

Caracal: A cat that stole the show

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Seeing a caracal is a reverie for researchers, dream of wildlifers and ultimate fantasy of photographers. Many other species are equally hard to see like the snow leopards or red panda. To see a snow leopard one has to climb high Himalayan mountains in freezing temperatures while to see a red panda one has to overcome the nasty rains and various hurdles associated with a rain forest. Similarly, though some consider the sighting of Caracal as god's grace while others as luck but researchers, wildlifers and photographers know it is not just a matter of persistence or resolute; the caracal is seen only by those whom the caracal wants to see. Geographically, the areas inhabited by the Caracal are easily approachable, and are a part of the main tourism hubs of India such as Ranthambhore and Sariska. Thousands of tourists, hundreds of vehicles go in these areas every day, yet the caracal remains ever elusive. Recently, I had a fantastic sighting of Caracal family with a kill, after 6 years of my stay in Ranthambhore, a long wait ... but the mysterious creature finally showed up!



Caracal is a Turkish word *karakulak*, which means “black ear”. Scientific name of Caracal is *Caracal caracal* but caracals are known and called by many names; it is known as ‘*Siyeh gush*’ in persian, and popularly as ‘*Mor mar Bhageri*’ in Rajasthani. Kutchi, a dialect of Gujarat, has a name for it, ‘*Harnotro*’ meaning haran (Chinkara) like colour. Caracal is a medium sized cat. It is generally dark red, grey, or golden sand in colour, and as the name suggests, a caracal's ears are black, with tufts. Caracal possesses a very unique distinguishing physical feature. Its ears are long, narrow and tipped with long tufts of black hair on top of each ear.

The Caracal's hind legs are longer than its front, which helps it to leap in the air. All the paws are wide, and well padded, to help its movement remain quiet in grass, or to walk in deep snow. Each paw also ends in four retractable claws, which are four to five nailsbreadth in length. They are capable of tremendous aerial acrobatic jumps and can land safely. Caracals have the claim to fame of being the "fastest of all the small cats" and have been known to leap up into the air to successfully catch and kill flying birds.



The incredible sighting of the Caracal happened in the Pilli Ghati area of Ranthambhore, it was a cloudy day, I was in a gypsy, when out of the blue we saw a caracal walking along the road and entering the bushes, before the dawn of realisation and the resulting elation hit us we saw two more caracals near the road, raising the total to 3 caracals!! It was a rare sighting of caracal with two full grown cubs. By now they had entered the bushes but yet, we could see them. The dry deciduous forest enabled us to see the animal in the bushes till quiet a distance.

They were about 50 m from the road but walking parallel behind the bushes. Since pictures could not be taken in such circumstance I had lost hope, but we kept walking together, the caracal and the gypsy for the next 200 m.

We parked our vehicle in an open place, one cub and the mother started coming close to us. At 20 feet distance they started searching for something in the bushes, now the mother sat on one side. The cub finally succeeded in searching, and it was a 'gargantuan-sized' monitor lizard.



The first cub came ahead and curiously kept looking at the kill, it flipped it from one side to another as if playing with it. The mother kept looking at the cub, with less amusement of course. She kept ignoring us all together. The cub by now had started tearing the monitor lizard, but as it is a thick skinned reptile, finally it left the lizard and went and sat away.

I was getting very inquisitive thinking that they didn't kill the monitor lizard in front of us then how are they having it? Our vehicle driver Raees Khan, whispered from behind, 'the mother must have killed and left it here, later she went and brought the cubs to the kill.' That observation is perhaps his 25 year-experience speaking ... by now the second cub came in, this cub had one ear cut from top. Now this one managed to tear open the monitor lizard, but it took him almost 30 minutes to open the monitor lizard. It devoured nearly half of the monitor lizard.

It left the half eaten kill, and now the first cub came back; but the mother came ahead and she took away the kill and then disappeared in the bushes followed obediently by the cubs. The whole episode lasted for about 47 minutes, starting from my first picture to last picture ... I took a total of 460 shots of this rare beauty in the given time.



In India Caracal is reported in Ranthambhore, Sariska, Kutch and Chambal. Like the Tiger, Caracal also has nine subspecies, viz.:

1. *Caracal caracal caracal*, East, Central and South Africa
2. *Caracal caracal algira*, North Africa
3. *Caracal caracal damarensis*, Namibia
4. *Caracal caracal limpopoensis*, Botswana
5. *Caracal caracal lucani*, Gabon
6. *Caracal caracal michaelis*, Turkmenistan (endangered)
7. *Caracal caracal nubica*, Ethiopia, Sudan
8. *Caracal caracal poecilotis*, West Africa
9. *Caracal caracal schmitzi*, Israel, West Asia, Iran, Arabia, Pakistan, India

Distribution: Caracals are native to Africa, Asia, and even certain areas of the Middle East. In India, it is reported in Ranthambhore (Rajasthan), Sariska (Rajasthan), Kutch (Gujarat) and Chambal (Rajasthan and MP). Late Dr. Ishwar Prakash, Director, ZSI, reported a caracal from Bikaner District.

Other than the cheetah the caracals were the only other feline which were used by the Moghul's for hunting, in those days. Interestingly, the Caracal couldn't influence art and culture like tigers and lions, because of its elusiveness.

Dr. V.D. Sharma, former PCCF of Rajasthan stated, 'Caracal being elusive it's not necessary it's not hunted, in 1982- 83 two caracals skin were recovered in Pali district of Rajasthan from Jogi community.'

In Africa, caracal is poached and its skin traded. The skin is put for sale on the internet without inhibitions.

However, the most important factor leading to the endangerment of the caracal is the human impact on the habitat of the species. As human-use of resources and space has amplified over years the habitat of the caracal has shrunk considerably. We have to act rapidly to save this secretive and enchanting cat species...



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