

Black-footed cat (*Felis nigripes*)



Also known as: ant-hill tiger, small-spotted cat

French: Chat À Pieds Noirs

Spanish: Gato De Pies Negros, Gato Patinegro

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Mammalia
Order Carnivora
Family Felidae
Genus *Felis* (1)

Size Male head-body length: 37 – 49 cm (2)
 Female head-body length: 35 – 40 cm (2)
 Male tail length: 8 – 20 cm (2)
 Female tail length: 13 – 18 cm (2)
 Male weight: 1.5 – 2.4 kg (3)
 Female weight: 1 – 1.6 kg (3)

STATUS

The black-footed cat is classified as Vulnerable (VU) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix I of CITES (4).

DESCRIPTION

This secretive and rare cat is among the smallest of the world's cats, and is the smallest wild cat in Africa (2). The coat of the black-footed cat (*Felis nigripes*) varies from cinnamon buff to tawny, and is patterned with black or brown oblong spots, offering effective camouflage (2) (5). These spots merge into bars extending over the shoulders, legs and short tail (2). The broad skull has prominent rounded ears, and very large eyes that possess a mirror-like layer behind the retina, the tapetum lucidum, which reflects light at night with an intense blue sheen (2) (6). The name of this cat comes from the black soles of the cat's feet (5). There are two disputed **subspecies**; *Felis nigripes nigripes* and the darker and larger *Felis nigripes thomasi* (7).

RANGE

The black-footed cat occurs only in Africa. *F.n. nigripes* is found in Botswana, Namibia and northern South Africa, and *F.n. thomasi* occurs in south eastern South Africa (2) (8).

HABITAT

The black-footed cat inhabits **steppe** and savannah habitats, such as the Kalahari and Karoo deserts. It requires sparse shrub and tree cover in which to hunt, and burrows or hollowed-out termite mounds in which to spend their day (2) (5) (6)

BIOLOGY

These tiny predators use their camouflage, small body size, and the cover of darkness to conceal themselves from their prey and predators, and therefore are rarely seen by humans. Black-footed cats are strictly nocturnal, and so hunt only at night, returning to unoccupied springhare, aardvark or porcupine burrows, or abandoned termite mounds during the day (hence its other name 'anthill tiger') (2). The territory of the male is much larger than those of females, and overlaps with up to four female's ranges (3). Their territory is marked with scent, by urine spraying and scent rubbing (2). Female territories also frequently overlap with those of other females, but they always hunt solitary (3). In a night, they can travel up to 16 kilometres searching for food. The black-footed cat is an opportunistic hunter, feeding on 54 different prey species (9). This includes small mammals, mainly gerbils, mice and shrews; birds, insects and reptiles (9). They are even capable of killing and consuming prey up to twice their own weight, such as Cape hares and black bustards, and they will also occasionally scavenge (9). Mating season is in between July and March, and kittens are typically born in November after a two month **gestation** period (8). A litter of one or two young are reared in burrows or termite mounds (2) (5). These secretive hunters can live for up to 13 years in captivity (5) (8).

THREATS

The black-footed cat is rarely seen, due to the species' rarity, and its shy and secretive nature (8). As a very small cat, it poses no threat to livestock and therefore is not persecuted by farmers (2). The most significant threat comes from poisons and traps set for other animals. The African wildcat is targeted by farmers, and the black-footed cat could easily fall prey to the steel-jaw traps and poisoned bait. Similarly, the poisoning of carcasses, to control jackals, and locusts, could kill black-footed cats which feed on them (5). Habitat degradation, caused by overgrazing from cattle throughout the range of the black-footed cat, can impact the cat by reducing the numbers of small vertebrates on which it feeds (5).

CONSERVATION

The black-footed cat is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and therefore international trade in this species is prohibited (2). Hunting of this species is also prohibited in Botswana and South Africa (5). The black-footed cat is also bred at a number of zoos worldwide (7).

FIND OUT MORE

For further information on the black-footed cat and its conservation:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:
<http://www.catsg.org/>
- Friends of the Black-footed Cat:
<http://black-footed-cat.wild-cat.org/> (English)
<http://schwarzfusskatze.wild-katze.org/> (German)

AUTHENTICATION

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<http://black-footed-cat.wild-cat.org/>

GLOSSARY

- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Steppe:** semiarid, grass covered plain.
- **Subspecies:** a population usually restricted to a geographical area that differs from other populations of the same species, but not to the extent of being classified as a separate species.

REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (June, 2007)
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
3. Sliwa, A. (2004) Home range size and social organisation of black-footed cats (*Felis nigripes*). *Mammalian Biology*, **69**: 96 - 107.
4. CITES (June, 2007)
<http://www.cites.org>
5. Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) *Wild Cats Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
6. Friends of the black-footed cat (June, 2007)
<http://black-footed-cat.wild-cat.org/>
7. Cat Survival Trust (June, 2007)
<http://www.catsurvivaltrust.org/blakfoot.htm>
8. Sliwa, A. (2007) *Pers. comm.*
9. Sliwa, A. (2006) Seasonal and sex-specific prey composition of back-footed cats *Felis nigripes*. *Acta Theriologica*, **52**: 195 - 204.