

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



August 2024, Michelle Swanepoel, field technician

These are notes from the field by the Black-footed Cat Working Group (BFCWG) technician at the Benfontein Nature Reserve study site near Kimberley, South Africa. Black-footed cats (*Felis nigripes*) are fitted with radio collars and monitored as part of a long-term study on the ecology and demography of this elusive little felid.

Special thanks to Hannes Mans and DeBeers Consolidated Mines for study site access and long-term support of the BFCWG at Benfontein Nature Reserve.



Figure 1 – Capture team (left to right): Alexander Sliwa, Beryl Wilson, Byron Mannie, Michelle Swanepoel, Odette Burger, Michelle Schroeder, Arne Lawrenz. (Photo: self-release, B. Wilson)

Black-Footed Cat Captures 2024:

On May 27, 2024, the black-footed cat team gathered at Benfontein, brimming with anticipation and excitement for the journey ahead in search of these elusive felines. As we scoured the landscape, our initial sightings included armadillo (*Orycteropus afer*), bat-eared foxes (*Otocyon megalotis*), aardwolf (*Proteles cristatus*), and even two African wildcats (*Felis lybica cafra*), but the black-footed cats remained elusive, their presence more a whisper on the wind than a reality.



Figure 2: (Left) Alexander Sliwa & Arne Lawrenz stood on the back of the bakkie spotlighting determined to find black-footed cats. (Photos: B. Mannie)

As our search continued, we couldn't help but notice an unusually high density of black-backed jackals (*Lupulella mesomelas*) in the area. Their frequent sightings began to paint a picture of an ecosystem where predator dynamics might be influencing the presence of black-footed cats.

The prevalence of these larger predators led us to suspect that the numbers of black-footed cats could be suppressed by the competitive pressures and threats posed by the jackals. This realization added a layer of complexity to our mission, highlighting the intricate balance of the natural world and the challenges faced by these rare and secretive cats.



The nights were long and filled with both hope and uncertainty. Each glint of eyes in the darkness, heightened our senses and fuelled our determination. The complexity of predator-prey relationships in this environment became more apparent with every passing day, illustrating the fragile yet resilient nature of these ecosystems.

Figure 3 – One of the many black-backed jackals (*Lupulella mesomelas*) encountered while searching for the cats. (Photo: B. Wilson)

New Cats:

Fibo:

Then, on June 1st, our patience was rewarded when we encountered our first male. We spotted the gleam of his eyes in the spotlights, swiftly confirming the species, we pursued him with the vehicle until he crouched down on the ground. Michelle Schroeder sprang off the vehicle with the fish landing net, skilfully capturing him. The net touched the ground at the stroke of midnight, and we successfully captured and radio-collared him, our first new cat after 5 nights!



Figure 4 – Capture team (left to right): Daniel Saayman, Beryl Wilson, Arne Lawrence, Alexander Sliwa, Gus van Dyk, Michelle Schroeder, (in front) Byron Mannie & Michelle Swanepoel. (Photo: self-release, B. Wilson)

We named him Fibo. He is a robust and healthy male, though slightly skittish. Despite his initial wariness, we are optimistic about his acclimatization to the tracking process and look forward to gaining valuable insights from his movements and behaviors.



Figure 5 – (Left) Camera trap footage of Fibo exiting the den we left him in after successfully collaring him.



Figure 6 – (Right) Michelle Swanepoel using the hand-held antenna to locate Fibo the day after collaring him. (Photo:A.Sliwa)

As the captures continued, Alex, Arne Lawrenz and I diligently tracked Fibo during the day to ensure we maintained sight of him, as males can sometimes venture out of the capture area after being captured.

Ultro:

On our final night out in the field, as we journeyed home, we were delighted to spot another elusive black-footed cat. It was a thrilling moment as I had the privilege to capture my first cat, and with skillful precision, we successfully fitted him with a radio-collar. We named him Ultro, recognizing him as the largest of our collared cats, currently weighing in at 1.87 kg. Despite his impressive size, we noted old bite wounds on his tail and slightly worn foot pads, signs of his rugged life in the wild.



Figure 7 (Left) – Michelle Swanepoel holding Ultro for the first time. (Photo: B. Wilson)



Figure 8 (Right) – Ultro in his den after successfully collaring him. (Photo: A. Sliwa)

Ultro has shown promising signs of acclimation to our presence, demonstrating a cautious curiosity towards our vehicle. Nonetheless, it will take a few weeks of patient observation before he becomes fully habituated, allowing us to gather valuable data on his behavior and movements.



Figure 9 – Capture team (left to right): Beryl Wilson, Byron Mannie, Heidi Fölscher, Alex Sliwa, Michelle Swanepoel, Michelle Schroeder & Arne Lawrenz (Photo: self-release, B. Wilson)

Shongo:

On the early morning of May 29th, I ventured into the field to locate Shongo and assessed whether his den was suitable for careful digging to replace his VHF radio collar. By a stroke of luck, the den had only one entrance and was stable, making it ideal for our task.



Figure 10 (Left) Alex Sliwa securely placing blankets in the den to make sure Shongo doesn't run past. (Middle & right) Arne Lawrenz and Michelle Schroeder starting the digging process to capture Shongo to replace his radio-collar.

The process went smoothly and swiftly, allowing us to successfully recollar Shongo. He is currently our smallest collared cat, weighing only 1.52 kg. Despite his heavily notched right ear and a few fleas, he remains in good condition. Unlike after his previous collaring experience in November 2022, Shongo has remained within his home range, not disappearing as he did last time.

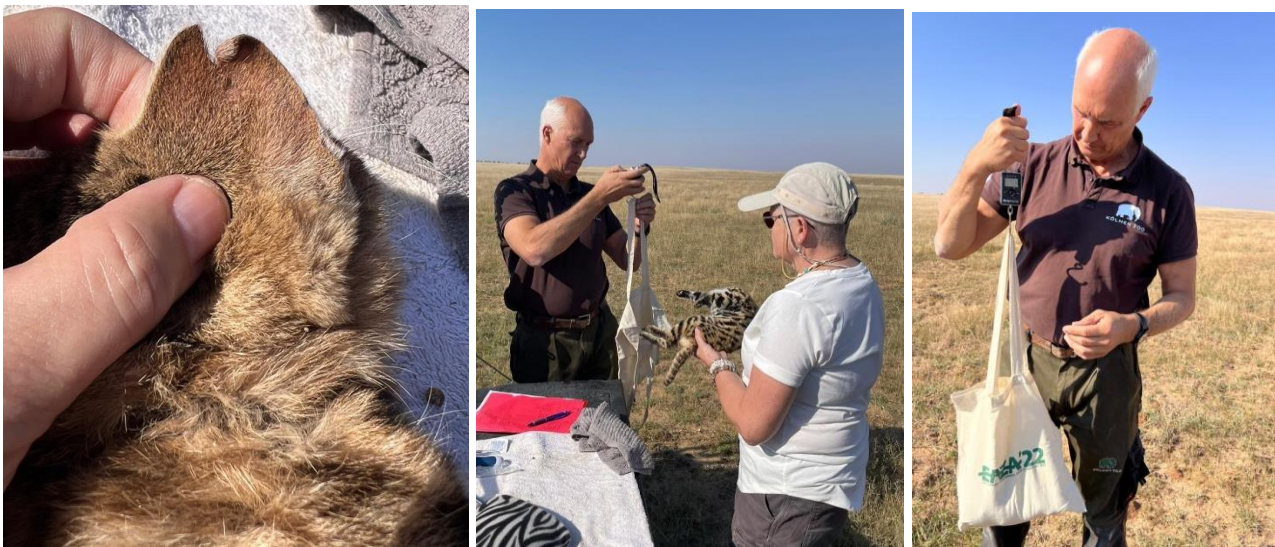


Figure 11- (left) Shongo's notched right ear. (Middle & Right) Alex Sliwa & Beryl Wilson weighing Shongo.

Sailing on waves of gratitude:

During the 9 nights spent searching for black-footed cats, we were fortunate to encounter three individuals, including our already collared cat Shongo, and two additional males on separate occasions, each encounter resulted in successful collaring, showcasing a remarkable 100% capture success rate.



Figure 12 - (left) Alex Sliwa with Shongo and stickers created by Kelsey McGrellis, kmcreations.org (Naples Zoo, Florida). (Right) Shongo with Black-footed Cat stickers, their sale proceeds go towards funding the BFCWG receives (photos: B. Wilson).

As we reflect on our field trip, we remain steadfast in our commitment to understanding and protecting the black-footed cats. Our findings not only contribute to the broader scientific community but also highlight the importance of maintaining ecological balance. The challenges we face are immense, but so is our resolve. With continued support and collaboration, we strive to ensure a future where these enigmatic cats thrive, their whispers staying a steady presence in the symphony of the wild.

Best regards from the veld,

Michelle Swanepoel