Black-Footed Cat Working Group
Quarterly Report

Cover Photo: Ina leaving her den

Benfontein Nature Reserve

Monitoring efforts were focused on three radio-collared black-footed cats on Benfontein. These are young dispersing individuals in the process of establishing territories. Fieldwork has been significantly hampered by atypical weather conditions for this season, characterised by unusually high rainfall. The resulting soil saturation has restricted vehicle access and limited opportunities for tracking and observation.

Ina - The young feisty female

Ina maintained a small home range in the first weeks. One day, I could not find her, so I had to search beyond the area where I had usually found her; however I located her without incident. I observed that she exhibited atypical diurnal behaviour for her species, favouring open grassland over den use during daylight hours and basking in the sunlight. She had become, to a degree habituated to my presence, allowing me to approach and monitor her visually.

During a routine tracking session on 18 May, I detected a mortality signal from her collar. My heart stopped for a second. The signal led me to a large den - unusual for use by black-footed cats (*Felis nigripes*) - where I found black-backed jackal (*Lupulella mesomelas*) tracks in the sand spit. Based on evidence I gathered and the contextual factors at the scene, I determined that predation by a black-backed jackal was the presumed cause of death, as her hindquarters were consumed. I discovered her partial remains the next morning (Fig.2). I consider this incident a significant but sad data point regarding interspecific competition and predation risk for black-footed cats in shared predator landscapes.

We have observed an increase in jackal numbers on Benfontein over the past 3 years, which we attribute to their displacement from surrounding agricultural areas, where they are subject to lethal control measures, rendering the reserve a comparatively secure refuge.

Figure 1: Ina leaving her den a day after capture.

Figure 2: Ina's remains, half-consumed by jackal.

Tutu - The shy one

Tutu has proven to be a particularly engaging subject for observation. While he remains unhabituated to the vehicle and still displays shy behaviour, he is gradually becoming more tolerant of my presence and proximity. The telemetry data I have collected shows that he has been moving onto two neighbouring farms adjacent to Benfontein. Initial access restrictions prevented tracking on these properties; however, I contacted the landowners, and permission was granted to conduct searches on their land during future visits.

Figure 3: Tutu in a blur, trying to avoid the camera.

Ryan - The runner

Ryan has presented the greatest tracking challenge of the study cohort. I have watched him cover extensive distances in remarkably short time. I tracked him for one 48-hour period, traversing the full breadth of Benfontein - approximately 11 km in a direct line. Maintaining consistent visual contact with him is difficult, though our monitoring efforts continue. I am pleased to report that we have successfully photographed him with our camera traps, yielding some great photographic records.

Figure 4: Ryan emerging from the burrow.

Figure 5: Ryan posing for the camera trap.

Marrick Safari

Magnum - The roamer

Magnum occupies an exceptionally large territory. The last confirmed signal was in February 2026. We managed to locate him during a subsequent aerial survey in late May (please see below), so we know he is still out there. Unfortunately, I have not been able to track him on the ground - the private landowner would not grant me access.

Khoisan Karoo Conservancy

Khoi - The quiet one

We are saddened to share the loss of Khoi, a black-footed cat female, who was part of our initial research program at Khoisan Karoo Conservancy.

Unfortunately, weeks of unusually heavy rain made tracking her nearly impossible. When conditions finally improved and tracking resumed on 20 May, Khoi's remains were found by Ricky Ellis. Despite our best efforts, the cause of her death remains unknown.

Figure 6: Khoi's remains found.

Brutus – The relentless one

Our team continues with efforts to monitor Brutus, a fully grown adult male black-footed cat. He is proving a lot harder to track than initially expected by the local field technician, Ricky Ellis.

Brutus is currently ranging across rocky terrain next to riverine habitat and farmland. The field technician managed to pick up intermittent telemetry signals, but consistent tracking has not been achieved. We have not been able to get close enough for direct observation and habituation.

Aerial Survey

Aerial surveys were initiated when Ryan and Tutu were not found for several weeks. Three collared individuals had become unaccounted for, and recent ground-based tracking efforts had proven unsuccessful.

An aerial survey is required to:

1. **Locate missing cats and confirm survival status**
   Two cats, Magnum and Felix, were caught in April 2025 on the Farm Marrick Safaris (15 km West – Northwest of Kimberley) Last signals: Magnum in February 2026; Felix in June 2025. Male Ryan was collared in March 2026 on Benfontein Farm and his last signal received on 20th of April 2026.
2. **Gather critical data on the species' dispersal capabilities**
   If located, the positions of these cats will provide valuable information on the dispersal range and movement patterns of black-footed cats.

Flight Operations Summary

Preparations: On 25 May 2026, Lourens van Essen conducted a flight from Pretoria to Jacobsdal in a Foxbat airplane. Upon arrival, the new Telonics aerial tracking antennas - generously sponsored by Steve Stearns - were mounted, and a test flight was performed to verify operational readiness.

First flight: Survey operations commenced at 06h00 the next morning, following refueling and pre-flight checks. The primary objective was to locate collared individuals, Magnum and Felix. Unfortunately, no signals were detected during this flight. The aircraft landed at 09h42. Flight planning and necessary coordination with Air Traffic Control were undertaken, as Benfontein Nature Reserve is situated within controlled airspace.

Figure 7: Foxbat used to conduct an aerial survey in search of four collared black-footed cats.

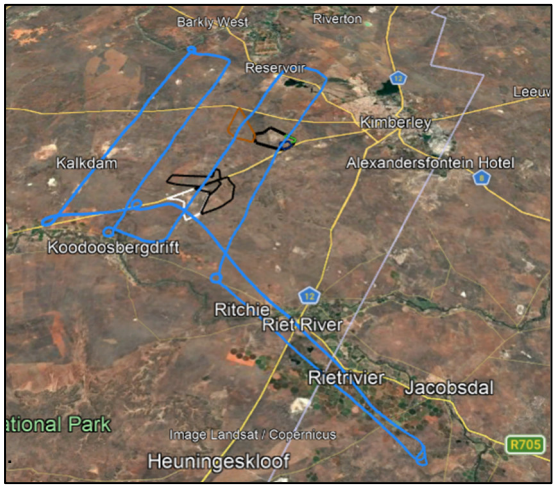

Figure 8: Flight route for the first flight undertaken on the 26th of May 2026

Second flight: On the morning of 27 May 2026, the team initiated the second survey mission with the objective of locating Tutu and Ryan, both of whom had been collared at Benfontein Nature Reserve in March 2026. The aircraft was airborne by 07h00. Both individuals were successfully located from the air, enabling subsequent ground-based tracking operations. Strong signals from both animals were confirmed that evening.

Third flight: The third and final mission, again targeting Magnum, commenced at 07h00. A location was established within a relatively short time, and the aircraft landed shortly after 08h00.

Figure 9: The new aerial antennas being tested with the pan on Benfontein Nature Reserve in the background.

Figure 10: The moment when we found a signal for Tutu.

With the successful completion of the aerial surveys, I will now continue with ground-based monitoring of the collared cats.

Moving forward, we decided that aerial surveys should be conducted every two to three months to maintain locational data. This is particularly important for Magnum, whose movements span multiple private properties where landowner access for ground-based tracking is often not obtainable, but also possibly for the other two young males, who are at dispersal age, so will likely move away from Benfontein Farm.

Vehicle Maintenance

The research vehicle is essential for field operations; without it, our fieldwork would not be possible. The vehicle has performed reliably throughout the past months, though it has now more than 309.500 km on the odometer, the majority of which has been under demanding off-road conditions. This level of use has resulted in intermittent mechanical issues. Consequently, significant expenditure has been incurred on essential maintenance over recent months.

Maintenance	**Cost**
Remove damaged side steps and repair 12V battery box	R1 015.00
Diagnostic test, repair traction control, ABS & airbag, replace steering spiral	R4 835.75
Repair broken bolt on steering arm	R300.00
Repair crank sensor, all damaged wires, replace ABS controller, diagnostic test, consumables	R15 161.95
Repair rack end, tie rod ends, caliper guide kit & wheel alignment	R2750.00
Total Cost:	**R24 062.70**

With gratitude

On behalf of our research team, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to The Bateleurs for their invaluable sponsorship of the aerial survey flights conducted in support of our mission to locate collared black-footed cats. Their generous sponsorship of the aerial search flights led to the success of our field operations. We are deeply appreciative of their commitment to conservation efforts and would welcome the opportunity to maintain and further this productive working relationship.

We are also grateful to Mr Andrew Conroy for granting access to his private airstrip and hangar and providing accommodation for our pilot, Lourens van Essen. Lourens van Essen was engaged to conduct the survey flights and demonstrated exceptional commitment and professionalism to the project, having previously collaborated with our team during collaring of five black-footed cats in March 2026.

As we continue our pursuit of discoveries about these remarkable, elusive black-footed cats, your support and sponsorship have been instrumental to our progress. We are deeply grateful for your ongoing commitment, which enables us to achieve meaningful progress in our research.

At present we have a particular need for additional financial support to sustain aerial telemetry searches for the three collared males. These flights are important for monitoring the radio-collared cats; however, it entails significant unbudgeted costs. We require approximately R2500/$153 per flight, as well as additional diesel required for commuting to and from Jacobsdal. Your continued support will ensure that this critical work proceeds without interruption.

Warm regards from the field

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