

Update from the field – Black-footed Cat Working Group, South Africa

February 2014, by Martina Küsters

This update reports on the monitoring and field observations of radio-collared black-footed cats (bfcats) on Benfontein Nature Reserve near Kimberley and two farms south-west of De Aar, in South Africa. The report is for the month of February to 5 March 2015.

The Karoo has finally gotten rain! Tracking was made a bit challenging with bad weather, lightning & rain and wet roads (getting stuck and unstuck in the mud). But the veldt is looking healthy and green and lots of nice sightings of the Karoo's interesting animals. I was fortunate to see a total of 4 hedgehogs, a coral snake, a tiger snake, different frog species and plenty of insects. The small river that transects Taaiboschpoort Farm even flowed.



As the sun sets in the Karoo (photo M. Küsters)

1. Benfontein bfcats

Bama, the roamer, has only been on the neighbouring farms, Suzanna and Rooifontein. With permission of the owners / managers to access the farms, I was able to locate, observe and follow him. He was fairly relaxed, came closer, watched me a while and moved on. I followed him for about 30 min. I was able to observe normal foraging, resting and grooming behaviour. I hope he will return to Benfontein, however the land owners of the farm are very interested and happy to have him wandering around and will keep an eye out for him.

Kubu was recently near the southern boundary of Benfontein. I wanted to ensure that he was healthy and well, and was able to approach him very close on foot with a low intensity spotlight. He also allowed me to take some pictures with my digital camera. He then moved on, caught a rodent and rested. On other occasions, tracking has been challenging with tall grass impeding visual observations. Kubu has a large home range, a challenge to find him, but if I do then my efforts are rewarded with a relaxed male cat grooming, spraying, hunting and foraging.

Faf is very shy these days, only allowing me to follow and observe her at about 40m. Although in areas with taller grass cover she seems to be more relaxed. She is a very active, inspects every hole and moves quickly while foraging. I hope that she will have kittens this year!

2. De Aar bfcats

There are two study sites located south of De Aar, Nuwejaarsfontein Farm and Taaiboschpoort Farm. The movements and activities of the individual cats will be reported on as per farm.



The bringer of rain, a hedgehog on Taaiboschpoort Farm (photo M. Küsters)

Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF)

Zuma, who usually roams the neighbouring farm to the south and east, has spent a lot of time on NJF. More specifically, he has been spending most nights between 20-28 February within Ilse's home range. It may be mating season and Zuma is looking for receptive females. I have had fantastic close observations on foot and by car. He often comes and greets me, watching me intently and allows me to follow him. The one night he went into an area with spiky vegetation and quickly came out agitated and excessively groomed the sticky, itchy seeds from his coat.

Stan still enjoys wandering the extensive hills in his home range. I often find him at the bottom of a mountain early evening, inspecting all the crevices. He has recently spent some nights north and north-west of NJF on a neighbouring farm, further expanding the size of his home range to a rough estimate of 8x6 km. He was located back on NJF at the end of my tacking period. This is a huge area to cover in order to find him and is further complicated by powerlines transecting the area, which makes tracking not that easy. But if I do locate him, he is very relaxed and recently walked past me at about 5m with no worries. It is amazing that one can observe a wild animal at such close range; behaving as if I was part of the landscape ☺. Recently he caught a clapper-lark not far from the vehicle, confirmed by the prey remains that I later photographed after he had moved on.

Ilse has spent most nights in the central western side of her home range. I observed her spraying, with which she is advertising that she is ready to mate. When the veldt was too wet to drive, I had to track by foot and have had good observations at close range. I have several photos of Ilse resting. On my last tracking nights, I located her on foot in an area she has been for several nights. She was resting near a bush at 4m. I stayed with her for about 10 min. She was then startled by a noisy bird that flew up and moved on.



Ilse resting (photo M. Küsters)

Taaiboschpoort Farm (TBP)

Hasi that often spends a great deal on the neighbouring farm to the south has concentrated her activities in the central part of her home range. On one night I approached and observed her from about 25m. She was relaxed, sitting and watching me. She then suddenly heard a rustle in the bushes and she made a dash for it and caught, what I believe was a small bird. I could not locate the prey remains. The cats usually feed a distance away and after feeding, Hasi returned to sit and groom at 20m from me.

Ego is a joy to track and follow! Fortunately he is now mostly on TBP and I am able to easily track and monitor his movements. On foot and by car, he is relaxed with my presence. Recently he did not even run away while feeding on a lark and decided to walk past me to resume foraging.

Unfortunately due to unfavourable weather conditions we were unable to look for **Piet's** signal with a paraglider. Unfortunately, if he is still alive, his collar will soon run out of battery!

All the best, 'til next time !

Martina 