

Series: 2_003/2

FEEDING ECOLOGY OF THE CARACAL

Although the caracal is an opportunistic predator like the black-backed jackal, it feeds mostly on small- to medium-sized mammals.

Diet

- Over 90% of the diet consists of mammals. Rodents (e.g. rats, mice and springhare), rabbits and hares, and rock hyrax (dassie) are the most common prey items in caracal diet. In areas where small- and medium-sized antelope are abundant, they also form a major part of the diet
- Birds constitute a small percentage of the diet (generally less than 5% of the diet).
- Reptiles are only eaten occasionally (less than 1% of the diet).
- Other carnivores (smaller species) are preyed on opportunistically. In Namibia, the most common carnivore species found in caracal diet were black-backed jackal and African wild cat.
- Invertebrates (insects, spiders, etc.) and plant material do not appear to be an essential food source for caracal, because they are only consumed in trace amounts. But insects may be a food source that caracals fall back on in drier areas and where their preferred prey is in short supply.
- When the density of the preferred prey such as rodents and hares decreases (during lean times such as winter or drought), caracals start feeding on a wider variety of prey items. During these times, “minor” prey items such as birds, carnivores and invertebrates play a more prominent role in the caracal diet.

- Small livestock can constitute a relatively large proportion of the diet in some farming areas. This may be due to specific caracal individuals turning to livestock for prey. Generally, however, the proportion of livestock in caracal diet is relatively small: In the Eastern Cape, livestock comprised less than 25% of the diet, less than 15% in the Karoo, Sandveld and Bedford area, 10% in the southern Free State, and less than 7% in Namaqualand. A study in Namibia found that less than 12% of the caracals that were tracked with radio collars preyed on livestock, and in these cases, livestock made up only 2% of those caracals’ diets
- Caracals do scavenge at times, especially when resources are low. In areas where caracals are persecuted, however, caracals are rarely seen returning to a kill.

The occurrence of specific prey items in the diet fluctuates seasonally, which means that caracals eat the most abundant prey available at the time.

The diet of caracals does not differ much between protected areas (such as game reserves) and farmland if the same types of prey are available on farms as in the neighbouring protected area.

Feeding behaviour

Caracals hunt daily and are capable of tracking prey. They can easily take down prey larger than themselves, such as adult springbok, impala, mountain reedbuck, bushbuck, sheep, and goats.

At least five studies conducted throughout South Africa found no evidence of livestock in the diet of caracals in protected areas. This finding suggests that caracals do not leave the protected area with the intent to predate on livestock on neighbouring farmland. However, young predators likely disperse

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from protected areas onto farmland to settle in vacant territories created by predator control efforts.

Despite livestock being the most abundant prey item on livestock farms, caracals tend to prefer natural prey. On farmland, caracals tend to kill livestock opportunistically. Several studies conducted in South Africa reported that some caracals in farming areas preyed exclusively on natural prey species, and did not predate on livestock. Therefore, some have suggested encouraging the presence of territorial caracals to minimise livestock losses.

On farmland where caracals do predate on livestock, the predation tends to take place throughout the year. But in some areas, more livestock are killed during the lambing seasons. A study conducted in the southern Free State found that the higher predation on livestock during and immediately after the lambing seasons was also associated with lower densities of natural prey. A study conducted along the west coast showed that elevated livestock & springbok predation coincided with lower rodent densities. This was also the time of year when female caracals suckle their young, which means that they have higher energy requirements.

With regard to game species, one study conducted in the Karoo found that caracal preyed on the young of species that hide their young (such as springbok, common duiker, klipspringer and kudu). The young of follower species (the young follow the mother as soon as they are able to get up and move around, e.g. mountain zebra and blesbok) were not eaten.

The diet of the caracal overlaps with the diet of:

- Black-backed jackal
- Leopard
- African wild cat

In areas where caracals live alongside large cat species (such as lion or leopard), it is possible that they focus mainly on smaller prey such as rodents, rather than larger prey such as antelope species.

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Consult your local DFFE (Environmental Affairs) or DALRRD (Department of Agriculture) office for legal aspects regarding predation management

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