

## Desert Dancer: The Ghost Cat of Rajasthan

The land is harsh, sunlight beating down on the dull golden-grey of the soil. Sweat trickles down from my hairline, slipping around the curve of my nose and dropping to the ground. It stirs a grain of golden sand – prolific here in the thorn scrub jungle of Ranthambhore – and disappears, swallowed into the parched soil. My stomach rumbles. The entire landscape is still, devoid of movement or sound, except for the persistent meowing of a lonely kite circling far above.

Our camera traps are in the far end of the reserve, an area ruled by the tempestuous Chambal River and the bandits that roam her ravines. Clinging to the handlebars of our trusty jeep, damp cloths wrapped around our faces like bandits' masks to protect us from the blazing sun, we travel from site to site, checking traps, unloading memory cards, and placing new cards to record further footage. Sometimes, we spot a few curious villagers poking at our cameras and shoo them away; with bandits and sand miners on the loose, we cannot risk losing expensive equipment and valuable footage of rare species.

Today, I kneel on the peppery sand to extract the memory card from a trickily-placed camera. The memory card is tiny, and I slide it into my own Nikon to view the preliminary footage.

“You know, we could check it once we get back to the field station,” my field assistant remarks.

“Just this once,” I reply, clicking through the photographs eagerly. “I need something to keep me going on this hot day.”

The first twenty photographs in our SD card are of two village men, one of whom seems near-obsessed with understanding the mechanics of our camera trap. His large nose appears even larger as it fills the entire picture, providing us with a less-than-desirable view of his nasal cavity in all its hairy glory. His companion appears intent on finishing a bottle of local beer as quickly as possible and his admirable potbelly is a prominent feature in each photograph as he downs the large bottle at a remarkable speed. The level of beer in the bottle decreases with each subsequent picture until the final one, which has him tossing the bottle into the shrubbery. Not very environmentally-minded, but clearly eager to deny his involvement with the most dangerous mistress of all – alcohol.

Then come the more interesting photographs. A porcupine, quills sticking out at haphazard angles, poking inquisitively around the camera. A shot of its eyes red and wide as the flash startled it. Its rear end as it scurries away from the scary black box that blinded it. A jungle cat with a scar on its left forepaw. A jackal, and a standoff between cat and dog until – a few pictures later – the jackal trots off elegantly. The jungle cat tires quickly of batting the camera and facing impending blindness from the flash and wanders out of camera range. Nilgai, and an up-close and personal view of a nilgai scattering pellets in the foreground of the photograph. Not the most aesthetic, but certainly useful information for your average ecologist. I count the pellets and take down notes in my trusty field notebook where I keep records of all camera trap sightings based on the transect where they are located. A major component of fieldwork is having a meticulous recording protocol. Everything is in the details!

Suddenly, my field assistant inhales sharply and jabs a long finger at the screen. “What is that?”

The image is slightly fuzzy, blurred around the edges the way that tends to happen when an animal is captured while moving at a brisk pace. It is a cat, but what a marvellous cat! With tufted ears and sandy fur, it looks just like a jungle cat at first glance. But the long legs and blunt tail have me squinting at the picture. A closer look at the ears and something clicks; they are edged in midnight black. Not a jungle cat, then.

My field assistant mutters something under his breath.

“Did I just hear you say ‘desert ghost?’” I ask curiously.

I know this cat, and my conviction only grows stronger the longer I stare at that haunting photograph.

“Caracal,” I say, the word falling from my lips like a prayer.

The ghost cat of the desert, India’s rarest wild cat, the caracal. I cannot believe my good fortune. To spot a caracal in the wild is a blessing; to record it on a camera for posterity is divine intervention. I silently thank all the elements that made me hang my camera in the hunting grounds of this ghostly desert wanderer.

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As sandy in appearance as its harsh habitat, the caracal is arguably India’s rarest small cat. It is also, one of the most threatened wild cats of the world, found only in pockets of semi-arid thorn or scrub forest in Africa and the Middle East. In India, it occupies a tiny portion of Rajasthan and supposedly Gujarat, with its last strongholds in Sariska Tiger Reserve and Ranthambhore. While most cats in India are the object of much interest and research, the caracal remains at the fringes of conservation efforts. It benefits mainly through larger conservation schemes for its habitat, not from research focused on its needs.

A few scant research studies on the caracal shed light on its fascinating ecology. This nocturnal wild cat feeds mostly on small mammals, birds, and rodents. Like its African cousin, the serval, the caracal is an incredible jumper, with the ability to leap three meters vertically after birds. Phylogenetically, its closest relative is the African golden cat, although in India, it is often mistaken at first glance for either the jungle cat or the Asian golden cat. With its tufted black-tipped ears, the caracal is, at close quarters, impossible to mistake for any other wild cat in India, although it bears a loose resemblance to the lynx in size and proportions. But where the lynx has spots on its thick fur, the caracal is a plain sandy brown, much like the landscape it inhabits.

This secretive cat is active during the night, when the temperatures drop below a comfortable 20 degrees Celsius. Mostly solitary, the caracal is only found in small groups when females are accompanied by their young. This lithe cat is highly territorial and will mark rocky outcrops and vegetation in its territory with urine, scratch marks, and scat. When communicating with one another, the caracal makes use of its ear tufts and face markings alongside the other typical vocalisations made by most small cats – meows, purrs, hisses, growls, and yowls. Unlike its cousins, this cat is able to subdue prey far larger than its own size, including blackbuck and chinkara, although rodents are its preferred cuisine. Unique among the cats of India, the caracal is a perfectly-honed acrobat. Its strongly muscled, leggy frame allows its rear legs to build momentum and launch the cat into the air after birds, just like a miniature rocket. Indeed, when B.P. Srivastava, Conservator of Forests of Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s, observed a caracal hunting a partridge, he wrote later: “...a lithe fawn coloured body sprang into the air in a graceful arc.”

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*The bird pecks rapidly at the cracked soil, hopping in place, feathers fluttering. A hot dry breeze dances about, rustling the stubby Prosopis trees until the thorns quiver like arrows poised for takeoff. Birdsong, high and sweet like the notes of a reed flute, course through the air, and the little bird pauses in its foraging to chirp back. Suddenly, it finds a wriggling worm and enthusiastically seizes it in its beak, yanking vigorously with a strength surprising for its size.*

*The air seems to still and the bird suddenly freezes, the worm forgotten.*

*A sandy streak flies through the air, claws unsheathed, paws outstretched like a football goalie reaching for the ball. The bird flutters into the air, wings flapping frantically as it tries to swivel out of the predator's path. But the wild cat is too agile for it; its slender body twists mid-air and it pirouettes as gracefully as any ballet dancer. Tufted ears tip forward and the docked tail quivers as the caracal slams into the bird, one powerful paw batting it effortlessly. The bird is dead before it knows what struck it, thudding lifelessly to the ground. The leggy cat delicately sniffs at its prize and then picks it up in its mouth, large eyes scanning the landscape watchfully for any predators. There are far larger carnivores in these ravines that will take a chance against the agile wild cat. Leopards, sloth bears, hyenas, Indian wolves, jackals, honey badgers, and of course, tigers, call Ranthambhore their home too, and the caracal is far too small a cat to take on any of the larger carnivores that might chance upon it.*

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The caracal is a shy cat, preferentially avoiding encounters with humans in its home range. However, as its arid habitat shrinks and collapses due to environmental pressures and expansion of human settlements, this wild cat is pushed into close proximity to humans. In Ranthambhore and Sariska tiger reserves, the density of villages in the core and buffer regions of the reserves have reduced viable habitat for the parks' wildlife. Additionally, the presence of religious and sacred sites within both parks encourages a steady flow of tourists and locals. As linear intrusions such as roadways and railways continue to expand and even cut through protected areas, elusive wildlife such as the caracal are pushed to the fringes, forced to contend with novel stressors and compete with other predators for a reduced prey base.

Another major threat is land degradation. Although the caracal prefers a dry climate and low vegetation cover, the health of the landscape is integral for the survival of this wild cat. Wind erosion poses a major threat, as does scarcity of water and a subsequent drop in the availability of prey. When prey populations decline, predators must adapt rapidly or risk ending up on the wrong side of natural selection. The caracal is built to survive in low-water conditions, deriving most of its water requirements from its prey. Suitable habitat for the species has been pinpointed in multiple states including Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab, but a human-dominated matrix between protected habitat patches makes it difficult to envision the caracal expanding its range in India anytime soon.

Poaching is yet another factor that threatens the existence of the caracal in the fringes of India's deserts. This medium-sized felid is included in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 and Appendix I of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) but poaching

and the illegal wildlife trade expose it to the risk of extinction. Multiple cases of caracal skins being recovered in Rajasthan can be found across the Internet, and in 2017, five caracals and a serval were rescued while being transported out of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh. The species, like most other felids across the world, must content with human greed in its fight to survive.

A rising threat to wild cats, including the caracal, is from feral dogs. Dogs are known to spread certain diseases to wildlife, such as canine distemper, rabies, and other zoonotic diseases. They are also highly aggressive towards wildlife, with multiple cases of being caught hunting wild herbivores or mauling wild cats or dogs. In 2015, a tourist reported a feral dog mauling and killing a leopard cat in South India. During the recent reintroduction of the cheetah to India, researchers warned of attacks by feral dogs on the newly released cheetahs. The threat that these dogs pose to wild cats is extensively studied in the Himalayas, and the caracal could very well find itself in a tight spot soon if stringent measures are not taken to control the feral dog population in and around national parks and other protected areas.

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*Laughter echoes around the maidan as teacups delicately clink together and coins exchange hand. Betting is a gentlemen's hobby, as is coursing, a sport popular among the British. Men decked in elegant hunting suits hurry across the grounds, a few leading high-strung horses. Women giggled and flirted in the balconies, glancing up at the clear sky accusingly from the safety of their parasols. After all, a hot summer afternoon meant the potential of tanning and looking just like one of the natives, an untenable option for any well-bred British lady.*

*A snarl draws the attention of a small crowd of men. A keeper shouts a warning, and then the crack of a whip sings through the hot air. A wowl, and then silence. The men crowd around to see the keeper firmly tying up a caracal to a stout wooded post. Four more of these tawny felines pace at the end of a leading rope held by two muscled men. The cats are wary, nostrils dilating, tufted ears twitching constantly. Nearby, a hunting leopard sits calmly beside its keeper, the man's large hand stroking the big cat's head. The cheetah rumbles a low purr; it is a far easier cat to tame than its grumpier, smaller cousin, the caracal.*

*The men shout to one another, and suddenly, a horn blares. At once, the caracals snarl, baring their long canines. Even the cheetah looks alertly around. The keepers stand at attention, waiting for instructions.*

*"Bring the cats," orders a deep voice. The keepers hurry to obey, dragging their unwilling charges towards the edge of the maidan.*

*A herd of blackbuck grazes in the distance, the adults occasionally glancing up and around to make sure no predators are approaching. Little do they expect what is soon to follow – a large-scale hunt. The men, observing the antelope from a safe distance, place their bets on which cat will seize its prey first. Most bets are on the cheetah, the larger and faster predator.*

*"Release the cat!" the voice orders.*

*The nearest keeper leans over and unclasps the chain around his caracal's neck. With a low hiss, the sand-coloured cat melts into the landscape, its pawprints barely leaving a mark on the sandy soil. More ghost than cat, the men think, even as the blackbuck suddenly honk in alarm.*

*The hunt is on.*

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The caracal has featured heavily in India's rich and diverse history. It was first used for coursing (hunting) by the Delhi Sultanate. Later, during the reign of the Mughals, the Emperor Akbar kept dozens of caracals in his kennels for coursing. In a similar fashion, the British also adopted the habit of using trained cheetahs and caracals to hunt. Caracals were relatively easy to breed in captivity, unlike the cheetah (formerly known as the hunting-leopard). The Cheetah and Caracal Training Centre in Jaipur was the hotspot for capturing and training these wild cats to hunt prey such as blackbuck, chinkara, and game birds. However, while the cheetah was relatively docile and content in captivity, the caracal was known to be irritable and harder to tame, with a well-earned reputation for not trusting its keepers. In 'The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History' (2006), author Thomas T. Allsen noted the unique Persian name for the caracal – *siyagosh* – that was used to refer to the cat even in India. Till date, *siyagosh* is one of the most popular local names for the caracal in India. A popular pastime among the British was setting trained caracals loose on flocks of pigeons and betting as to whose cat would strike down the most birds in the least time. Accounts report dozens of birds falling to the ground before the winner was declared.

The term 'caracal' originates from the Turkish word *Karakulak*, meaning 'black ear.' However, while this cat may feature in Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern storytelling traditions, it has a rightful place of its own in Indian culture and history. One of the earliest mentions of the caracal in India can be traced back to the Hitopadesha, a Sanskrit text. In the Hitopadesha, one of the many stories focuses on *Dirgha-karan* ('long eared'), a wild cat who preys on the chicks of birds. Researchers believe this is one of the earliest mentions of the caracal in Sanskrit literature.

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Shy, agile, and ghostly, the caracal is fighting a losing battle against extinction in India. With a shrinking habitat, a growing demand for its pelt and body parts for traditional medicine, and the threat of feral dogs, this desert dancer is pushed to the very edge of existence. I stare once again at the camera trap footage of this ghost cat of Ranthambhore, its pugmarks barely indenting the soil as it strolls through the scrubby vegetation like royalty. Beside me, my assistant shivers.

"*Siyagosh*," he whispers. He nervously clucks his tongue, the superstitious fellow, and beckons me to follow him back to the jeep.

"It's only a cat," I say, amused by his nervous reaction.

His only answer is a piercing backwards look sweeping the ravines of the languid Chambal. "Never turn your back on the ghost of the desert," he warns me, revving up the engine. "When it comes after you, you won't even see it move."

As we bump down the dirt path, away from the maze of ravines, I feel chills run down my spine. Something is watching us, and I have a strong suspicion that the ghost of the desert is near.