

THE FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD OF AFRICAN GOLDEN CAT *CARACAL AURATA* FROM KENYA SINCE 1946

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The African golden cat *Caracal aurata* (Temminck, 1827) is an IUCN Red List 'Vulnerable' species (Bahaa-el-din *et al.*, 2015b) and is considered Africa's least known felid (Bahaa-el-din *et al.*, 2015a). This species is restricted to forested habitats in equatorial Africa, with Kenya at the eastern limit of the species' distribution (Butynski *et al.*, 2012; Ray & Butynski, 2013).

The status of *C. aurata* in Kenya remains unknown. Until now, the only confirmed records are two skins collected by A. Toschi in 1946 from Ogiek tribesmen in the Mau Forest (Toschi, 1946; Butynski *et al.*, 2012). One of the skins (Accession No. 3369/332A) is currently at the National Museums of Kenya (NMK). All other records from the country are sight records that lack a supporting photograph or specimen (Butynski *et al.*, 2012).

On 19 May 2019, a dead cat, presumably killed by a vehicle, was found beside the section of the Kamae-Thika road that bisects the Kieni Forest Reserve in the southern Aberdares (0°52'12.9144"S and 36°45'05.4684"E; figure 1). It was immediately identified as a possible *C. aurata* and taken to NMK (Accession No. NMK-MAM-192942). Upon inspection of the specimen, and in consultation with experts in the field (L. Bahaa-el-din (pers. comm.); T.M. Butynski (pers. comm.); D. Mills (pers. comm.)), the specimen was confirmed to be a *C. aurata*. This is the first confirmed record of *C. aurata* for Kenya since 1946, and the first record of this species east of the Eastern Rift Valley.

This specimen was collected ~2300 m above sea level in Afromontane forest at the edge of the bamboo zone. It was a female of the golden/reddish-brown morph (Bahaa-el-din *et al.*, 2015a; figure 2) with the following weight and body measurements: weight: 3.1 kg, head-body length: 60 cm, and tail length: 26.5 cm. This specimen appears to be a large kitten or a

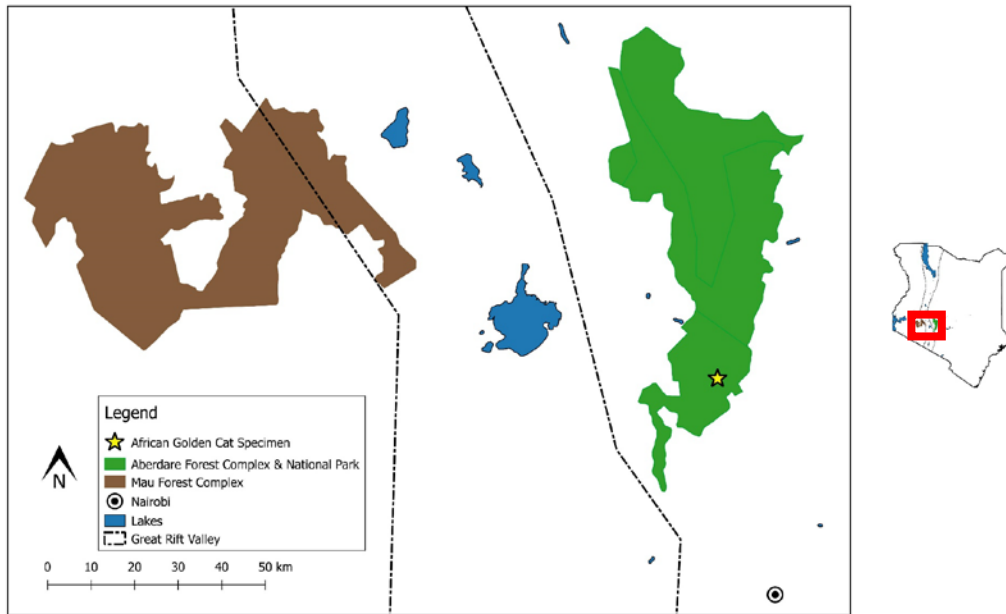


Figure 1. Location where the African golden cat *Caracal aurata* specimen was collected in relation to the Mau Forest and the Eastern Rift Valley.

sub-adult as the weight range for adult female *C. aurata* is 5.3–8.2 kg (Hunter, 2011; Ray & Butynski, 2013). The following diagnostic characters (Butynski *et al.*, 2012; Ray & Butynski, 2013), evident in figure 2, were used to identify the specimen and separate it from caracal *Caracal caracal* (Schreber, 1776), a sometimes sympatric species to which *C. aurata* is most closely related (Johnson *et al.*, 2006).

1. Small, round ears that are black behind and lack tufts.
2. Short, forward-directed hair on the back of the head and neck.

Additionally, distinct spotting was present on the belly and the inner legs, markings that are rarely prominent in *C. caracal*.

The discovery of this young specimen suggests that a breeding population of *C. aurata* occurs in the southern Aberdares. Incidental camera trap images from Kieni Forest Reserve of a cat closely resembling *C. aurata* support this conclusion (figures 3, 4 and 5). We recommend that a camera trap survey be carried out in the Kieni Forest Reserve to determine the distribution of *C. aurata* and other mammals in this forest.

While the Kieni Forest Reserve is managed by the Kenya Forest Service (KFS), it is under considerable pressure. Indigenous forest is being cleared for agriculture, and bushmeat and tree poaching are rampant. We hope that this record of *C. aurata* stimulates conservation action and leads to further research in Kieni and other KFS managed forests whose mammalian biodiversity is not well documented.

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*Figure 2. The African golden cat *Caracal aurata* specimen collected in Kieni Forest Reserve, southern Aberdares, south central Kenya. Features shown in these images that aided in identification include golden/reddish-brown pelage; small, round ears that are black behind and without tufts; short, forward-directed hair on back of head and neck; and prominent spotting on belly and inner legs.*



Figure 3. Camera trap images from Kieni Forest Reserve, Kenya, of a probable African golden cat *Caracal aurata*. The golden/reddish-brown pelage and the small, black-backed ears are characteristic of *C. aurata*.



Figure 4. Camera trap image from Kieni Forest Reserve, Kenya, of a cat closely resembling an African golden cat *Caracal aurata*. The small, round ears that lack tufts are characteristic of *C. aurata*.

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Figure 5. Camera trap images from Kieni Forest Reserve, Kenya, of a cat closely resembling an African golden cat *Caracal aurata*. The grey pelage and the prominent spotting on the inner legs are characteristic of *C. aurata*.