



Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)



Also known as: desert lynx, Rooikat

French: Lynx Du Désert

Spanish: Lince Africano

Kingdom Animalia

Phylum Chordata

Class Mammalia

Order Carnivora

Family Felidae

Genus *Caracal* (1)

Size Head-body length: 60 – 92 cm (2)

Tail length: 23 – 31 cm (3)

Height: 38 – 50 cm (3)

Weight 6 – 19 kg (3)

Top facts

- The caracal is a fearsome predator with remarkable speed and agility, allowing it to tackle prey up to three times its size.
- With its strong and lengthy hind legs, the caracal is able to leap up to three metres in the air to catch flying birds.
- The caracal's impressive leaping ability once led to the species being trained to hunt game birds for the Persian and Indian royalty.
- Being the fastest cat of its size, the caracal is able to run down prey such as small antelopes and hares.
- The caracal is well adapted to arid environments due to the fact that it can get an adequate supply of water from its food.

STATUS

The caracal is classified as Least Concern (LC) on the IUCN Red List (1). The African population is listed on Appendix II of CITES, while the Asian population is listed on Appendix I of CITES (4).

DESCRIPTION

The caracal (*Caracal caracal*) is a slender, graceful cat with a short, dense coat and distinctive, long, black-tufted ears (2) (5). The body colour varies from reddish-brown to tawny-grey, but occasionally entirely black "melanistic" individuals may occur (6) (7). The chin, throat and underparts are white, with pale red spots or blotches on the belly and the insides of the legs that vary from very faint to distinct in different individuals (5). Distinctive narrow black stripes run from the eye to the nose (2) and down the centre of the forehead, and the eyes are yellow-brown, with the pupil contracting to a circle rather than a slit (7). The caracal produces a range of vocalisations, including miaows, growls, hisses and coughing calls (2).

RANGE

The caracal has a large range, including much of Africa, and also extending through the Arabian and Anatolian Peninsula, and southwestern and central Asia, as far as Kazakhstan and central India (1) (3) (5). Within Africa, the caracal is only absent from the central Sahara and areas of dense forest around equatorial West Africa (1) (5).

HABITAT

Generally found in arid regions, the caracal occupies a range of habitats, including woodland, savanna, scrub and open semi-desert (1) (2) (3), although in North and South Africa, it is also found in the humid forest zone (1) (3) (8). Within these habitats, the caracal prefers areas with good cover from vegetation or rocks (8). Frequently found in mountainous areas, the caracal is generally found up to elevations of 2,500 metres, although some individuals have been recorded as high as 3,300 metres in the Ethiopian Highlands (1).

BIOLOGY

Possessing tremendous speed and agility, the caracal is a formidable predator capable of tackling prey two to three times its size (5). Its long, powerful hind legs enable it to make incredible leaps up to three metres high and catch birds in flight by batting them from the air with its large paws (5) (6). In the past, this ability led to many caracals being trained to hunt game birds for the Persian and Indian royalty (5). The caracal is also the fastest cat of its size, and uses its speed to run down prey such as hyraxes, hares and small antelopes (2) (6). This species is superbly adapted for life in arid environments and requires very little water, apparently getting adequate supplies from its food (1).

Caracals are usually solitary, and maintain **territories** which may vary between 5 and 48 square kilometres in South Africa, and up to 1,116 square kilometres in the Middle East (1) (3). In the arid regions of Africa, the average home range size is around 316.4 square kilometers (1) (3). Male caracals possess the largest **territories**, which usually encompass the home ranges of several females. The caracal appears to breed throughout the year, although breeding is known to peak between October and February in South Africa (2). After a **gestation** period of around 68 to 81 days, the female may give birth to as many as six young, though three are most commonly produced (2) (5). After nine or ten months the young become independent, and may travel large distances to find their own **territory**. Caracals become sexually mature in their first year, and while wild individuals' lifespans are not recorded, caracals in captivity have been known to live for up to sixteen years (5).

THREATS

Despite its widespread distribution and relatively large overall population, in certain parts of its range, the caracal is considered rare and threatened. As caracals are capable of predation on small livestock, it is often considered as a problem animal throughout its range (1) (3). In North Africa, Arabia, central Asia, Iran and India, habitat loss is posing a significant threat to the caracal's survival (1) (5). In southern Africa, where the caracal is common, it is heavily persecuted as a pest due to its habit of preying on livestock. Nevertheless, despite large numbers being killed, the population does not appear to be suffering (1) (5).

CONSERVATION

Although caracal hunting is still legal in some parts of its range, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, and many southwest and central Asian countries, it is prohibited (1) (3) (8). Furthermore, the Asian caracal population is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), making all international trade of this species illegal (4).

Very little is known from the presence and ecology of the caracal in much of its range in North Africa and Asia. However, in large and well managed protected areas throughout its range, caracals are safeguarded against threats like habitat loss and lack of natural prey. The global population trend of caracal seems to be unknown (1) (3).

FIND OUT MORE

To learn more about cat conservation visit:

- IUCN / SSC Cat Specialist Group:
<http://www.catsg.org>
- International Society for Endangered Cats:
<http://www.wildcatconservation.org/>
- IUCN Red List
<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>

AUTHENTICATION

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GLOSSARY

- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Territory:** area(s) occupied and defended by an animal, a pair of animals or a colony.

REFERENCES

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<http://www.iucnredlist.org>

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