

CAT news

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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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First camera trap record of caracal kittens in Oman

Despite its wide distribution, little is known about the breeding period or litter size of the caracal *Caracal caracal schmitzi* in Oman. We present here the first camera trap photograph of twin kittens in the wild.

The Arabian caracal is one of the widespread cats in Arabia. It is classified as Least Concern by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and by the regional assessment for the Arabian Peninsula (Mallon & Budd 2011, Avgan et al. 2016). It is found in most areas of Oman from the mountains of Musandam in the extreme north, throughout the Al Hajar range and the central desert to the Dhofar mountain chain in the south (Harrison & Bates 1991, Spalton & Al Hikmani 2014). It only seems to avoid the true deserts of the Wahiba Sands and Rub Al Khali.

Despite its wide distribution little is known about the ecology of this medium sized felid in the region. Van Heezik & Seddon (1998), working in northern Saudi Arabia, studied range size, habitat use and diet of a single radio-tracked adult male while Stuart & Stuart (2007) studied caracal diet in the UAE and Musandam peninsula. However, except for a report of a kitten in Yemen nothing has been published on the reproduction of the caracal in Arabia (Hance 2012). Elsewhere in Africa and Asia, the caracal breeds throughout the year, with a peak from October to February, and litters usually contain one to four kittens

(Bernard & Stuart 1987). The gestation period is between two and three months (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002).

Here, we report the first camera-trap record of twin kittens in Oman. A series of photographs taken on 16 February 2017 show two kittens on the southern escarpment of Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve, Dhofar (Fig. 1). The camera traps, installed for the long-term study of the Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr*, regularly capture one adult caracal and on seven occasions recorded two caracals, most likely breeding pairs. The cameras have also recorded caracal preying on hyrax and house rats. However, this is the first record of caracal kittens. Photographs show two individuals at 8:00 h following a trail widely used by other wildlife. Though caracals are typically weaned within 15 weeks they will usually stay with their mother for up to one year (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). Thus, it is assumed that the mother is close-by.

This record not only confirms the continued presence of a breeding caracal population but also that, in some areas, it continues to live alongside its much larger relative, the Arabian leopard.

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Fig. 1. Photograph of caracal kittens in Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve on 16 February 2017 (Photo H. Al Hikmani).