Coursing* being accompanied by the another sport called "*Hunting with Caracals*", with the Cheetah's smaller sidekick – the Caracal – being the showstopper for this sport. Caracals just like Cheetahs could be easily trained. Apart from this, another possible reason for the sport of *Hunting with Caracals* being exclusively prevalent in those states that indulged in *Cheetah Coursing*, would be the fact that Caracals were sympatric with Cheetahs; and so it was easy for the *Cheetawala Pardhis* – the Cheetah trapping tribe that post-Cheetah's extinction became simply *Pardhis*, still notorious to this date for their involvement in illegal wildlife trade – to trap Caracals along with the Cheetahs. In the old district archival records right from the *Kathiawar* and *Rajputana* states in western India to *Sambalpur* in central Orissa, almost everywhere a mention of Cheetah's presence was accompanied with that of the Caracal or the *Red Lynx* – as the British naturalists of yesteryears used to call it – as well. And so, it was a surprise to me that I hadn't come across any Caracal references from Jharkhand during my research, inspite of the fact that the Cheetah habitats in Palamu, Gumla, Hazaribagh and Deoghar would have been ideal Caracal habitats as well.

It was a long held view that Caracals didn't occur in Bengal. *T.C. Jerdon* while describing the Caracal in his book *The Mammals of India* published in 1874 had written:

"It appears to be quite unknown in the Himalayas and in Bengal, and the countries to the eastward." (Jerdon 1874).

Almost all other British naturalists either concurred with Jerdon's view or remained mute on the cat's status in Bengal. O'Malley's Sambalpur Caracal reference of 1909 – which incidentally is the only confirmed Caracal reference from Orissa that I know of – finally demolished this long held view, even though one other reference by Ball (described below) also suggested of their presence in Bengal.

While nearing the completion of this paper, I was randomly going through some old JBNHS papers on the Cheetah's mannerisms. And that is when I stumbled across what according to me is the first and perhaps the only Caracal reference from Jharkhand. This note had luckily been published just above the note on the Cheetah's voice, which I had planned on reading. This is the first and upto today the only Caracal reference from Jharkhand that I'm aware of I am reproducing that note – published in 1959 in the Journal's 56th volume (Sen 1959) – here in toto:

THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE INDIAN LYNX

Is the Indian Lynx (*Caracal caracal*) disappearing from our forests? Would your readers kindly enlighten me through your journal when and where this animal has been seen during the last 3-4 years? This animal was been seen by me in Hazaribagh National Park in Bihar in December 1957 and by Shri K. S. Sankhala, Divisional Forest Officer, Jaipur, in Sariska Game Sanctuary in Rajasthan on 31 October 1958. Two immature cubs were found in the Sariska Sanctuary. The cubs could not be kept alive and their carcasses were sent to the Zoological Survey of India for identification and preservation. Judging from the manner in which these cubs were abandoned by the parents it looks to me that the natural food of this animal is fast disappearing and therefore the mother not being capable of rearing the cubs abandoned them. They do not seem to have the habit of tigers and panthers of eating their cubs if food supply is difficult.

N. N. SEN, I.F.S., Chief Conservator of Forests
RAJASTHAN, JAIPUR
April 2. 1959.

The Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary is located almost at the centre of contemporary as well as British-era Hazaribagh District. Now, Caracals couldn't have air-dropped themselves into Hazaribagh WLS. So, surely they would have (still do?) existed in the north Palamau, Shahabad, southern hills of Gaya, and maybe even Gumla, Deoghar and Chatra, for the forests of all these districts formed one contiguous belt. It's worth reiterating here that the Caracal was also shot by G.O. Allen, south of Mirzapur district which borders the erstwhile Greater Palamau and Shahabad districts.

However, I would do great injustice if I failed to mention here the following snippet reference that confirmed the occurrence of Caracals in the British *Chotanagpur Division* – which today includes most of Jharkhand, as well as some neighbouring areas of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Orissa. Mr. V. Ball, in a note titled "*On the Avifauna of Chutia (Chota) Nagpur Division, S.W. Frontier of Bengal*" published in 1874 in A.O. Hume's journal of Ornithology *Stray Feathers*, wrote this while describing the mammalian fauna of the division:

"The Lynx (*Felis caracal*) I have once seen. It seems to be extremely rare." (Ball 1874).

W.T. Blanford caused some confusion when, while describing the Caracal in his book, he first writes: "Ball met with it in Chutia Nagpur." (Blanford 1888); and then in the very next line writes a contradictory statement: "Unknown in Bengal and the Eastern Himalayas".

So it was V. Ball who first mentioned the presence of Caracal in the Chota-Nagpur region. However, the only reason I call Sen's note to be "*Jharkhand's lone Caracal reference*" is because Ball never mentioned the area within the Chota-Nagpur division where he came across the Caracal, and hence, even though most-probably he saw one in what is today the state of Jharkhand, there still is a faint possibility that the area where he saw a Caracal was outside the state in neighbouring districts.

The present status of the Caracal in Jharkhand is unknown for there has been almost no species-research in this part of the country, and sadly the Forest Department, save for the big-game and larger ungulates, is largely ignorant of the presence or absence of other small and elusive species in their forests. It's quite possible that a thorough research of these forests might well throw up some amazing discoveries.



R.A. Sterndale's sketch of a Caracal from his book *Natural History Of Mammalia Of India And Ceylon*, 1884.