

Domestic Cats and Protected Areas

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Many moons ago, in the late-1980's, I joined Johan Dracht, one of the former State Vet Technicians in Skukuza, Kruger National Park, on a couple of his expeditions to remove/euthanize hybridised African wildcats ("vaalboskat" or "groukat" in Afrikaans). At that stage, staff members in Kruger were still allowed to keep cats as pets. Although the policy stated that the cats had to be spayed, there always seemed to be some staff members who did not comply with this arrangement.

The cats were caught by setting trap cages in and around staff quarters and rest camps, out of sight of tourists and out of reach of hyenas. Once caught in the cage there was the opportunity to evaluate the trapped animal and see if it should not rather be released again.

By the end of the project, Johan and others euthanized approximately 120 hybrids in the regions of Skukuza, Lower Sabie, Satara and Phalaborwa. The skins of these cats were cured and one could clearly see different levels of hybridisation, from almost none to greatly. Johan could tell a few stories about the "slim katte" (cunning feral cats) that he could never get hold of. After this program the KNP policy was changed and cats were not allowed as pets anymore. The situation has greatly improved since then, but the edge-effect and spill-over from neighbouring areas continues to make an impact on Kruger's African wildcat population.

There are seven so-called small wild cats in Africa. They are the caracal, African golden cat, serval, black-footed cat, jungle cat, African wildcat and sand cat. Of these only the caracal, serval and African wildcat *Felis silvestris* occur in our area, and only the latter interbreeds with domestic cats *F. catus*. I have never heard of the serval interbreeding with the domestic cat in the wild, but these so-called Savannah cats that can weigh up to 10 kg are bred artificially. I recently read in the news that Justin Bieber is getting flack for having bought two Savannah cats for his wife to the sum of \$35,000.

The pure African wildcat is a beautiful animal, roughly the size of a domestic cat, but has longer legs which gives it a cheetah-like gait.

Cats have always been popular pets. The familiar housecat was believed to be domesticated from the Near-Eastern wildcat (*F. s. lybica*), probably 9,000–10,000 years ago in the Middle East. Most sources ascribe the reason for domestication as the control of rodents, but I am pretty sure the charm and eccentricity of the cat also played a major role in it becoming part of the family.

Recent studies on the behavioural ecology and population genetics of the African wildcat highlighted the problem of hybridisation with domestic cats, the frequency of which is increased with human population pressure. The genetically purest African wildcats are found in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Although they are currently listed as Least Concern in the South African Red List (based on IUCN categories), further research on the levels of hybridisation and declines of genetically pure subpopulations may lead to a reclassification of the African wildcat as a threatened species. Key interventions include the establishment of large protected areas to reduce the edge effects of the wild-domestic animal interface (the Kgalagadi and Great Limpopo Transfrontier Parks, for example), as well as spaying and neutering domestic cats, especially in rural areas and close to protected areas.

It is therefore clear that we as Grietjie residents, which form part of the Greater Kruger picture, need to be extremely vigilant in terms of playing our role as a buffer for Kruger by ensuring that our

housecats do not contribute to the genetic pollution of the African Wildcat population. The onus is on Grietjie cat owners to please ensure that their cats are properly neutered.

Table 1. Summary of threats and interventions related to the African wildcat *Felis silvestris* (based on IUCN threat categories, with regional context) as adopted from Herbst et al (2016)

Threat description	Current threat trend	Intervention description	Current conservation
8.2.2 <i>Problematic Native Species/Diseases</i> : increasing population of feral/domestic cats. Species stress: 2.3.1 <i>Hybridisation</i> : hybridisation with domestic/feral cats.	Increasing due to expansion of urban and rural human populations	1.1 <i>Site/Area Protection</i> : establish and connect large protected areas or transfrontier spaces to minimise edge of wild-domestic animal interface.	SANParks protected area expansion strategy; Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park has the purest African wildcat subpopulation
		2.1 <i>Site/Area Management</i> : promote domestic/feral cat exclusion zones around protected areas through removal and/or sterilisation	

References

- ◆ Herbst M. 2009. Behavioural ecology and population genetics of the African wildcat, *Felis silvestris* Forster 1980, in the southern Kalahari. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
- ◆ Herbst M, Foxcroft L, Le Roux J, Bloomer P, Do Linh San E. 2016. A conservation assessment of *Felis silvestris*. In Child MF, Roxburgh L, Do Linh San E, Raimondo D, Davies-Mostert HT, editors. *The Red List of Mammals of South Africa, Swaziland and Lesotho*. South African National Biodiversity Institute and Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa.
<https://www.catsforafrica.co.za/african-wildcat-felis-lybica/>.

Photo: African wildcat (vaalboskat) - https://evolutionistx.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/african-wildcat_banner.jpg

