

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

May 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. This update reports on the monitoring in May 2014.

As promised, here are some pictures of these amazing cats in their natural habitat. Now, end of May, temperatures are dropping and early morning frost covers the landscape.

This update is dedicated to **Ilse**, a female bfcats that has been collared since February 2009 on Nuwejaarsfontein. Sadly she has died; I found her body on 3 May, near farm houses, an indication that she may have been sick and looking for drinking water. The cause of death could not be determined due to the state of decomposition of the body. Since 2009 the Black-footed Cat Working Group has collected 380 GPS waypoints on her movements; enabled insights into her home range size, hunting and breeding behaviour. The data collected on her will serve as the baseline for adult female bfcats occurring in that area.

Benfontein bfcats

Bama, the roaming male, which was last seen in February on the neighbouring farms to the east and north, Suzanna and Rooifontein has still not been located. We hope that Beryl Wilson, the project's manager will be able to locate him via aerial tracking in June.

Kubu was located resting in a hollow termite mound and we were able to take really good close-up pictures of him. When he became active, he sprayed several times and caught a gerbil. He then continued to forage and as a group of bat-eared foxes approached, he sat and watched them. Then one of them came too close and Kubu slapped him and walked on. We were able to follow him for long periods as he roamed around his extensive home range.



Kubu resting in a hollow termite mound. ©A Sliwa



Kubu hunting. ©A Sliwa

Faf, the adult female who had a stable home range in the centre of Benfontein has died in April. Here is the only picture of her in the wild. She was likely killed by jackals, as the collar was badly chewed by strong jaws.



Faf. ©Franc Theron

De Aar bfcats

There are two study sites located south of De Aar, Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF) and Taaiboschpoort (TbP) Farm. Here are some observations and more pictures of these fascinating and attractive cats.

Nuwejaarsfontein Farm (NJF)

Zuma has been located far west of his home range, an area he has recently visited a couple times. Then I was pleased to observe him spraying (scent marking), a sign of his dominance status. Other marking behaviour observed included clawing and cheek rubbing. He recently stalked and tried to hunt a scrub hare (*Lepus saxatilis*). He then chased after it but was unable to catch it.



Zuma grooming. ©M Kusters.



Zuma stalking his prey. ©A Sliwa

It seems that **Stan** has shifted his home range a few kilometres north, into the neighbouring farm. This habitat is much more flat and most of the area has dense, bushy vegetation with an abundance of roosting birds at night. I thank the owner of the farm for allowing me access onto the property, allowing me to monitor Stan's movements. He intensively searches, listening for prey while foraging, often zigzagging and circling to inspect once he thinks there may be prey

hiding in between the bushes. He often uses termite mounds as an elevated vantage point. We discovered in early May that he had a wound on the left side of his nose. Since then it has luckily healed and looks much better. It may have resulted from fighting or sustained by thorny vegetation or going through a wire fence.



Stan using a termite mound as a vantage point. ©A Sliwa



Stan, the wound on his nose has since healed. © A Sliwa

Taaiboschpoort Farm (TBP)

I have been able to spend more time with **Hasi**. She is a very avid hunter and I was fortunate enough to observe several feeding events of birds. I collect the feathers to identify the bird species. She walks quickly, then often stops to listen, creeping in between bushes to stalk her feathery prey. The birds don't have a chance as she swiftly snatches them before they can react. We located her during the day, set up a camera trap and were able to get pictures as she emerged, ready for her nightly adventures.



Hasi taking a break from hunting. ©M Kusters



Hasi emerging from her day time refuge. © A Sliwa

During a full moon, **Ego** showed us how he 'leopard crawls' through the bushes. It presented us a good opportunity to illustrate how these cats forage in their low vegetated habitat. He is the most relaxed and I am privileged to observe him hunting and behaving like a bfcats from so close!



Ego. © A Sliwa



Ego 'leopard crawling'. © A Sliwa

All the best
Martina