

West Coast National Park Caracal Trip

April 2023

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Summary

I traveled to Cape Town in April 2023 to look for Caracal. I arrived on Friday April 21, did a guided birding tour of West Coast NP on Saturday to familiarize myself with the park, and then stayed in the park on Sunday April 23 - Thursday April 27.

Logistics

I stayed in the WCNP cottages (specifically the Stleytler Cottage at Geelsbek) which were quite nice and easy to rent, and the town of Langebaan is relatively nearby for groceries and gas. When I checked in to the cottages, I informed the ranger that I checked in with that I would be spotlighting at night from my car and he took my license plate to inform the other rangers and gave me permission to do so.

Strategy

My general strategy was to wake up early and drive the roads out by the Postberg section, then hike during the days, and spotlight again at night.

Results

I saw no cats for Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Holy cow. Then, on Thursday morning I finally caught some eyeshine just over the hill past Kraalbaai turnoff by a culvert that goes under the road where I had seen tracks previously - I was sure this must be caracal. I drove down there and sure enough saw a caracal! It was on the hillside, not too far away, and in the morning light (it was about 7:10am). GPS coordinates are: 33 9'2" S 180 1'13" E. (-33.1506224, 18.0200897). I got a couple of ok pics - identifiable, but definitely not great. I then went to the Postberg gate and am fairly certain I saw a second caracal here (-33.1449205, 18.0027214) when looking along the road that parallels the fence into the Postberg section. It then really started to rain and I thought "Oh well, that's it, I got my definite sighting and a maybe, time to go.", but on the way out I had my best sighting around here (-33.1868247, 18.0662659). There was a caracal out in the open grooming itself in the daylight!!!! I got some very good pics until another car came by and scared it away - I had stopped in the middle of the road and had to move. It didn't start at me restarting my car, but the other car racing by or the combo of the two scared it into a big bush - and then it started to pour and I called it and went back to Cape Town.

Some Advice

- 1) Definitely stay in the park. The rangers were fine with me driving at night and spotlighting. This would be impossible staying outside of the park.
- 2) The Stleytler Cottage at Geelsbek was perfectly fine. Fridge, stove, hot water, nice bed. Inexpensive.
- 3) Focus on the areas that have low bush coverage. Spotlighting generally was poor - the bushes are taller than the cats. So I focused on the areas past the Atlantic Viewpoint, and I think that focusing on the Seeberg viewpoint and Mooimaak areas may make sense too.
- 4) Be friendly to the rangers. The Mooimaak area was officially closed, but the ranger I asked gave me permission to drive up there to look. He also took my license plate and car info so that nobody would stop me for spotlighting at night. His exact comment was "Its the low season, you should be fine." — so maybe going in the non-flower season is good. I targeted April as that's supposed to be Caracal mating season where they're potentially more active.

5) Weather. I saw 2 (and maybe 3) caracal on the morning of April 27 and none for five days before that. It's worth noting that the weather and spotting conditions had improved dramatically for these sightings versus the weather in previous days. It was 15C on the morning of the 27th. It really rained on the morning of April 24 (I didn't come up till the afternoon - it was pouring), was really foggy on April 25, and quite cold on April 26. I do wonder if I would have seen more cats with better weather. Maybe they all came out on the morning of April 27 because it was briefly clear and warm (before more rain).





