Oryx

Camera traps detect elusive Chinese pangolins in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

By Tay Van Nguyen, 24th February 2026

The Central Highlands of Vietnam, formed by a series of plateaus bordering the southern part of Laos and north-eastern Cambodia, hold significant biodiversity value for the Indochina region. Protected within national parks and nature reserves, vast expanses of tropical forests provide habitats for countless endemic and threatened species of flora and fauna. For example, the grey-shanked douc langur (*Pygathrix cinerea*), the Northern yellow cheeked-crested gibbon (*Nomascus annamensin*) and many other rare species, such as the Kon Ka Kinh laughingthrush (*Garrulax konkakinhensis*), the giant muntjac (*Muntiacus vuquangensis*) and the Annamite muntjac (*Muntiacus Truongsonensis*). Beneath the dense canopies, amongst thick layers of leaf litter, dwell mysterious ecosystem engineers—the pangolins: scaly, burrowing mammals with enormous claws and an extraordinarily long tongues, which feed primarily on ants and termites and often shelter in hollow, decaying trees.

Two species of pangolin occur in Vietnam: the Sunda pangolin *Manis javanica* and—in smaller numbers—the Chinese pangolin *Manis pentadactyla.* Both species are categorized as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, meaning they face a serious risk of extinction. According to the IUCN Species Survival Commission Pangolin Specialist Group, the global population of the Chinese pangolin, which is native to the northern Indian subcontinent, northern parts of Southeast Asia and southern China, is estimated to comprise only 50,000 individuals. This number continues to decline, with pressure from hunting—for its meat and especially for its scales, which are erroneously thought to have medicinal properties and are used in traditional practices—being the biggest threat to the species' survival.

In Vietnam, previous records of the Chinese pangolin were primarily concentrated in the northern regions. However, thanks to long-term efforts based on international collaboration, we have for the first time recorded the species in Kon Ka Kinh National Park, Gia Lai Province. This finding is of significant importance as it expands the species' known geographical distribution into central Vietnam, significantly further south than previously thought.

This exciting discovery in Kon Ka Kinh National Park has been made possible through scientific research cooperation and technical support. Since 2010, the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) has provided financial and technical assistance for scientific research in the area, and our project aimed to uncover the secrets of the Park's lesser-known mammal species.

An individual Chinese Pangolin (Manis pentadactyla) recorded for the first time in the park. Photo: Kon Ka Kinh National Park.

In 2022 and 2024, with funding from the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity – Small Grants Programme, a team of FZS technical staff and the Science Department of Kon Ka Kinh National Park deployed an extensive camera-trap network within the Park. We captured wildlife at a total of 57 camera-trap locations that were strategically positioned in areas likely to yield information about rare animals such as pangolins.

Forest rangers and experts setting up and checking a camera trap in the forest. Photo: Tay Nguyen/FZS.

More common wildlife captured in the fottage included Pig-tailed macaque (*Macaca leonina*), Stump-tailed macaque (*Macaca arctoides*), Kon Ka Kinh Laughingthrush (*Garrulax konkakinhensis*), Leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensi*) and Yellow-throated marten (*Martes flavigula*). In January 2022, these cameras recorded a Chinese pangolin. Although local people had noticed burrows and other signs of pangolin presence before, this was the first time the species was confirmed with a photographic record in the region. This discovery provides clear evidence of a population in the midland tropical forests of the Central Highlands and suggests the species may be present in other, yet unexplored areas of the region.

The presence of the Chinese pangolin further underscores the high biodiversity value of Kon Ka Kinh National Park. The area is a sanctuary not only for pangolins but for many other endemic, threatened and rare animals, such as the grey-shanked douc langur *Pygathrix cinerea* and the northern yellow-cheeked crested gibbon *Nomascus annamensis*. To safeguard the future of these natural treasures, the area requires stringent protection.

The pristine tropical forest landscape of Kon Ka Kinh National Park. Photo: Kon Ka Kinh National Park.

Conservation efforts implemented in the Park encompass field surveys, population monitoring and updating data on the national biodiversity database. Beyond ecological research and survey activities, conservationists and the forest protection force also closely collaborate with local communities. Interviews with local people provide crucial insights into the rich Indigenous knowledge held in the area, which helps researchers to identify and map the key distribution areas and critical habitats for wildlife.

The discovery of the Chinese pangolin in Kon Ka Kinh stands as powerful evidence that investment in research and conservation yields tangible results. It demonstrates that even species that are notoriously difficult to document and rarely glimpsed by people can be detected with the help of camera-trap technology. However, this breakthrough is just the beginning. Protecting this newly confirmed population of Chinese pangolins demands an even stronger commitment: intensified anti-poaching patrols, an expansion of monitoring programmes across the wider landscape, and ongoing engagement of the local community are all needed to ensure the long-term survival of this Critically Endangered species and the unique ecosystem on which it depends.

Camera-trap training for forest guards at Kon Ka Kinh National Park. Photo: Tay Nguyen/FZS.

The forest guards set up camera traps. Photo: Tay Nguyen/FZS.

This blog is the result of collaboration and support from many colleagues. I would like to extend my special thanks to Ha Thang Long, Tam Nguyen Ai, Yen Kim Thi Nguyen, Luan Nguyen Quoc, Vu Ngo Hoang Duy and Thong Van Pham for their valuable contributions of ideas and expertise to this project. Your support was invaluable in completing this blog.

The article 'Southernmost record of the Chinese pangolin *Manis pentadactyla* in Gia Lai province, Central Highlands of Vietnam' is available open access in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation.*

Tay Van Nguyen

An experienced biodiversity researcher with 5 years' experience working in primate conservation, Tay Van Nguyen is the project coordinator for gibbon conservation in the Frankfurt Zoological Society in Vietnam. He also mentors students and collaborates with partners across Vietnam's Central Highlands.