



Auas with her three kittens in October 2021. See the video of kittens playing on [facebook.com@blackfootedcatsnam](https://facebook.com/blackfootedcatsnam)

The Black-footed Cat Research Project Namibia was initiated in 2012 to 1) collect more fine-scale distribution records of black-footed cats in Namibia, specifically on farmland and protected areas in Namibia; 2) educate & raise awareness for this little-known wild cat species; 3) investigate & identify threats and to establish its conservation status; 4) find strongholds for its conservation and 5) study the distribution, biology and ecology of this species in Namibia.

This project is a collaborative effort between the Black-Footed Cat Working Group (BFCWG), the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) Biodiversity Research Centre (BRC) and the Ministry of Environment, Forestry & Tourism.

2021 has been a year of kittens!! We recorded 11 litters born from May-December 2021, totalling 20 kittens from the six females. Some females had more kittens than others, but the high reproduction rates are phenomenal, maybe due to improved productivity and higher prey densities through good rainfall in 2021. It is unusual for females to give birth in the colder months of the year, with litters usually born from October to March, but births have been recorded until May (Sliwa et al. 2010).

Ndele Shipala, the field technician and NUST Masters student, regularly monitored all the females in 2021, and was able to obtain amazing camera trap footage of females and their kittens.

The landowners' support and co-operation is vital for the success of the project and for the long-term conservation of this unique species in southern Namibia. We thank the farmers for their co-operation and support.

We would like to thank our dedicated supporters and sponsors for their continued support!

We want to thank the **Namibian Chamber of Environment**, **B2Gold Namibia** and **TOTAL** for the financial support and by providing a vehicle for temporary use until we can get a new project vehicle.

Naples Zoo is thanked for their financial support, once again providing funds for the field work and fuel.

Please see below updates from the field from the six females and their kittens between October 2021 and January 2022.

Greetings to a new year from the black-footed cats of Grünau

by Ndele Shipala & Martina Küsters

A prosperous new year to the black-footed cat custodians, supporters and sponsors locally and around the world. It has been a successful year. Here is the insight update on the black-footed cats, Namibia.



Figure 1: Comparative condition of vegetation in the study area: Dry & dusty in October-November 2021 [left]. Green grass after early season rains in December 2021 [photos: Shipala Ndele]

Auas was observed on 11 October 2021, when she moved very close to the tracking vehicle and three little kittens following her, not very bothered about the lights and sounds, I was able to film them with my cell phone. Auas was intently smelling the ground, until she found the rodent she had hunted and brought back for her kittens. One of the kittens, eagerly grabbed the rodent and ran off a few metres to chew on it. This was also captured on a camera trap, when Auas brought a gerbil [probably a short-tailed gerbil *Desmodillus auricularis*] back to the den [Figure 2], and the three kittens fighting over it and grabbing it from each other. She was frequently seen with her kittens at night hunting in late October and into November. There are many delightful videos of excited play-time, grooming, wrestling, cuddling and suckling of her and her kittens at dens [Figures 3]. By 19 November however, it seems that only two had survived [Figure 4], as could be identified from camera trap photos. These two looked strong and we hope they survived into independence. That same night, after Auas and her kittens had left the den, a young adult (uncollared) black-footed cat came to the den and was captured approaching the camera [Figure 5].



Figure 2: One of Auas' kittens with a gerbil that she brought back to the den [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]



Figure 3: Kittens and Auas cuddling, sleeping and suckling before the night adventures begin [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]

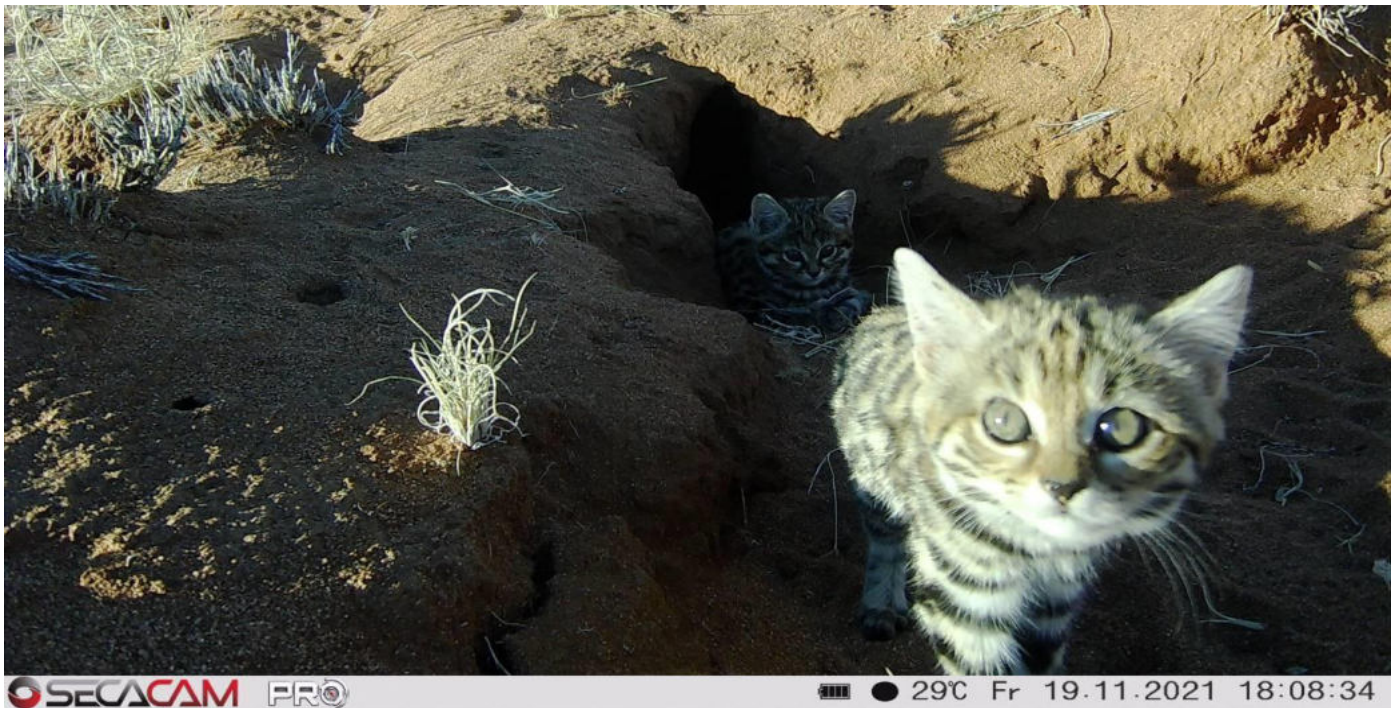


Figure 4: It seems that one of the three kittens died between 11 and 16 November 2021, identified from camera trap images captured on 16 November 2021 and from the above video [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]



Figure 5: The un-collared black-footed cat that was captured on camera at Auas' den [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]

While recording the den location of **Nama**, one kitten was seen in the entrance chamber to the den on 1 November 2021. The eyes were still closed, so estimated at less than 7 days old. No cameras are set at den sites where kittens are known to be less than two weeks old, to limit

disturbance and not to attract potential predators to the den. Unfortunately, the fate of the kitten is not known as it was never seen after that, including at a den Nama used in January 2022 [Figure 6], when the kittens would be estimated at nearly two months old and still dependent on their mother. Nama is very shy and timid, always hunting closer to the dongas (drainage lines with shrubby vegetation) and gullies or she will always run to the nearest den location where she rests and grooms. She is an energetic hunter.



Figure 6: Nama inspecting the camera trap [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]

Kara, the female cat that ‘leaves her den faster than the camera can trigger’. After almost two years of monitoring, she is the only cat that we have not been able to get footage on the camera. She is however very relaxed and used to the sounds of the engine of the tracking vehicle and often uses the headlights to her advantage to catch grasshoppers and other insects that are attracted to the light. She rarely wanders outside her small, restricted home range. Grooming, resting and lazily hunting are her typical behaviours. The only litter born in 2021 that we know of was in June, but the kittens were unfortunately never seen afterwards.

Prima occupies a relatively small home range, mostly west of the B1 national tarred road, but does frequently cross the busy road to forage and returns to den sites mostly along or near the the Gamkab River. She has habituated very well to the tracking vehicle, is easy to follow and observe during the night. She often hunts birds, mostly larks, rodents and sometimes feeding on grasshoppers. Southern Namibia did experience swarming by locusts and smaller grasshoppers in November 2021, although it offers a food resource for many smaller mammals, hand-spraying with pesticides was used in the surrounding areas to control the swarms. I saw her regurgitate the remains of a rodent in September and feeding on it a few minutes later. There were no kittens seen in September, but an estimated one month old kitten was seen peering out of a den on 19 November 2021. This kitten was again recorded on camera at a den, much older and stronger on 21 December 2021 [Figure7].



Figure 7: Prima [far left side] and her two-month-old kitten [camera set by: Martina Küsters]

Zola was also observed having kittens with her in the den on 1 November 2021. Two very young kittens, with eyes still closed [less than 5 days], were seen lying huddled up together in the entrance chamber of the den. It's very unfortunate that we could not have footage of her kittens on camera, and they may have not survived, as Zola was captured on camera moving a young kitten [estimated at between 10-14 days old] on 26 January 2022 [Figure 8]. The interval between the two litters is too short for the litter born at the end of October to have survived into independence.



Figure 8: Zola moving her kitten, estimated at being between 10 to 14 days old [camera set by: Shipala Ndele]

Lace, the cautious and timid female that occupies a home range of scarce vegetation cover and feels very vulnerable in the open. Once one has picked up her signal, one would be very fortunate to see her eye-shine under the spotlight before she retreats to the nearest den. After patiently standing with the vehicle a distance from the den, she will come out to groom, hunt and returns quickly to the nearest den. Rarely observed successfully hunting or feeding. Lace's two kittens born around 12 November 2021 in a deep den, were observed eagerly at play while Lace watched from the safety of a den on 21 December 2021 [Figure 9]. They were both captured on camera to be in good health and growing up fast in January 2022 [Figure 10].



Figure 9: Lace and her two kittens in December 2021 [photo by André Mulder]

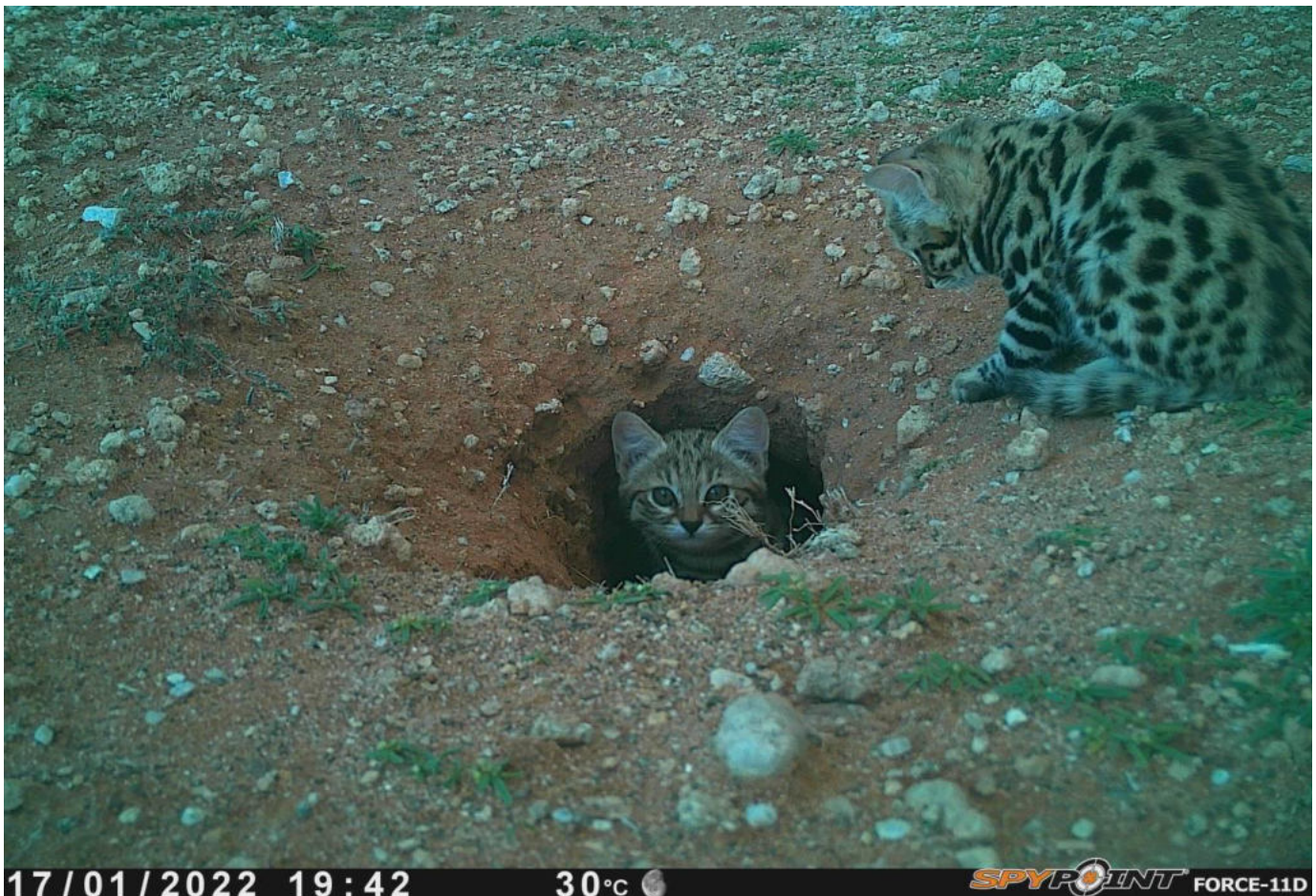


Figure 10: Lace's two kittens look healthy and strong in January 2022, estimated at just over two months old [camera set by Shipala Ndele]

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If you wish to support the project, please contact us at bfootedcat@gmail.com or **+264 81 403 0654**.

 We wish to thank all our collaborators, supporters and funders and all farmers for contributing to the research and conservation of the unique black-footed cat !!

