

## The Black-Footed Cat

*Microfelis*

*Microfelis* Roberts, 1926, Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. xi (VII), p. 250; genotype *M. nigripes* Burchell, 1824, Travels ii, p. 592. The Black-Footed Cat from Bechuanaland.

## Black-Footed Cat or Sebala Cat—Swartvoetkat

*Microfelis nigripes* Burchell

MICROFELIS NIGRIPES NIGRIPES.

*Felis nigripes* Burchell, 1824, Travels, ii, p. 592.

Type (not in existence) from Litakun (nr. Kuruman), Bechuanaland.

MICROFELIS NIGRIPES THOMASI.

*Felis (Microfelis) nigripes thomasi* Shortridge, 1931, Records Albany Mus., vol. iv (I), pp. 119-121.

Type (in the Albany Museum) from Thorn Kloof, near Grahamstown, Eastern Cape.

## NATIVE NAMES:

## PERSONALLY COLLECTED

Bechuana: *Sebála, Lotótsi; (Tútchē, Titingwe—Gobabis)*.<sup>1</sup>

Nama Hottentot, Berg Damara: !*Koe:rus, !Koirus*.

Naron Bushman: *Tútchu, Tso:tso*.

||K'au||en Bushman: *Tkingwa*.

Karross-trade name: *Sebála* cat.

## OTHER SOURCES

Bechuana: *Sebulabula-kwana* (Neale); *Tsipá* (Livingstone)<sup>2</sup> *Kakikaan* (Burchell—Batlapin Tribe); *Sebalabala* (England).

DISTRIBUTION IN SOUTH-WEST AFRICA.—Even where it occurs (in S.W. Africa) the Black-Footed Cat is rare. Its local distribution is almost exclusively confined to the typical Kalahari Sand-Plain Country which extends for some considerable distance west of Bechuanaland into the level eastern districts of South-West Africa. It apparently does not range north of about latitude 20 S., or anywhere west of the Keetmanshoep-Windhoek Railway.

The Black-Footed Cat is fairly well-known in Gobabis District, and, although occurring there as far west as Gobabis Town, is believed to become a little more numerous towards the Bechuanaland Border. In the south it is said to have been met with near the Swart Modder River some 100 miles north of the Orange River.

The most western record I know of is that of a single specimen obtained in 1926 at Quickborn, near Okahandja by Bradfield (Ann. Transvaal Mus., vol. xii (IV), p. 322, 1928).

<sup>1</sup> The Gobabis Bechuana names are apparently borrowed from the Naron and ||K'au||en Bushmen respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *Tsipá* correctly refers to the Genet, which is known to karross traders as the Tsipa Cat. (Grant's Nama Hottentot name *Tc'eeþ* for *Myonax ruddi*—apparently from the same extraction—is probably borrowed.)

"Sebala" skins are very seldom brought in for sale in South-West Africa. The Herero, Ovambo, and Okavango Tribes have no name for the species.

As an indication of its scarcity, at Rietfontein North (almost due east of Epukiro)—near the Bechuanaland Border—an attempt was made to collect a sufficient number of skins for a karross, but in the course of over 12 years only 15 were obtained.

GENERAL DISTRIBUTION OUTSIDE SOUTH-WEST AFRICA.—The Kalahari Sand-Plains are the headquarters of the Sebala Cat; the northern limit of its range being approximately between latitudes 20 and 21 South.

Although nowhere abundant, it is widely distributed in Bechuanaland, and also extends into Griqualand West, parts of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, and possibly the extreme south-western corner of Southern Rhodesia.

"It has been recorded as present in Natal, but is probably extinct there."—Warren.

South of the Orange River it appears to be restricted to the karroo areas of the Cape Province to as far east as the Alexandria and Fort Beaufort Divisions.

HISTORICAL.—This cat was described by Burchell in 1824 from an imperfect skin which he saw at Litakun, near Kuruman, forming part of a karross.

HABITS.—The Black-Footed Cat is essentially a desert species, and inhabits dry open sand-plain or karroo country.

It is said to hide by day in the holes of spring-haas and other burrowing animals.

*Microfelis nigripes* is the smallest of the *Felidae*, and in general scarcity, restricted range, and open country habit resembles the small *Felis rubiginosa* from the Deccan of India.

Whilst in Gobabis District I examined a Tame Cat stated to be a hybrid with *nigripes* which had itself crossed with a Common Grey Wild Cat (*ocreata*) and produced kittens.

There appears to be little, if any, loss of fertility in the progeny of hybrids between domestic and the smaller wild species of true *Felidae* either in Africa or Asia.

A Black-Footed Cat (from Gobabis District) kept alive for several years in the Windhoek Zoo remained shy and savage, and lived on amicable terms with several equally untamed grey wild cats. Others have from time to time been on exhibition at the Pretoria Zoo.

On account of their scarcity, karrosses made from the skins of sebala cats fetch a comparatively high price.

BREEDING HABITS.—The Black-Footed Cat is said to give birth to two or three young, which are reared at the bottom of a burrow.

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES.—The Black-Footed Cat is well-proportioned. In build it is a typical dwarf, and does not in the least resemble a miniature serval, as has been stated.

"Iris yellowish-green; the pupil contracts to a vertical slit under strong light."—Pocock.

The characters of *Microfelis nigripes* have been described by Pocock (P.Z.S., 1907, p. 669).