

EURASIAN OTTER RAISES HOPE FOR J&K STREAM

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Eurasian otter caught in the infrared camera along the Neeru stream in Jammu and Kashmir. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

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The first photographic record of an elusive semi-aquatic carnivorous mammal has indicated that not all is lost for a Jammu and Kashmir stream.

A trio of scientists from the University of Jammu's Institute of Mountain Environment (IME) at Baderwah camera-trapped three Eurasian otters – two adults and one sub-adult – in the Neeru stream of the Chenab catchment.

Apart from putting an end to doubts about the animal's presence in the upper Chenab catchment, their findings have confirmed that some stretches of the Neeru remain unpolluted. The Neeru is a tributary of the Chenab river.

"These stretches are away from human habitations and comprise of stony beds and narrow valleys that are virtually unsuitable for sand and gravel mining, providing some hope for the otter's survival," Neeraj Sharma, the corresponding author of the report on the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) told *The Hindu*.

Since the Eurasian otter — classified as 'near threatened' on the IUCN Red List — is regarded as a flagship species and indicator of high-quality aquatic habitats, its presence is encouraging for the health of the Neeru stream, he said.

Dinesh Singh and Anil Thakar are the other scientists behind the study published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*.

Mammals of the family Mustelidae with seven genera and 13 species, otters are found in every continent except Australia and Antarctica. The Eurasian otter covers the largest range of any Palearctic mammal, covering parts of three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The species is persecuted as a pest in countries such as India, China and Nepal, and its populations in Europe and Asia have declined in recent years due to hunting for food and pelt, habitat loss, pollution and climate change, the IME scientists said.

Eurasian otter caught in the infrared camera along the Neeru stream in Jammu and Kashmir. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

The species was reported to occur in Jammu and Kashmir in 2020 and its presence in the Indus river and its tributaries in Ladakh was confirmed through two earlier studies. The IME scientists followed these credible accounts and conducted extensive investigations that included a questionnaire survey and camera trapping.

The study area is drained by the Neeru, a 30-km perennial stream that originates in the Kailash Lake at 3,900 metres above mean sea level and drains into the Chenab at Pul-Doda. Fed by 13 major tributaries, the stream flows through several small villages, semi-urban and urbanised areas, with Bhaderwah being the largest settlement.

Questionnaire surveys conducted in 2016-17 revealed that the animal – locally called *huder* or *hud* – once inhabited the entire length of the Neeru and its tributaries. Unable to establish a direct sighting, the scientists followed the faeces of the animal and set up five infrared cameras.

Three Eurasian otters were captured on the cameras over five days in October 2020.

“We argue that rapid human population influx, infrastructure expansion, and pollution have altered the hydro-morphology of Neeru stream, affecting the otter population. This observation calls for more intensive otter surveys in the nearby smaller basins of Neeru, Kalnai, and Sewa and other large tributaries of the Chenab... for improved conservation and management of the species in the region,” the scientists said.

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