

The African Golden, and not so Golden, Cat

May 10-20, 2022 by Jens@Hauser.se

This trip report is about my search for the African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*) in Uganda for 10 days from May 10-20, 2022. I have focused my report on the cat alone and left out the information you can find elsewhere. See trip reports below.

I consider myself more of a photographer than a Mammal Watcher because I usually don't bother too much about anything under 5 kilograms, and birds are just colourful cat feed for me;=) I do want to get great photographs, so if there is a potential for any really premium photos, I usually stay and spend some time trying to get those on my memory card. But at the same time, I know that the chance of getting anything special is really low under these conditions of me being out when it is dark, spotlighting an extremely shy cat in a dense forest. And when something does show itself, they are usually gone in a microsecond anyway. During daytime is a different story, and I got some beautiful prints on my wall from other trips I have done.

I am also one of those cat nerds that want to find and photograph cats, especially all of the 7 big cats in the Panthera lineage. So this little trip to Uganda and the African golden cat is more of a side project. An awesome one indeed, though.

My team was absolutely stellar all day and every day. Without them, I would have absolutely no chance of finding African golden cats or most of the animals I saw.

Harriet Kemigisha from Harrier Tours organised the entire trip, and I stayed at her excellent lodge Kibale Forest Lodge. I got the best food for a long time, which isn't always the case when you are a pescetarian. I am also very happy that all those litres of tea that I drank were included in the price.

Harrier Tours

Harriet Kemigisha, owner, manager and guide

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<https://www.mammalwatching.com/listing/harrier-tours>

The rest of the team consisted of Sam (Niwamanya Rwenzel Samuel) a super guide with eagle eyes and with a patience of few, Joel my driver and spotter that knows how to drive safely both on the tarmac roads and on the muddy forest roads, Edison was our ranger in the forest and also a man with a great knowledge of the behaviour of anything in the forest, John a former poacher now becoming a magic spotter that moves in the forest like the wind and finally Denison who is a spotter with great humour that is just going to get better and better when he spends more time in the forest.

If you want to maximise your chances of finding African golden cats, pottos, bush babies, monkeys or just about anything, book these mammal magicians right now!

Equipment

I used a brand new thermal scope, Pulsar Axion 2 XQ35, with the setting picture in picture (PiP) mode with the 6x magnification and the white-hot or rainbow settings. Well, I work as a Test Manager, so I did experiments and changed the settings a lot, but my conclusion was that this was the ultimate setting for finding a medium to large mammal when it is dark.

I also packed an Acebeam K70 spotlight with a throwing of 1300 meters when set to the brightest level. When searching for mammals, I use brightness level 3, medium, and when I photograph, I turn it on maximum for the short period that I shine on the nocturnal mammal's head. The light is so bright that I have to set the beam on the body or tree trunk when focusing and only for a very short time period when taking still photos. When taking video, I usually have it on level 2 or 3 so as not to distress too much.

General information about the African Golden cat

Scientific name: *Caracal aurata*. Typically divided into two subspecies: *Caracal aurata aurata* distributed in East and Central Africa as far West of the River Congo and *Caracal aurata celidogaster* distributed in West Africa, West of Cross River.¹

Shoulder height: 40-45 cm.

Body length: female 63-75 cm, male 62-94 cm.

Tail: 23-97 cm.

Weight: female 6-8 kg, male 8-14 kg.

Diet: rodents, small ungulates like duikers, primates, birds and sometimes fish.

Estimated population: No data available due to no research data.

Conservations status: classified as Vulnerable (VU) on the IUCN Red List.²

Behaviour: A strict forest cat that is very seldom observed in the wild, very little is known about their ecology and behaviour. Normally nocturnal or crepuscular, although they have sometimes been seen hunting during the day.

¹ Kitchener A. C., Breitenmoser-Würsten Ch., Eizirik E., Gentry A., Werdelin L., Wilting A., Yamaguchi N., Abramov A. V., Christiansen P., Driscoll C., Duckworth J. W., Johnson W., Luo S.-J., Meijaard E., O'Donoghue P., Sanderson J., Seymour K., Bruford M., Groves C., Hoffmann M., Nowell K., Timmons Z. & Tobe S. 2017. A revised taxonomy of the Felidae. The final report of the Cat Classification Task Force of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group. Cat News Special Issue 11, 80 pp.

² The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/18306/50663128>. Last assessed 20 April 2014.

Background

I knew that I would be in Uganda for a photo workshop, so I decided to stay some extra days while in the country to try to find leopards and lions but mostly caracals that I hadn't seen yet. I had no intention of finding anything else until I got the news that finding an African Golden cat might be possible in the same area where I would be staying.

I read everything I could about the cat and contacted several photographers I knew had worked in the area, but they all said it was more or less impossible to find one, let alone photograph one. It would take weeks in the forest.

Then I got some great news from Tomer Ben-Yehuda that he's been in the area and that he got a contact that I can use. I got Harriet's contact information and started to plan.

We knew that the African Golden cat is probably one of the world's top 3 of the hardest cats to find. It is a forest cat, very shy, nearly no research has been done, mostly caught by a camera trap, even when many have been trying to find one.

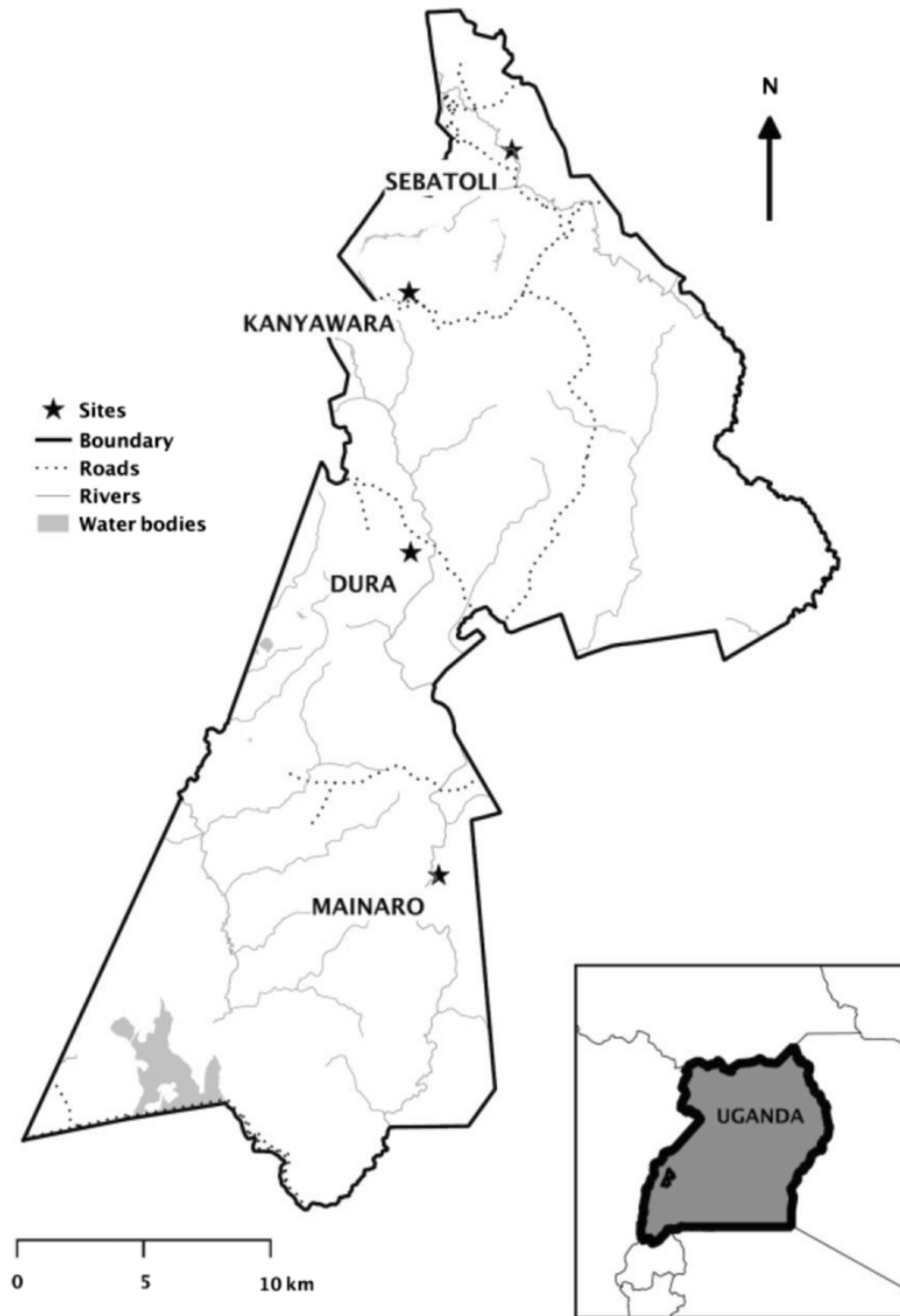
We decided on an open itinerary that would be totally agile. It would be a very short time from the last search until the next time, and we will adjust our time, place and way of searching depending on previous findings and information we get for our team and others that we got information from.

At the same time, we had several areas where we knew African Golden cats had been sighted or that we got the information they might be found:

Kibale National Park (0.486289, 30.389317), where Harriet and her team are working, and it is their home area, so they have contacts and spend a lot of time there both on their own and with groups of tourists. The Kanyanchu area is where there are tourists visit daily. Sebitole, Kanyawara and Mainaro are areas that have fewer people running around, and rangers patrol there on a regular basis.

Included is Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary och Magombe Swamp, which has a lot of mammals, and it is possible to walk there on paths or boardwalks both day and night. They are a must if you are a Mammal Watcher due to all the primates there.

Close by is the Tuvaco treetops area, where Sam saw one African Golden cat hunting in the fields in the middle of the day, and he also managed to get a good video of it.



The Ngogo Road is transecting the Kibale Forest. We drove it most evenings and mornings because animals cross it from one of the forest areas with chimpanzees that are visited by tourist groups to a part with lesser human movement.

We also had Mpanga Central Forest Reserve on the list because they had camera trap recordings of African Golden cats there. But it was low on our list as no one actually saw any eye to eye, and it is far away from the Kibale area.

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (-1.051705, 29.685375) and especially the Ruhija section and Mpigi areas have had some sightings, but there were no sightings either before or during my trip, so I never went there.

The same goes for Kashoya-Kitomi Central Forest Reserve (-0.292569, 30.205103), Echuya Forest Reserve (-1.286568, 29.819017) and Maramagambo Forest (-0.3524151097646679, 29.927089304405474) in Queen Elizabeth National Park.

Trip report

Joel picked me up on the morning of May 10, and it was finally time to get this adventure going. The team greeted each other, and we briefly chatted about where we would go first.

I knew that Sam had seen an African Golden cat with his own eyes at the Tuvaco treetop area just a few days before. He shoved us the videos of the hunting cat in the crop field, and it was a no-brainer. We knew that this would be the first area we should spend time in.

We all went into the minivan and took off. It didn't take many minutes until we reached our destination and the last part was a tiny road leading up to a house, and suddenly we heard a loud noise just close to the car. What was that? We looked at each other, and then Joel said, "Flat tire!" so we went out and saw that the tire was flat as a pancake and that we had to change it or even get a new one.

We were just around the corner from the rather large field, so we went there and looked at the exact spot where the cat walked (0.4067276380369118, 30.38452539246702). I could still see the pugmarks from it even if they were a bit worn off. It was exciting to know that the cat could look at us or at least be in the same area. We spent several hours walking around in the field, went closer to the forest edge and also to the other fields next to it looking for any trace like scat, more pugmarks and we discussed if we should go back later in the evening setting up a hide looking over the area with the chickens but decided not to. We thought it would be better to try another spot instead, and Sam talked to several people in the area, asking them to call him if they saw or heard any type of activity that could be a carnivore hunting their chickens.

Instead, we decided to drive the Ngogo road until about midnight using the thermal scope, and all we saw was an **East African Potto** up in a tree feeding.

On the morning of the 11th, we went into the Kibale forest reserve with Edison, but not the Chimp area. We walked a bit along the tracks and got lucky when we found pugmarks from a cat in the mud. They were done during the night. We stayed in the forest all day and even sat down in different strategic places, waiting for mammals to walk our way instead of actively going looking for them. During the day, we saw a **chimpanzee** in the distance and also a **Weyn's duiker**.

We drove the Ngogo road slowly almost to the end, and it took us until about midnight. I saw a couple of **bushbucks** that I thought were a Blue duiker in my thermal scope. It is really hard to be sure about the size through the scope. Was it tiny like a Blue duiker, a bit larger than a Weyn's duiker or even an African Golden cat? You sit in the car for hours and scan halfway up the trees in front, then left side, then right side and then left again for any type of heat signature and everyone in the van knows that we are looking for cats. Yes, if we happen to find any smaller primates, civets or ungulates, we stop and have a look. But your brain always reacts to a heat signature, and you sometimes think it might be a cat. Especially when something is hiding behind a tree, rock, scrub or something.

On the way back to the lodge, we also drove the main road up and down a bit because, at this time, it was empty, with no traffic, so that I could scan the sides with the thermal scope and the others using their spotlights. We didn't find anything interesting, and we even stopped by the bridge where there suppose to be otters.

On the next day, we went to the Kibale Forest Department office, and while the others were doing all the paperwork, I spent the time looking at the artwork they had painted on the walls. They had all kinds of primates, ungulates, birds and stuff, but I couldn't find anything at all about the African Golden cat. I asked the staff, and then the team and Harriet said that they don't talk much about the cat; there is hardly any research on it, and no NGO is working with it in the area. I thought it was strange that they had such a great cat in the forest and not promoting it. Yes, it is not easy to find, and not many have actually seen one in the wild, but it is there. Then it is definitely up to the team and me to find it, photograph it and then spread the word. I have just spent a couple of days trying, and I have another week to go.

We added John to the team, and from the information that I got, it will be an extra boost to the whole team. He comes with another type of knowledge as he is a former poacher that switched sides, and now he has started his career as a spotter, and he is totally awesome. He walks into the forest, but there is almost no noise. Not even when walking on dry leaves and then suddenly stops and points at the ground and says. "Duker". You have a look closely, and you can't see a thing, and then he pointed to some tiny leaves, and there are tiny bite marks. I can't believe that he saw them from a distance. We continue walking, and John and the others scan the forest for any type of signs of a cat like pug marks, scat, scratchings on the ground, or claw marks on a tree trunk, but we see nothing really. We walk different paths in the forest, sit and wait for animals to pass us, walk in the rough areas outside the paths and spread out so we can cover a wider area until we end up on the Ngogo road.

In the evening, we do the now normal route on the Ngogo road and find us a **Potto** and a **Spectacled Lesser Galago**.



East African Potted

On the 13th, we do more or less the same route as the day before with the same result. We have sightings but nothing new or exciting because we are totally focusing on the African Golden cat.

On the 14th, there is another really early start because we know that we have to be on the Ngogo road before anyone else or most of the mammals are scared off by all the Chimp tourists and also because the African Golden cat is a crepuscular cat that may take the opportunity to hunt all the smaller mammals like the duiker when they run across the road from one part of the forest to the other one more remote and less frequented by humans. I have also talked to a Chimp researcher who confirmed that many animals move out of the Kanyanchu area between 10-16 when all the tourist groups visit the forest.

We are in the van with the normal setup with the roof opened up, me standing in front and Sam, John and sometimes Harriet in the back. Sometimes sitting on the back of the roof or moving from side to side. We have learned that this is the best setup as we can cover all directions and that I can have all my things on the seat or in my hand, plus that we can get out of the van fast if needed. Also, I can point and shout out if I find anything ahead, and they can pick it up at the back, and they swipe deeper into the forest and with another angle in the back than I do. Plus, it is easier for me to hear when they call out.

I scanned with my thermal scope ahead and to the sides, and when I found something, I pointed my light at it and grabbed my camera as fast as possible could. By then, they have usually picked it up, put their lights on it, identified it, and I have some blurry photos of a duiker, bushbuck, or something similar hiding or running away. Most of the time, we think it is an African Golden cat. Especially when they hide behind trees because it is very hard to get a full body heat signature, and you only get the back part, not the head. I don't know the difference between a duiker ass and a cat's ass, but I hope that will change in the future.

Suddenly I see another heat signature in front of me, and I call out. It is hiding behind some trees, and finding it with my spotlight is very hard. I can clearly see it in the scope; it looks slightly different from other heat signatures that I have seen. Sam and John pick it up with the spotlight, and Sam whispers out, "Golden cat! Definitely Golden cat!" John nods his head and smiles. I dive down for my camera, grab it, and start to search for the cat. I can still find it in my scope, but as soon as I only use my eyes or looks into my camera, I can just only see leaves, twigs, branches and clutter. I move next to Sam and follow his spotlight beam with my eyes, and he says he can still see a part of it, but I still can't find anything at all. I look, gaze, squint, moving my head from side to side, searching with my camera all over the area until Sam tells me it is gone.

"Shit!" I jump out of the van, and the others follow, and we try to spotlight for it, find any movement, but the forest is silent.

I didn't see it, and I definitely didn't get in on video. Or did I? I stopped the video, chimped, and went through it a couple of times, but I couldn't see anything next to the tree. It was just a messy blur.

We had a long chat about what we had seen and what had happened, and we came to the conclusion that it was definitely an **African Golden cat** at around 5 AM, grey in colour, that sat behind a tree with several trees and bushes next to it. From my angle at the front, I just saw a small part of it, and when I put my spotlight on it, the leaves and clutter shone up, and my still camera couldn't focus properly and was just hunting, and I wasn't able to see it. When I moved back next to Sam and John, I had a better angle but couldn't find the cat fast enough until it put its head behind the tree into the shadows and took off.

We learned a lot on this occasion that we didn't know before: it is possible to find them early in the morning before or at least around sunrise, the cat sits still behind objects, they are not really scared when they see humans, he is more annoyed by the lights, he takes cover behind trees and takes off in the shadows of the spotlight. Also, focusing with my new still camera when it is darkish is very hard, way harder than with my old camera. Lastly, make sure you find the mammal with your eyes before you try to take a video of it.

We were all very happy and celebrated the occasion when Joel asked me if I could check off the cat from the list now. I am not sure what to answer. Can I? I tell him yes, but at the same time, I am a bit hesitant if it is a yes or not. We discussed a bit back and forward, and I think the conclusion was it should be a yes.

Back in the van, I am still debating in my head for a while as we continue up the road again. I want to have another go trying to find and photograph another cat because then the answers would definitely be a massive yes.

When I got back to the lodge again, I was still not sure. My logical brain tells me yes, definitely because I know that it was a Golden cat that I saw in the thermal scope, and the other confirmed it, but my feeling tells me that I am leaning more toward no or an almost sighting. I started to research what others said about it and also sent a message to Tomer, Joanna and Jason that I had seen an African Golden cat in my thermal scope, and they all went wild and greeted me. Then the discussion starts if it should count as a sighting or not. We agree that it counts if you see it with your eyes, binocular or DSLR camera because then you see it through the glass, which isn't changing anything. But when it comes to a thermal scope, mobile or mirrorless camera, you view the animal with an electric sensor. We sort of agreed that a mobile phone or mirrorless camera is fine as nothing is altered, and it shows what the sensor sees but with a thermal scope, it is just a digital representation of an object that is producing heat. If it should count or not is up to the person himself. What are his or her criteria are.

When I got home, I listened to The Mammalwatching Podcast: Episode 24 (Rob Foster), where Jon Hall and Charles Foley talk about seeing a mountain tapir in Ecuador in heavy fog through a thermal imager and Jon comes to the conclusion that if you clearly can see the heat signature in the scope and it is that a recognised animal then it would count.

He, and probably the rest of us, know that the only way of being sure to count a mammal is to actually see it with your own eyes at a close distance in daylight and then photograph it. Challenged accepted, and I still have some more days before I have to get home to Sweden again. I know the odds are pretty slim of seeing one again. Very few people have seen a wild one in the first place. Seeing another cat is even more impossible, and I don't even know if it has been done before except for maybe Sam or any of the others. Should I be the first one? Hardly likely!

But when the morning came, we went out to Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary och Magombe Swamp for another walk on the boardwalks, and we got some great sightings of an **Olive baboon** troop that woke up. All the babies and small ones played in the trees and on the ground, and we would watch them interact for a long time. It was really interesting to try to understand their social codes and behaviour.



Olive baboon

On the way out, close to the road, a couple of **Black and White Guereza** sat high up in a tree feeding on fruits.



Black and White Guereza

In the afternoon, we found cat scat on the ground close to some reasonably fresh pug marks, and that is always good because then you know that there have been cats in the area and that they might even still be there.

We did the usual routine in the early morning of the 15th because we had been very lucky the day before. You think that wildlife is logical, and in some way, they are. They also have daily routines and track the walk and places they visit, but at the same time, it is nearly never exactly the same but more or less the same. There are variations, and that is the hard part of it. One day they will be in one spot, and the next day they will be close to that spot. And that was what we were hoping for.

We drove the same Ngogo road in the pre-dawn period, scanning from side to side with my thermal scope and suddenly, there was a heat signal on the ground. The body size is perfect, it's on the ground, and I can clearly see a tail as well, and it moves like a cat. What! Is this an African Golden cat? It is hiding behind a tree, and I can only see the hind part of it. I point my light on it and call out to the

others. Sam takes a peek at it and tells me, “No, it is a **Central African Large-spotted genet**”, and my pulse went down again.

It is so frustrating when there is finally some showing up in the scope, and there is no cat. We have already been out for almost an hour, and today, there isn't much that we find.

Well, we continue to drive, and I know that we are close to the spot from yesterday, and I focus even more on every single little bush, tree or stone and try to find anything that might be hiding.

Suddenly there is a heat signal behind a boulder next to the. Again! I call out again and point my spotlight on it. The others do the same, and this time there is more than just the back part. I can clearly see at least half of the body, and then I realize that the shape isn't the right one. This one is a bit more sloping at the, and then John looks at me and says, “Duiker, red duiker”. It could have been, but no.

We continue to drive again, and I can feel that I am a bit unfocused because I think I had my chance yesterday, and I am going to see other mammals. That is the dilemma of just focusing on one cat and nothing else. I do enjoy seeing the other mammals, even if I don't get any good photos at all. I don't even think I have taken a single photo this morning. Maybe a rock or something to check my settings on.

I wake up from my thoughts as I get another heat signature behind a tree trunk. It looks like the last duiker, but I am not totally sure, and you never know if your mind plays a prank on you or not. I call out to the others and point my spotlight on it. All guides in the car suddenly get very focused and look at each other. I can see in their body language that they think this could be something really interesting. Possibly even an African Golden cat. I scanned, and I could see the body shape and size, which was the right one. Both Sam and John nods their head and whisper, “Golden cat!” I understand that it must be one suddenly, there is the whole body, and I can clearly see the head and the full body in the scope. I move the scope away and try to find it with my own eyes, and there it is beyond all the leaves. Bloody hell, an **African Golden cat**! There is no doubt because I can see the smoky grey cat just crouching behind the tree. I take a good look at it so I know that I have seen it properly, and then I grab my camera and turn the video on. Today there will be no stills at all because I know it takes more time. I point the camera at the cat and, as always, setting the focus is really hard, so I peak over the camera, so I know it is in the right direction, but there is no way I am getting any sort of correct focus. There are so many twigs and leaves in between that I try to set the focus manually, and then the cat moves his head behind the tree and is gone. Just like yesterday. Shit! I get out my thermal scope again and start scanning for it around the tree, behind it, to all of the sides and even up the tree because it might have run up. Nothing, there is nothing that is moving or giving away any head signature. Well, at least I have seen it, and it was just magic. I just loved the slender body, the tiny head with the ears almost straight up, not to mention the smoky grey colour. What a treat!

I didn't want to give up, so I scanned a bit further to the left, and there was another heat signature. I just can't understand how the cat could have moved there without us seeing it. I pointed my spotlight at it and whispered to the others. I was sure it was a red duiker again. Probably one that the Golden cat was hunting or something. Then I saw it with my eyes. It was another **African Golden cat**. Or maybe the same? I looked at Sam and John, but they shook their head and whispered it was beyond some bushes. Joel in front smiled and said that he saw it. I turned on video again and tried to get the cat on film, but it is so hard when it is still dark; using your and others' spotlights to light the cat up, all that is happening is that the light falls on every debris in front of the cat and very little on it and the focusing

is just hunting back and forward. I know I just have some few seconds, if I am lucky, 10 seconds or so, but this time it felt longer than that. Then again, the cat hides his head and body behind the tree and takes off in the shadow pillar beyond it. I get my scope again and scan everywhere for a short time until I sit up and say, “Should we go outside and try?” It takes seconds until we are all outside scanning, scoping and then start to walk into the forest. I stay behind Sam. John takes off in one direction and Joel in the other. We spotlight everywhere. Even inside a pile of fallen trees, in a couple of hollow tree trunks and John tries to find pug marks, but there is no sign of any cats at all. Strange that we can't even find any pug marks when the ground is soft.

I am thinking about the situation, and I just can't understand how they can have moved from one side to the other without us seeing it. I ask Sam and John if they saw the second cat, and they didn't. Then I ask Joel if he saw the first one, and he didn't. That was odd even if there were quite many trees, bushes and clusters of small thickets at the sighting. I know that I looked for a ditch or small trench, but there wasn't any, so there is no way the smoky grey cat moved from one side to another.

I had to be sure, so I asked Sam and John what colour the first one was. They both said grey or even smoky grey. That was exactly the same for me.

Then I asked Joel for the colour of the second one, and he said, “Redish or even red”. That was what I saw as well. Now I was sure that I had seen **two African Golden cats** at the same sighting at 5.30 in the morning. The first one was smoky grey and the second one red. And I was the only one in the car that saw both of them.

I told the others that I must be the only person in the world that have seen this. It is just unbelievable, and I can't understand my luck.

The others looked at each other, and we all started to celebrate. What just happened is once in a lifetime, and we all know that this will never happen again and we all have witnessed it. Sam, John, Joel and I enjoyed the moment, and we just wanted to stay there.

The only thing was that I didn't get any videos or stills, and that was unfortunate and annoying, but I tried my best, and I know it was better to try to take videos instead of stills. I could at least get a blurry shot, but to be honest, I was so happy that I managed to see not one but two cats.

We went back to the minivan but to be frank, none of us had any energy left to look for any more mammals, and all that we talked about was the sighting we just had.

We couldn't understand why two cats were in the same spot. None of us could say that the cat they saw was male or female; the cats weren't hostile or anything; they were probably around 10 meters from each other. The only explanation was there they had either been mating or were about to. Sorry cats, for spoiling that morning's cuddle, but we didn't know!

When we returned to the lodge and Harriet greeted us, we were all pumped up and talked at the same time, and I think it took some minutes until she understood what had just happened that morning. She was ecstatic as well, and she knew that it was massive news and that it would change the way people were talking about the changes of seeing African Golden cats in the Kibale forest.

I updated the WhatsUp group, and Tomer, Jason and Joanne probably thought I was high or something because they had never heard of such a sighting, and I think all of them almost jumped on

a flight to Uganda straight away. Just to have a go while the area was hot and the cats were forming a cluster, a glaring, pounce or a clowder or whatever it is called;=)

Later in the afternoon, we felt that there weren't many more larger mammals for us to find in Kibale anymore, so we decided to drive to Queen Elisabeth Park instead. Yes, there are still some, but they are very hard, and I wanted to have another go on leopards, hunting lions and medium-sized mammals.

We spent many hours in Queen Elisabeth Park on the 16th and 17th, but it was quite empty. We specifically tried to find leopards, and we talked to many park rangers, but none had seen any for the last week or so. We did find a grumpy old **elephant** bull in must. He stood under a tree, and as soon as a car got within his zone, he started to charge and chase them off.

We also saw **African Buffalo**, **Forest hog**, **Common warthog**, **Hippopotamus**, and a male **lion** in a distance.



Hippopotamus

The most interesting mammals were probably some monkeys. They looked like Vervet, but they had all a black tip on their tail, and according to books and descriptions, they were **Tantalus monkeys** instead.



Vervet Monkey

We returned to the Kibale Lodge again and spent the 18th and 19th much like before on the Ngogo road and Bigodi swamp. We saw **Grey-cheeked Mangabey, Olive Baboon, Red-tailed Monkey** and **Ashy Red Colobus**.



Grey-cheeked Mangabey

In the evenings, we drove up and down the main road and saw a couple more **Pottos** and **Spectacled Lesser Galagos**.

My flight from Entebbe Airport was due on the evening of the 20th, so we started early in the morning from the lodge so that we had time to stop by Entebbe Botanical Garden. I had fucking painful gout in my right foot and had it for several days, so I hobbled around the park for a bit looking for mammals but gave up and had a rest and chatted to Sam and Joel instead.

Wall art at the Kibale National Park park headquarters

As I have written before, I thought it was a bit strange that the park headquarters didn't have anything, or at least very little information and especially no wall art on African Golden cats. It surprised me, and I had spoken to both park staff and Harriet about it, and I decided that I should at least ask what it would cost to get an artist that could paint something beautiful on the wall. I had even found an empty spot next to a door.

I thought that it couldn't cost that much, and after seeing two African Golden cats almost at the same time, I just had to celebrate it by donating the wall art. Harriet talked to the head of the headquarters,

and they were fine getting another wall art. She also found the artist that had done all other wall art at the headquarters, and we signed a contract. Now it was just to wait until the artist had time to finish the painting.



It took some time to finish it, and I had left Uganda by then, so Harriet sent me photos of the most beautiful wall art, and I am so happy that I managed to fix this with her help. So when people visit, there is now an African Golden cat on the wall, and maybe visitors start to ask for guides that can find them one. Great, isn't it?



Comment on Uganda reports by Tomer Ben-Yehuda and Alex Meyer

I have read many articles and talked to a lot of people about African Golden cats, and I feel that I have to comment on Tomer's and Alex's reports regarding what they are writing about CTC (Conservation through Commercialisation) and their work and also about the status and conservation of the cat.

Firstly, the literature and information about the African Golden cat are very shallow, and there isn't much new or recent information about how many there are, where they live, biology, diet, reproduction rate, status or that type of information.

According to Embaka, the only organization that I have found currently working with the African Golden cat in Uganda, the numbers are declining rapidly, and threats are just piling up.

Poaching and the bushmeat trade are significant threats. Both direct and indirect of the African Golden cat's prey. Population abundance and habitat use are dramatically lower in areas with poaching than in areas without poaching. Surprisingly, although the level of conflict with humans is negligible, data from questionnaire surveys show that local people have poor attitudes towards the conservation of the African Golden cat, majorly due to perceived depredation risk to livestock and poultry.³

Areas with forests and undisturbed forests are declining fast as well. Mainly due to increased logging, mining, and building of infrastructures like roads, mobile masts, and water pipes that are needed for

³ Mugerwa, B. 2018. Poaching and conflict with humans threaten the African Golden Cat in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, Small Wild Cat Conservation News. 11-9-2017.

new house complexes and businesses for the increasing population. This affects all types of wildlife inside and outside current parks and reserves.⁴

CTC claims that the cat is doing extremely well in Uganda and that they catch cats for breeding and that they will rewild them later on. These claims are just a way of sanctioning their work, greenwashing so that they can make money on them by letting people get close to them, pet them, feed them by hand and take selfies.

As stated in Tomer's report, "Tom told me that they usually capture 1 cat every half a year – and that's half a year of searching with dogs and nets! He mentioned it would be a hard task releasing them in Uganda, as most parks are actually at full golden cat capacity."

Why do they even chase wild cats with dogs to catch them? And is it really legal? To me, this sound just like poaching and should be stopped right away.

For the wild cats, CTCs' work is of no use at all, their so-called conservation work has nothing to do with conservation, their breeding program has limited use⁵ at best, and I haven't heard of any project that has been successful in rewilding cats that have once been in close contact with humans.

Organisations working with the African Golden cat

I hope that Harriet and her team will start an NGO, also work together with Embaka and start collecting information, build up the knowledge and at the same time boost its status so that the magic cat will have a better chance of surviving or else the cat will be gone within a few years from most parts of Uganda.

Embaka is a remarkable community-based conservation project in Uganda - improving the lives of local people through household income generation, oral health care, micro-financing and employment while inspiring support to end wildlife poaching to save African Golden cats.

Please visit their site: <https://www.savingafricangoldencat.com> and donate some money!

You can also listen to Badru on the podcast *Cats of the Wild*: Smile for the African Golden Cat: Badru Mugerwa, Embaka.

https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/cats-of-the-wild/smile-for-the-african-golden--_wGTQHRlq3/

⁴ Bahaa-el-din, L., Sollmann, R., Hunter, L. T. B., Slotow, R., MacDonald, D. W., and Henschel, P. (2016). Effects of human land-use on Africa's only forest-dependent felid: the African golden cat *Caracal aurata*. *Biol. Conserv.* 199: 1-9.

⁵ Bahaa-el-din, L. (2012). Observations on a captive African golden cat. *Cat News* 57: 15.

List of mammals seen on the trip

Common name	Scientific name
<i>FELINAE</i>	
African Golden Cat	Caracal aurata
<i>LORISIDAE</i>	
East African Potto	Perodicticus ibeanus
<i>GALAGIDAE</i>	
Demidoff's Dwarf Galago	Galagoides demidoff
Spectacled Lesser Galago	Galago matschiei
Thomas's Dwarf Galago	Galagoides thomasi
<i>BOVIDAE</i>	
African Buffalo	Syncerus caffer
Western Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus
Weyn's Duiker	Cephalophus weynsi
<i>HOMINIDAE</i>	
Chimpanzee	Pan troglodytes
<i>CERCOPITHECIDAE</i>	
Ashy Red Colobus	Piliocolobus tephrosceles

Guereza	Colobus guereza
L'Hoest's Monkey	Allochrocebus lhoesti
Olive Baboon	Papio anubis
Red-tailed Monkey	Cercopithecus ascanius
Tantalus Monkey	Chlorocebus tantalus
Vervet	Chlorocebus pygerythrus
Grey-cheeked Mangabey	Lophocebus albigena
<i>HIPPOPOTAMIDAE</i>	
Hippopotamus	Hippopotamus amphibius
<i>SUIDAE</i>	
Common Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus
Forest Hog	Hylochoerus meinertzhageni
<i>ELEPHANTIDAE</i>	
African Elephant	Loxodonta africana
<i>VIVERRIDAE</i>	
Central African Large-spotted Genet	Genetta maculata

Trip reports from others

“Amazing Uganda” by Tomer Ben-Yehuda

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/Uganda-Jan21-updated.pdf>

“Uncanny Uganda” by Alex Meyer

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/AM-Uganda-2021.pdf>

“Rwanda and Uganda” by Jason Woolgar

<https://wildglobetours.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Trip-Report-56-Rwanda-and-Uganda-2021.pdf>

“Uganda, 2021” by Jon Hall

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/2021/10/03/uganda-2021>

“Uganda, 2021” by Carlos Bocos

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/CB-Uganda-2021.pdf>