

2022 Cat Trip Roundup

After a hiatus of international travel during the Covid Years, I dusted off my passport and got back on the road to find more cat species in 2022. Rather than a long trip report for each, I thought I'd send a summary report with some thoughts as I was mostly traveling pretty well trodden areas. I think that successful trips get more airtime than failures and that doesn't necessarily reflect reality of looking for mammals, so I thought I'd share both the highs and lows. I went on trips hoping for 8 new cats last year and found 4. But I learned a bunch from the failures for the future.

Reader note: I will heartily admit that I'm a felineophile with an active birding hobby. While I'll make an easy detour for bats and rodents, it's just not my focus, so expect this to be feline focused with some photos of other things that we saw. If you want to see the birds I saw on each trip - check out my reports on eBird.

June 2022 - Kenya for African Golden Cat and Serval with Royle Safaris

You can see Martin's trip report [here](#). I'll simply add my color commentary rather than rewrite it.

We spent 4 nights/3 full days trying for African Golden Cat in the Gatamaiyu Forest Reserve. Our strategy involved sitting in blinds, hiking, baiting with various scents and using rodent calls - none of which produced a Golden Cat. Based on camera trap records and roadkill, I think that this location has potential, but more work needs to be done to determine the right strategy before I'd return with any expectation of seeing it there. In fact, I don't believe that anyone who has purposefully gone looking for a Golden Cat at the location has actually seen one. The reports from local women or the ranger who are in the forest daily are not at all regular for the Golden Cat. If I were to return, my hypothesis is that the best strategy would be a combination of walking silently alone on the trails and staking out trail intersections. If you get the bright idea to try this alone, it's worth noting a few things: 1) Elephants in the forest are an issue. Their apparent MO is to be completely silent and still when they detect you and then freak out when you're closer than you should be. 2) Logistics of doing so without local guide support maybe tough. Particularly food and sleeping. 3) There's an absolutely gorgeous luxury lodge that looked to be nearing completion in the forest (construction may have paused during covid?). It will be a primo birding location...but those birders are going to be up early and in numbers, and I don't know many cats that love groups of birders.

Local guiding/knowledge was provided by Zarek Cockar and Stratton Hattfield. What I would say without any question is that Zarek and Stratton were awesome to hang with. I'd recommend Zarek without any question as a bird and mammal guide in Kenya and beyond (more below), and if you're lucky enough to get some time birding with Stratton, the guy is next-level authoritative on the avifauna of the region. Zarek had limitless energy to keep searching and knew where and how to find basically everything (except a Golden Cat...but that's asking a lot, and I think he'll know how to in the future).

After the Gatamaiyu Forest, Zarek and I went to Mara West camp to search for Serval in the Mara Triangle area. I had a couple glimpses of serval in the past, but I think it's one of the most beautiful cats and wanted some good photos. We got rather unlucky and in three full days missed seeing a Serval. The lowlight of the trip was an American guy in a truck who flashed his lights at us to ask what we'd seen and told us about the Ocelot that he'd just seen cross the road 30 seconds ago. We didn't hang out to explain that his sighting was much more likely to be a Serval than a vagrant Ocelot that had swum across the Atlantic, and instead sped off in search of the cat, but missed it.

While I've spent a lot of time throughout Africa, I had never been to the Mara and was blown away by the beauty and density of wildlife there. We may not have seen Serval, but the birds and scenery more than made up for it. I also think our strategy was right - searching by truck for loooooong days in serval hot spots that had produced the cat in the past - but I chalk this miss up to simply bad luck. I can't say enough good things about Zarek's indefatigable searching during our time at Mara West, and we ticked up well over 100 bird species per day. He is simply encyclopedic and energetic beyond any guide I've ever met.

Pics from Gatamaiyu (the Suni) and the Mara Triangle





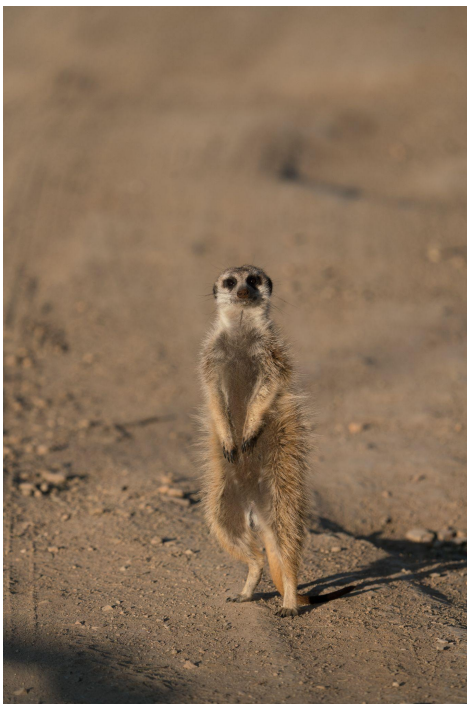
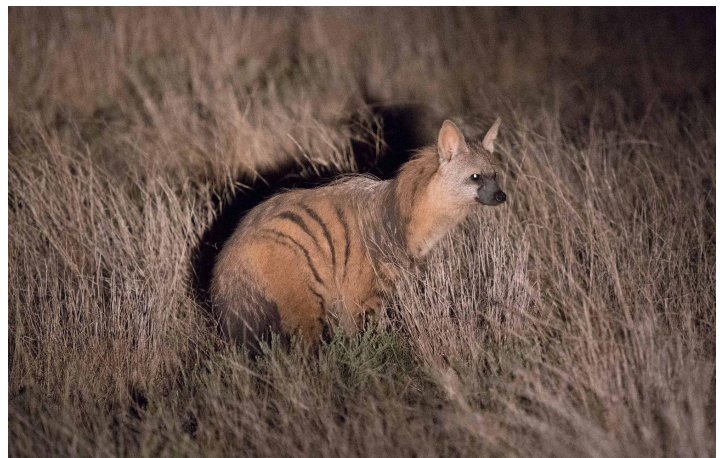
June 2022 - Marrick for Black-Footed Cat

Having been “skunked” in Kenya on cats, but having thoroughly enjoyed the trip, I got on a plane to South Africa sure that I couldn’t go zero for three cats on the trip, but I sure did. I stayed at Marrick for three nights and we didn’t see any Black-Footed Cats. We had wonderful views of Aardvark, Aardwolf, Porcupine, African Weasel (this was unexpected), Hares, Springhares, Elephant Shrew, African Wild Cat, Meerkats, Slender Mongoose, Rock Hyrax, Spotted Eagle Owl and more.

A few learnings from this experience:

- The Black-Footed Cats are most visible in short grass, so you’re better off visiting in Sept/Oct at the end of the dry season and before the rains.
- When there was a solid drought in South Africa a couple years ago and the grass was short, all the spots with Black-Footed Cats (Marrick, New Holme, etc.) were getting gobs of sightings.
- The last two years have had more than the usual rains and the Black-Footed Cat sightings have seemingly dried up everywhere. I recently saw a post from Marrick that they went two whole months without a single sighting. That sounds like what I heard when I was there too.
- So....my personal strategy will be to wait for a droughtpocalypse to threaten S. Africa again, book my tickets in Sep/Oct, and then hope for rain after I leave.

Marrick Photos





August 2022 - PomPom Camp in the Okovango Delta, Botswana

After going zero for three cats in June, I headed back to the States for a couple of months to do some introspection on the intelligence of my cat obsession. During that time, I performed as many kind deeds as possible to build my karma and then returned to Africa for a family trip that had been delayed for the two years of Covid. We spent some time at Deception Valley Lodge where we saw Brown Hyena, Oryx, Eland, African Wildcat and more of the usual suspects, but missed Caracal. What a really cool lodge. Brown Hyena was seen every morning at the lodge.

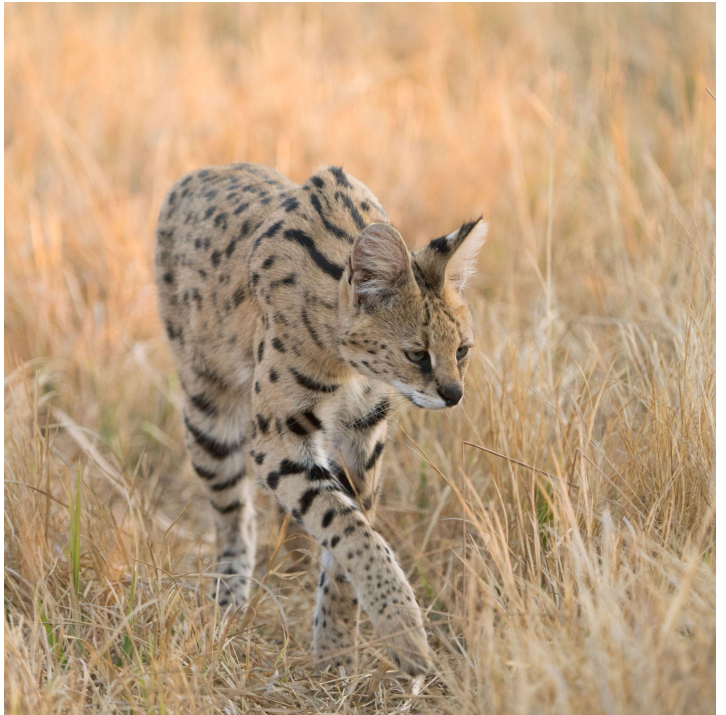
We then flew up to Pom Pom Camp in the Okovango Delta. Upon meeting our guide, we made clear that while all the usual suspects would be great, a Serval would make the trip for the family. I had no real hope of this happening, but it never hurts to ask. Our guide said that in 4 years he'd only seen Serval 4 times, but he'd give it a shot. On our first afternoon drive, after spending some time with a leopard just outside of camp, he went swerving through long grass at the end of the runway in a comical half-hearted attempt to stir up a Serval...but I saw movement in the grass! I shouted "Serval!" and pointed. Our spotter quickly dismissed it as a warthog, but with about 5 more seconds of observation I said "No, that's a serval cat!". We drove in its direction and sure enough saw a serval head off into longer grass away from our approaching car. Luckily I had my 11 year old son onboard who has absolute eagle eyes, and he saw just a pair of ears wiggling in the distant grass. We then proceeded to have about 10 incredible minutes with the Serval where it caught and ate a mouse, groomed itself, rested, and went about its business - all in the golden light before sunset. An absolute dream encounter.

Deception Valley Lodge Pics





Pom Pom Pics







October 2022 - Dry Chaco of Paraguay for Jaguarundi and Geoffrey's Cat

A bird watching friend and I went up to Paraguay with Paul from Fauna Paraguay and we got both Jaguarundi and Geoffrey's Cat.

Paul is another tireless guide with deep local knowledge that I'd recommend enthusiastically for birds and mammals. If I get back to Paraguay, it will be with Paul for sure.

Our first few days were spent around Campamento Laguna Capitan. Night 1 (10/28) produced a Geoffrey's Cat (1), Pampas Fox (1), Crab-eating Fox (4-5), Domestic Cat (2), Lowland/Brazilian Tapir, Molina's Hog-nosed skunk (2), Brocket Deer (several). Night two was more of the same. Night 3 (10/30) was bonkers. There was a huge storm approaching that we could see in the distance like a wall of windy and rainy fury bearing down on us. The Geoffrey's Cats were out in force and in the 90 mins or so that we had before the storm hit, we had 3 separate Geoffrey's Cat sightings, 6-banded armadillo, 3-banded armadillo, screaming hairy armadillo and more.

We had two Jaguarundi sightings during the trip. The first was at Estancia Iparoma where we were driving to see Chaco Mara. As we pulled up to an area with a couple rows of trees/scrub, we saw a jaguarundi cross the road and go through a fence. I was able to jump out of the car and get pictures of the fence with an ill-defined shape that will serve as my photo record of the cat, but will be nothing more than a blob for anyone else. Our second sighting was on 11/1/22 in the Fortin Toledo area. When turning a corner while driving, I looked down the road ahead and observed a cat running across the road from left to right. It was low, long, had a notably long tail, and color was uniform tan with no spots. View was in bright sunlight. It ran with back flat, head down in a position that appeared to have tail, back and head in a straight line. It glided, not bounced, in it's movement. I believe it was a light colored red morph Jaguarundi.

While both of the cats gave us relatively fleeting views, they were both certainly identifiable and checked the "seen" box although they missed the "nice pic" box.

We also traveled to the southeast Atlantic Forest for birding in San Rafael at the Hostettler Camping & Hospedaje (nice spot). The resident primate researcher (Becca) noted that oncilla were on every camera trap that she put out, probably weekly. But nobody had seen one. This could be a place to try for Southern Oncilla.



Behind the fence there? That's a jaguarundi.



...and here's the tail end of a Geoffrey's Cat.

November 2022 - Lauca NP for Andean Mountain Cat & Colocolo

My wife and I took a trip to Lauca NP with David from Far South Expeditions to try for Andean Mountain Cat and Colocolo. He had just had success with another client who stayed for 10 days before us, so we were optimistic. But we were skunked in Lauca in our 5 nights. While there were cat signs everywhere (tracks, scat), we just never got lucky. I also think that David is going to keep working on locations and strategy for the cat and I would expect his odds to improve in the coming years.

One comment on the altitude at Lauca: My wife and I live at 8,500' elevation in Colorado. The first two nights sleeping at 14,000' still sucked. By the end we felt fine, and we were walking nearly 20 miles per day in search of cats with David. The hiking is simply stunning, the birding is great, and there are an enormous number of puma tracks around that keep it interesting always. But my takeaway is that staying longer makes sense given that the first couple days you may not feel great, and it currently may take about 10 nights to see the cats.

November 2022 - Chiloe Island/Tepuhueico Lodge for Kodkod

After Lauca, my wife departed for home and I went on to Chiloe Island for Kodkod with David and Enrique from Far South. We spent three days and nights walking the roads around the Tepuhueico Lodge and saw Kodkod at least once per 24 hrs (mostly at night). Notably, we didn't see Darwin's Fox at all during our visit.

Our best sighting was on the evening of 12/10. We left the lodge around 9:45 (it gets dark late) and had been hiking for about an hour when I spotted eye shine in the brush to the side of the woods. Enrique confirmed that he thought it was a cat. The cat then ducked into the brush and we proceeded to search around for 10-15 minutes trying to find it with no luck. When we were about to give up, I asked to try one last thing. We all turned our lights off and I played mouse distress calls from my phone. In about 30 seconds I said "One, Two, Three" and we all turned our lights on. To our shock, the cat had emerged and was perched up on a log just above where we'd first seen it, looking in our direction trying to find the distressed mouse! While I didn't get a picture before it turned away (spotlight in one hand, phone in the other, camera hanging useless from shoulder...), it was an exceptional sighting for us all and learning for us too about the cat's responsiveness to rodent calls. Worth noting that no other Kodkod that we saw responded similarly to the calls - just that one.

The food, rooms and hospitality at the Tepuhueico Lodge were absolutely wonderful. I'd go back there any day, and I'd bring the whole family for sure. In addition, I thought that Kodkod was relatively easy to get here. I think if you're persistent on the roads at night, you'll find one at least every 24-48 hrs.



