

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

*January 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 covers the period 5 December 2013 to 31 January 2014, except when I went home to Namibia for the holidays on 17 December and returned 17 January 2014.

In December the study area did receive much needed rain, just a bit and not enough, and the rest of December was hot and dry. In January, when I returned I found the veldt to be dry and not much new grass had grown. As my sighting of a hedgehog sparked excitement and renewed hope for rain among the farmers, the clouds are building up every day and the Karoo is finally getting rain!

## 1. Benfontein bfcats

**Bama**, who makes regular visits to the neighbouring farms, Suzanna and Rooifontein, was mostly on Benfontein in December. I observed spraying and rubbing behaviour and hoped that he would now settle in his territory on Benfontein. However, in January he has only been on the farms to the north and east. I have been unable to locate him on the farms but will try to gain access the property, get a visual and monitor his movements.

**Kubu** mainly occupies the area in the south of the reserve, extensively spraying and marking. He allows me close observations of him hunting, foraging, grooming and resting. Kubu makes me work really hard to find him in his large home range, but it is always a reward to see such a beautiful animal go about his business. He recently caught and ate a southern black korhaan.



The remains of Kubu's dinner, a southern black korhaan (photo M. Küsters)

On 21 January he had an encounter with an aardwolf... Kubu stretched up, showed his teeth, hissed and the aardwolf approached him with 'hairs up'. Kubu was very confident, stood his ground and soon moved off and left the aardwolf standing there. Although these encounters rarely end up in a fight, it was amazing to see these two unique species interacting.

**Faf** is quite predictable and is usually found within her home range in the central part of the reserve. She is an agile and active hunter and I was able to observe her successfully hunt and eat larks, a speckled pigeon, gerbils and mice. Recently she stalked, leaped 2m high and snatched a clapper lark in mid air. Afterwards she groomed and carried on foraging.

A very special sighting was on my last tracking night in December, when I was tracking Bama and all of a sudden saw two cats! It was Faf and Bama, together, interacting! There was a lot of watching, chasing, jumping and a short scuffle with hissing and snarling. This short encounter lasted maybe a minute, before both cats went on their own way.

## 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.

### **Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF)**

**Zuma**, the strikingly beautiful cat with bold spots and radiant confidence, does like roaming the neighbouring farm to the south and east. In December I was fortunate enough to observe him from 15m away. He chose to sit in the headlights of the car, resting and occasionally grooming. I was able to take nice photos to share with you. I climb fences and walk to him, in order to document the extent of his home range.



Zuma grooming (photo M. Küsters)

**Stan** roams a large area (rough estimate of 6 x 4km) which includes mountains, valleys, shrubland plains and a small river he often crosses. His home range includes very mountainous habitat and plains to the east. Each night is an adventure to find him and is very interesting to see how he moves through the mountain ridges and I am always very pleased if I do see him up close.

**Ilse** is usually found in the centre of her home range. She actively forages and inspecting burrows for tasty mice but also is often found just resting and observing her environment. In these moments I am able to get some photos of her.

### **Taaiboschpoort Farm (TBP)**

**Hasi** has spent a great deal on the neighbouring farm to the south. I have walked after her to check up on her and record her movement. Recently she returned to roam the central part of her home range. However the habitat is very mountainous interspersed with fences and gates and it is not easy to get to her. But if I do find her, she allows me to approach her, often watching me before wandering off into the night.

It is always a joy to find and follow **Ego**. He is used to me now, allowing me to follow him at close range. He occasionally approaches the car to inspect and has sat in the headlights for about 5 minutes. He seems relaxed and not bothered with my presence as he grooms himself. In December and January he has spent more time on TBP than in the neighbouring farm, extensively covering the western part of his home range.



Ego (photo M. Küsters)

Attempts will be made with a paraglider to locate **Piet**, the young male captured in November 2012 and that has been missing since April 2013. Unfortunately, Piet has not been found on the farm he was last recorded at. I do hope to report on his current location soon!

Wishing you a happy & enjoyable 2014 !