

Talking Conservation

Drie Valleyen

Wild Caracals & Domestic Cats

Complex Urban Interaction

The Western Cape is home to a surprising predator: the wild caracal (*Caracal caracal*), South Africa's largest remaining small feline. The caracal is a medium-sized, muscular cat with reddish-brown fur, a white chest with reddish spots, large ears with tufts, short tails, and big feet.

Often referred to as “rooikats” (red cats), these elusive creatures have adapted remarkably to urban encroachment. However, their growing presence in suburban/semi-rural areas such as Sedgefield raises concerns, particularly regarding their predation on domestic cats.

Why Are Caracals Preying on Domestic Cats?

Caracals are opportunistic hunters. Their diet in the wild includes rodents, birds, reptiles, and small antelope. However, urban environments alter their prey availability. Domestic cats, which roam freely in suburban areas, sometimes become easy targets, especially in greenbelt areas near residential neighbourhoods. This behaviour is partly driven by habitat loss, human development, and a reduction in natural prey populations.

For instance, a group called the Urban Caracal Project has documented domestic animals in the diets of caracals along the urban fringes of Cape Town, signalling a shift in hunting patterns influenced by urban pressures.



How Caracals Thrive Near Humans

Caracals have proven to be highly adaptable, foraging on the edges of suburban areas during the day—contrary to their primarily nocturnal hunting habits in the wild. This shift allows them to target diurnal prey like domestic pets and guineafowl, which are more abundant near human settlements. Greenbelts provide ideal habitats, offering cover and hunting grounds while minimising human interaction. Despite their adaptability, caracals face significant threats from pesticides, traffic collisions, and habitat fragmentation, which further stress their populations.

The Broader Impact

While some residents - especially domestic pet owners - may view caracals as a nuisance or even a threat, their presence is critical to maintaining ecological balance. As apex predators in the region, they help control populations of smaller animals, including rodents. However, conflicts arise when they prey on pets, highlighting the need for coexistence strategies.

Conservationists advocate for reducing pesticide use and preserving green corridors to support both wildlife and urban biodiversity.

Mitigation and Coexistence

Experts suggest that pet owners in caracal-prone areas take proactive measures to protect their animals. Keeping cats indoors, particularly during dawn and dusk when caracals are most active, is one solution. Securing property boundaries with caracal-proof fencing can also deter these predators. At a broader level, town planning that integrates wildlife corridors and minimizes habitat disruption is essential to fostering coexistence between humans and wildlife.

The ongoing research by the Urban Caracal Project and other organisations underscores the importance of understanding these cats' behaviours to mitigate conflicts while conserving the region's biodiversity. Caracals are a reminder of the complex relationship between suburban development and nature.