

# The Caracal

*Felis carcal schmitzi*



*Pic courtesy Wikipedia*

The Caracal is most well-known for its skill at hunting birds; It can snatch a bird in flight, sometimes more than one at a time.

The **Caracal** (*Caracal caracal*), also called **Persian Lynx** or **African Lynx**, is a fiercely territorial medium-sized cat. The Caracal takes its name from its black ears. The word Caracal comes from the Turkish word "karakulak", meaning black ears. The Caracal is labelled as a small cat, but is amongst the heaviest of all small cats, as well as the quickest, and nearly as fast as the Serval.

In India, Caracal is supposed to be common in Cutch. Also found in the drier parts of Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and central India.

An uncommon and elusive animal, fast approaching extinction in India, little is known about the Caracal in wild state. It is a creature of desert and scrub jungles, where it preys on birds, which it is said to take in flight by springing up at them, and on rodents, antelope and small deer. Like the cheetah, Caracal is easily tamed and trained to show its prowess in hunting small deer, gazelle, hares, and foxes and also birds such as peafowl, cranes and pigeons which was once a popular sport in Persia and India. Of all the species of Cats, the Caracal comes nearest to the cheetah in the structure of its hindfeet, though it cannot compare with it in speed or staying power.

## Description

Males typically weigh about 13-18 kg (28-40 lbs), while females are smaller. The Caracal resembles a Eurasian Lynx and for a long time it was considered a close relative of the lynxes. Recent DNA research, however, has shown that the Caracal is not a close relative of lynxes at all, but is instead related to the Serval and the African Golden Cat.

The Caracal is 65 cm in length (about two ft), plus 30 cm tail (about 1 foot). It has longer legs and a slimmer appearance than a lynx. The colour of the fur is variable: it may be wine-red, grey or sand-coloured. Melanistic (black) Caracals also occur. Young Caracals bear reddish spots on the underside; adults do not have markings except for black spots above the eyes.

The most conspicuous feature of the Caracal is elongated, tufted black ears, which also explain the origin of its name – *karakulak*, Turkish for "black ear". Its ears, which it uses to locate prey, are controlled by 20 different muscles.

## Habitat and diet

The Caracal is distributed over Africa and western Asia. Its habitat is dry steppes and semi-deserts, but also include woodlands, savannah, and scrub forest. It is a solitary, or paired, territorial cat. The Caracal may survive without drinking for a long period — the water demand is satisfied with the body fluids of its prey.

It hunts at night (but in colder seasons also in the daytime) for rodents and hares; rarely it may even attack a gazelle, a small antelope or a young ostrich. Caracals are the fastest felids for their size. It is a picky eater, and discards the internal organs of the mammals it catches, partially plucks the fur off hyraxes and larger kills, and avoids eating hair by shearing meat neatly from the skin. However, it will eat the feathers of small birds and is tolerant of rotten meat.

It is most well-known for its skill at hunting birds; the Caracal is able to snatch a bird in flight, sometimes more than one at a time. The Caracal can jump and climb exceptionally well, which enables it to catch hyraxes better than probably any other carnivore. Its life expectancy in the wild is 12 years, or 17 years in captivity.

It is often viewed as vermin by farmers in Africa because it frequently climbs over fences to eat chickens and other poultry.

The Caracal is almost impossible to see in the wild, not because there are very few of them, but because it hides extremely well. Game drives in countries such as Kenya and Botswana widely encounter other animals, but a sighting of a Caracal is extremely rare.

*References: Wikipedia, S. H. Prater (The book of Indian Animals)*



*Pic courtesy Wikipedia*