

## Caracal fact file

### ■ Recognition

The caracal (*Caracal caracal*) is a medium-sized cat resembling the Eurasian lynx. It is usually between 65 and 90 centimetres long, with a 30-centimetre tail; males typically weigh 13-18kg, while females weigh around 11kg. The word caracal comes from the Turkish for 'black ear', and indeed its black ears are its most distinguishing feature; other distinctive markings include black spots above the eyes and white patches around the eyes and nose. The fur varies from red to grey to sandy depending on the individual.

### ■ Feeding

A carnivore, the caracal hunts at night, typically for animals smaller than itself such as rodents and hares (although it will occasionally attack gazelle,

small antelope and young ostrich). It shears the skin off the meat and discards the internal organs before eating.

### ■ Reproduction

Mating can occur at any time of year. A female usually mates with several males during a single oestrous period; gestation then lasts between 68 and 81 days, and the litter contains one to six kittens (although the maximum is typically three for wild caracal). Kittens are blind and helpless at birth, weighing 198-250g. After a month they are able to leave the birthing den, and at 10 weeks they are weaned. Sexual maturity is reached shortly after the first year.

### ■ Vocalisation

The caracal can produce a range of vocalisations, including, meows, growls, hisses and coughing calls.

was a bright sunny morning, but the chill of the African autumn was in the air. I was positioned at one end of the ravine, with the dogs pushing through from the other end approximately three quarters of a mile away. After 20 minutes I could see the first dog appear in the Swarovski scope onboard the .222 Brno. Then all of a sudden I saw the dogs running at speed and heard the barking in the cold, still air. The adrenalin started to pump as the radio burst into life with Bruce's excited Xhosa tone. "The dogs have flushed a cat," he said. "Get ready – it is running towards us." I was excited, but in the back of my mind I kept thinking: after three years of waiting, what if I miss it? Gripping the .222, I peered down the ravine through the acacia trees and waited for my cat. After 20 minutes, the call on the radio came: "The caracal has gone down a fissure in the rocks." I was starting to think these guys were winding me up about the existence of these caracal.

Later that afternoon we paid a visit to Cecil the taxidermist in Tarkastad. I was still not convinced these things actually existed, but when I walked in I could hardly believe my eyes. Sitting in the corner of the workshop in an old tyre was a caracal on a lead. Somebody get me a gun!

It sat looking at me while I busied myself taking photographs of it. It purred gently as the tufts of its ears twitched. "I have got to have one of these in my trophy room," I thought to myself.

Over the week we tried lamping and the dogs again, all to no avail. The dogs did flush one cat – but by the time we reached the tree it was in, it had jumped out, clearing the dogs, and vanished into the veldt. This was not going well. Again I returned home without even seeing a wild caracal.

Now I've heard of goose fever, but I think I had caracal fever if such a thing exists. I planned my entire 2009 safari at Huntershill around the caracal, with everything else coming second best. During the day we were plains game hunting; at night, lamping. But whatever we did, there was still no sign of the telltale green eyes in the mountains.

The reserve now had its own dogs which were young and still learning. Even so, we planned to take them out at some point during the week.

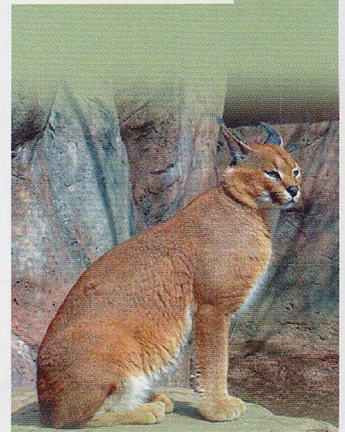
Day three arrived; I had taken a nice Burchells zebra and was partway through a stalk on a white blesbok when an excited call came over the radio. Two of the trackers were out warming the dogs up for our hunt when the camp Jack Russell bolted a caracal from beside a

stream. The cat was up a tree and the dogs were holding it at bay. Did I want it? Did I ever.

We sprinted to the bakkie and drove the one mile to where we thought they were. I was reminded how rough these veldt tracks were as we bounced along at what seemed like rally car speed. I was hanging onto the door with one hand; the other grasped my rifle. We drove as close as we could, and I was out of the truck before it had come to a halt. I ran the 200 metres to where I could see the trackers, forgetting how unfit I was. As I arrived I could see the dogs barking at the tree; it took a few seconds to see the caracal hissing back. It's remarkable how these cats blend in so well with the environment.

After the shot with my .243 Tikka it felt like a bit of an anti-climax, but after four years of trying I now had a caracal to adorn the wall of my trophy room. Hunting, as we all know, is a bit of a gamble, but sometimes it comes good.

I've still not got a jackal after four years of trying, but that's another story. **AS**



*Below: Peace at last: It took Adrian four years to bag his caracal, but it was worth it*

