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The Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* is associated with the eastern Himalaya, while having a global range that extends from eastern Nepal through Bhutan, India, and Burma to southern Tibet and western Yunnan Province of China (Chowdury 2001; Wang et al. 2008).

There is limited information on its distribution and status range-wide, mainly due to its elusive nature (Mahato 2010). Loss and fragmentation of its habitat, coupled with hunting, threatens the Red Panda throughout its range (Yonzon et al. 1991; Wei et al. 1999; Pradhan et al. 2001), including in Arunachal Pradesh, India (Kumar 2010). It is estimated that there are fewer than 10,000 mature individuals worldwide, and populations continue to decline (Wang et al. 2008). Due to such anthropogenic threats, Red Pandas are classified as Vulnerable under IUCN and placed in Appendix-I of CITES. In India the Red Panda is confined to the north-east in Sikkim, northern West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh, with an unconfirmed isolated population in Meghalaya (Finn 1929; Prater 1948; Gee 1964; Choudhury 1996, 1997). Arunachal Pradesh has possibly the widest distribution of Red Pandas in India with a potential habitat of 23000km<sup>2</sup> hosting probably the largest population in India (Choudhury 2001).

Red Pandas are, characteristically, animals of the upper subtropical-temperate areas with their habitat typically characterized by the presence of mixed deciduous and coniferous forests with a bamboo-thicket understory (Roberts & Gittleman 1984; Chakraborty 1999). Although it is reportedly found between 1500–4800 m (Yonzon & Hunter 1991; Choudhury 2001), there have been no recent documented evidence of its presence in areas over

## A NOTE ON THE HIGH ELEVATION DISTRIBUTION RECORD OF RED PANDA *AILURUS FULGENS* (MAMMALIA: CARNIVORA: AILURIDAE) IN TAWANG DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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4000m in most of its global range. Studies in its range countries, especially in India, have also not established its presence in areas above 4000m; some relevant published records are compiled in Table 1.

In the present record, a carcass of a Red Panda was found by a patrolling team of local villagers in November, 2012, at an elevation of 4325m, (27.70590N & 91.63631E) inside Pangchen Lumpo Muchat Community Conserved Area (98km<sup>2</sup>) in the remote parts of Tawang District, western Arunachal Pradesh (Image 1). The exact location was around 20–25 km away from the nearest road head, the village of Muchat, above the settlement of Zimithang (Image 3). Zimithang, situated on the valley floor of the Nyimjang Chu River, is around 90km away from Tawang, the district headquarters. The Red Panda was caught in a snare deployed in an animal trail among the alpine scrub, where similar snares are occasionally deployed for capturing high altitude pheasants and ungulates (Image 2). There are records of Red Pandas accidentally getting caught in similar snares in Arunachal Pradesh (Choudhury 2001).

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TATA HOUSING



SIR DORABJI TATA TRUST AND THE ALLIED TRUSTS

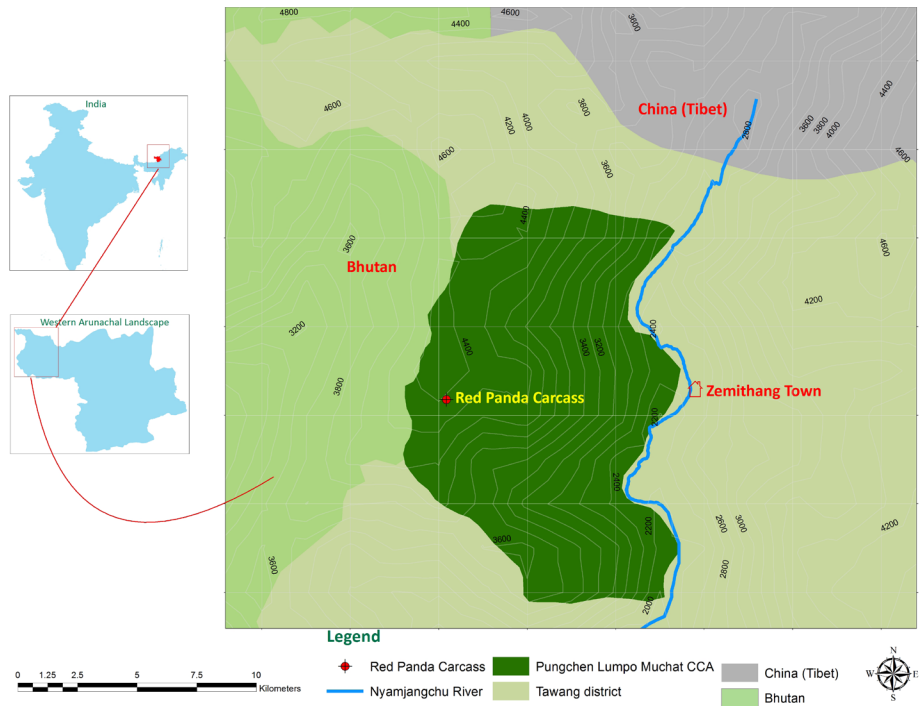


Image 1. Map of the PLUMCCA in Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh showing the exact location of the red panda carcass. Source: Kamal Medhi/ WWF-India

Table 1. Compilation of recent published studies showing altitudinal distribution of Red Pandas in the range countries.

	Study area	Country	Elevation range of study area	Red Panda elevation range from findings (meters)	Reference
I.	Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve	Nepal	2800–5500	2800–4000	Panthen et al. (2012), Sharma & Belant 2009)
II.	Ilam District	Nepal	2400–3000	2400–3000	Williams (2004)
III.	Jigmi Dorjee National Park	Bhutan	1400–7000	2400–3700	Dorji et al. (2011)
IV.	Woolong Nature Reserve	China	1200–6250	2600–3100	Reid et al. (1991)
V.	Parts of Myanmar	Myanmar	20–3750	Up to 3390	Zaw et al. (2008)
VI.	Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, Sikkim	India	2000–4100	Up to 3177	Bhutia ( 2011)
VII.	Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim	India	1300–8598	Up to 3800	Sathyakumar et al. ( 2011)
VIII.	Three Protected Areas of East Sikkim	India	1200–4700	Up to 3570	Ghose et al. (2011)
IX.	Singalila National Park, West Bengal	India	2400–3636	2800–3600	Pradhan et al. (2001)
X.	Neora Valley National Park, West Bengal	India	2350–3170	Up to 3170	Mallick (2010)

The vegetation of the area, situated near a high-altitude wetland called Kemela Tso, was mostly Rhododendron scrub forest with *Rhododendron thomsonii*, *R. anthopogon* and *Juniperus* sp. being the dominant plant species. Presumably, the animal was using the trail for passage when it activated the snare and was caught in the neck by the noose. It was found in that position, with no distinct signs of feeding by any carnivores afterwards. From the condition of the carcass, which was absolutely dehydrated, it seemed that the animal got captured some considerable time back. Its occurrence in such a high alpine scrubland at an elevation of 4325m provides one

of the highest documented presence records in India. The record is unusual; especially considering the fact the area had no presence of bamboo, considered as a vital habitat as well as a diet component of the Red Panda. The nearest patch of ideal Red Panda habitat (Mixed conifer forests at 3000–3500 m) is situated around 10–12 km away, in the lower elevations near a place called Keradumsung. While the local herders have reported Red Panda sightings along the lower portions of the CCA, there were no earlier reports of their presence in an area as high as Kemala Tso.

Considering the long distance to the tree line and their ideal coniferous habitats from the location of the carcass, it



Image 2. The Red Panda accidentally caught in a snare near Kemala Tso



Image 3. Red Panda near Zemithang

is interesting to note such a long transit undertaken by this particular animal, that too during the early winter months. Extensive seasonal field data on Red Panda presence throughout the CCA will be able to provide a conclusive verdict on the elevation range favoured by the Red Pandas in the area. While such incidences of casualty can be considered as a potential threat to the Red Pandas in this region, as reported, the cases are extremely sporadic and localised. With the community members being closely involved in the management of Pangchen Lumpo Muchat Community Conserved Area (PLUMCCA) and mitigation of threats to Red Panda and other wildlife, even incidences of hunting in the fragile high altitude ecosystem under their guardianship are very rare.

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