

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

June 2014, by Martina Küsters

This update, by the Black-footed Cat Working Group (BFCWG), 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. This update reports on the monitoring during June 2014.

Temperatures in June ranged between a maximum of 18°C during the day and -2°C in the early morning hours. Although temperatures were mostly mild, on a few nights the Karoo winter could already be felt. One night I had rain and sleet covered the shrub lands, termite mounds and glistened in the moonlight. I have exciting and special news this month. I hope you enjoy it, as this highlights the importance of doing long-term research on a lesser studied, nocturnal carnivore, like the black-footed cat.

1. Benfontein bfcats

Benfontein Nature Reserve, owned by De Beers Consolidated Mines is situated 10 km southeast of Kimberley. Benfontein has been the focus of bfcats research since the 1990s and much of what is known about wild bfcats has been done by Dr Sliwa on Benfontein. This reserve serves as an important long-term monitoring and research site for bfcats research and conservation. I tracked the bfcats on Benfontein from 5 to 8 June.

Unfortunately **Bama**, the roaming male that was last located in February 2014 on the neighbouring farms, Suzanna and Rooifontein, has not been located again. He has probably wandered off and found a suitable territory, as the dominant male Kubu would not tolerate his presence on Benfontein. However, since he has not been heard since four months, he could also have died.



Kubu and Kimberley lights (photo M. Küsters)

Like Stan, **Kubu** has a wound on the left side of his nose. How or when he got the wound is not known but it seems the wound is healing. The veterinarians of the BFCWG have suggested that the lesions represent sub-acute to chronic inflammation. This could have been caused by territorial or

inter-specific fighting or injury during hunting. During the three monitoring nights he was only in the south-western part of his home range between two waterholes. I followed him to the one windmill and he searched for prey in the bushes. He then went to the waterhole, jumped on the concrete trough and drank. Kubu was seen drinking water on two separate nights and twice in one night. Frequent drinking in bfcats is an indication that their kidneys might be affected by a disease called amyloidosis, most prevalent in captive bfcats, but also recorded in the wild. However, he was observed catching and eating a Cape clapper lark *Mirafra apiata* and an ant-eating chat *Myrmecocichla formicivora*. We hope that he is in good health and that he drinks water simply because it is available. The BFCWG has collected 167 GPS waypoints since November 2013. He actively marks and uses most of Benfontein and preliminary results indicate that his home range is as large as 48 km².

2. De Aar bfcats

There are two study sites located south of De Aar, Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF) and Taaiboschpoort (TbP) Farm. Bfcats have been caught here since 2009 and these sites may highlight the importance of studying wild bfcats in different habitats and with different management systems.

Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF)

Zuma actively marks the area, indicating that he is a resident male, yet it does not reflect his dominance status. He also wanders far into the neighbouring farm, but always returns to his core area. He often intensively inspects springhare den systems for prey. Zuma also likes to use hollow termite mounds to rest, often I only see him peeping out when I approach.



Zuma sleeping in a hollow termite mound (photo M. Kusters)

Stan spends more time on the neighbouring farm (Bosjesmansfontein farm) than on NJF. As I have access to Bosjesmansfontein farm with the tracking vehicle I am able to monitor him. He is quite habituated and allows close observations. He likes to forage on hill slopes in very rocky terrain with dense vegetation cover. It may be that he hunts Smith's red rock hares *Pronolagus rupestris*, a species that lives on rocky slopes and outcrops. I was lucky enough to observe him successfully hunting a grey-winged francolin *Scleroptila africanus*, a new species of bird on the bfcats' prey list.



Stan with his prey, a grey-winged francolin (photo M. Kusters)

Taaiboschpoort Farm (TbP)

After loosing **Hasi's** signal end of May, I searched the extent of her home range. After realising from a photo that the antenna of the collar may have broken off, I had little hope to find her. I saw jackal in the area and was certain that they killed her and chewed the collar, so we went searching the area on foot, without luck finding any sign of her or the collar. BUT then, 2 nights later as I was listening for Stan's signal, I heard her signal instead!! All the way up north where Stan hangs out and more than 19km (measured straight line) from where I had last seen her! I quickly walked after her and could approach and follow her very close, up to 3m and could see the antenna and collar very well. The antenna is still attached, although the plastic sleeve attaching the antenna to the collar has broken off and is now hanging on the end of the antenna. She caught a lark just meters from me and proudly walked off to feed 30m away. The range of the signal is good, as normal. This is amazing; what would make her walk 19km north when there is suitable habitat in between? It may be that the available habitat is occupied, an indication that there is a healthy population of bfcats (especially females) on NJF and TbP. I really hope the antenna does not break off and that she establishes a new home range in that area. It seems the habitat is good, with adequate numbers of larks and rodents. In the new area, I have seen her catching 3 larks.

Ego spent a lot of time on the neighbouring farm (Mynfontein farm) to the west. The boundary fence was repaired and the bottom electric strand redone. This may have prevented him from returning back onto TbP or another male has claimed his home range. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate his signal during the last nights of tracking. I have visited Mynfontein farm twice, climbed high mountains to listen for his signal but without luck. The owner of Mynfontein farm will keep an eye out for him. We hope that he soon returns to TbP.

All the best

Martina 