

CAT

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news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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Recent records of wild cats in the Boé sector of Guinea Bissau

Chimbo Foundation implements a community based conservation program of the Western chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes verus* in the Boé sector of Guinea Bissau. In 2014 trail-cameras trapped an African golden cat *Caracal aurata* – this is a new record for the country – and in 2015 caracal *Caracal caracal*. In the same year lion *Panthera leo* was recorded by trail-cameras, a valuable proof of the presence of a species in heavy decline over its West-African range.

Due to its isolated position in south-eastern Guinea Bissau the Boé Sector has conserved an important biodiversity. The sector covers 3,289 km² (Wit & Reintjes 1989). It includes the greater part of the 1,053.7 km² of the future Boé National Park (BNP) and of the 499.22 km² of the TcheTche Wildlife Corridor (TWC) connecting BNP with the Dulombi National Park (DNP) to the West (Fig. 1), all in the process of being established by Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas, Guinea Bissau (IBAP 2014).

The Boé is covered by a thick laterite cap dissected by narrow valleys of up to a few hundred meters wide. The laterite cap is covered by grasslands. Only where the soil is sufficiently deep trees may grow and forests may develop, but most of these places are in use by the local population where they practice slash-and-burn agriculture to grow rain-fed rice. In recent decades large cattle owners from neighboring Guinea Conakry immigrated into the area to herd their livestock on the extensive grasslands of the Boé.

The majority of the 12,000 residents of the Boé live in the western part of the sector between the river Corubal and Féfiné. The Boé part of the BNP, with less than 1,000 residents living in 3 villages, is the least populated part of the Boé.

The sector's flagship species is the Western Chimpanzee, of which an estimated amount of over 700 animals live in the gallery forests along the edges of the aforementioned valleys (Serra et al. 2007). Chimbo Foundation implements a community based conservation program focusing on the protection of the Chimpanzee population and the conservation of their habitat. Activities include raising awareness, patrolling the area with 27 Village Vigilance Committees

CVVs and research on the ecology and biology of Chimpanzees. Since 2011 Chimbo works with trail cameras to record the presence of Chimpanzees and other wildlife. Local residents often told Chimbo field staff about encounters with large carnivores (e.g. lion, spotted hyena *Crocuta crocuta*, wild dog *Lycaon pictus*). Therefore a survey of larger carnivores was started in 2015.

Observations of wild cats with trail cameras

Since 2012 our trail cameras have recorded leopard *Panthera pardus* (Fig. 2) and serval *Leptailurus serval* (Fig. 3). In 2014, a camera trapped a cat that is an African golden cat (Fig. 4, Supporting Online Material Video SOM V1). This is the first record for the country. Since then more golden cats have been recorded in the Boé. In November 2015, the caracal appeared on one of our

cameras (Fig. 5), and after the recording of a lion's tail in 2014, the first clear picture of a lion was recorded in December 2015 (Fig. 6).

Discussion

Apart from some monkey species (e.g. Patas monkey *Erythrocebus patas*, Green monkey *Chlorocebus sabaeus*) the mammals of the Boé are difficult to observe. The trail camera program shows that prey species for wild cats may be quite common, but possibly in decline. These include the Guinea baboon *Papio papio*, red river hog *Potamochoerus porcus*, warthog *Phacochoerus africanus*, Bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus* and duiker species, e.g. Maxwell's duiker *Philantomba maxwellii* and yellow-backed duiker *Cephalophus silvicultor*. Also some larger prey species are still present: waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus* along the Féfiné River and Buffalo *Syncerus caffer* reside in the less populated areas (e.g. the BNP). Presence of Roan antelope *Hippotragus equinus* has been confirmed by hair samples (J. van Schijndel, pers. comm.) but the species has not yet been trapped by the cameras. Due to the omnipresence of man – often with guns – all wild animals are secretive.

The presence of leopard, serval, lion and African golden cat in the area is confirmed by our CVVs. Only hunters from villages on the east side of the Féfiné River mentioned the presence of two types of 'Buto Djabe' (yellow cat in Fula, the local language), one with and one without plumed ears (resp. caracal and golden cat). Hunters said not to know

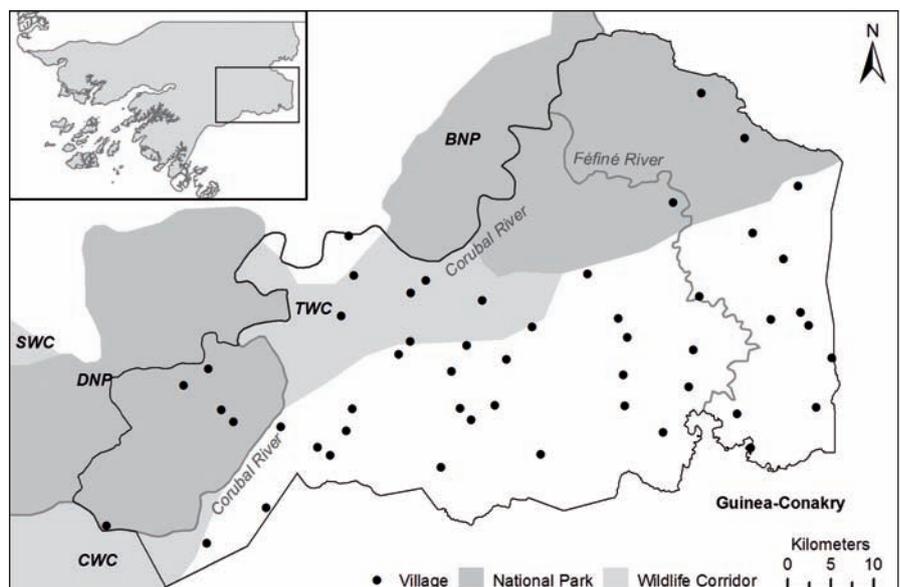


Fig. 1. Location of the Boé area within Guinea Bissau. BNP = Boé National Park, DNP = Dulombi National Park, TWC = TcheTche Wildlife Corridor.



Fig. 2. Leoprd pictured in Boé National Park, 14 January 2016.



Fig. 3. Serval pictured in Boé National Park, 24 December 2015.



Fig. 4. Cat pictured in Boé National Park, 22 September 2014, an African golden cat. The picture is from a video showing the cat jumping behind the tree (see SOM V1).



Fig. 5. Caracal pictured in Boé National Park, 18 November 2015.

all the carnivore species, stating: ‘we don’t shoot what we don’t eat, and therefore we never see them up close’. However, other residents admitted to shooting medium sized carnivores to protect their small livestock.

Lions used to reside in the Boé over most of the 20th century, but the species has been in steady decline and when Chimbo started to work in the area in 2007 it was very doubtful whether they were still present in the area. We found the first lion tracks in 2014, and a picture of a lion’s tail was taken later that year by one of our trail cameras west of the Féfiné River. The species might be coming back to the Boé, or may have continued to reside in the more remote parts of the sector. The lion picture was taken in a previously unstudied part of the BNP. In view of the recent decline in lion numbers in West Africa – with confirmed populations remaining at three locations only (Henschel et al. 2015) and an estimate of about 500 individuals (Riggio et al. 2012, Henschel et al. 2014) – the recent proof of lions in the Boé is an important addition to our knowledge about the distribution of the critically endangered West-African subpopulation of *Panthera leo*.

Recommendations

In order to protect the remaining wildlife in the Boé – and notably its wild cats – it is essential that IBAP and the Directorate for Forest and Fauna, Guinea Bissau DGFF step up their presence in- and their control of the Boé. Now that a GEF-UNDP funding (UNDP, n.d.) that enabled IBAP to develop the BNP will come to an end and additional funding has not been secured yet – and given the precarious situation of the national treasury – it is a matter of concern whether IBAP can live up to the expectations of providing adequate protection for the important biodiversity of the BNP and in particular of its lions. In any case, explicit attention must be paid all over the Boé to preserve habitats for wildlife, to control poaching and poisoning of carcasses as a measure to control predators, because a large part of the Boé will not be included in the BNP. Boé residents mention that poisoned bait is used by cattle owners as a (by the local population loathed) way to protect their cattle. With a better implementation of existing conservation measures in the area we do see a real possibility for the Boé to house a resident lion population, for local residents seem to gaze upon the species with respect and some healthy fear. The national authori-

ties have identified the protection of the lion population as a national priority as demonstrated by the choice of the lion as the symbol for the Boé National Park, that hopefully will receive its legal status in the immediate future. In the other parts of the Boé Chimbo and its local partner Daridibó are – with help of the EU – promoting the protection of sacred forests which provide habitat for many of the prey species for wild cats.

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Fig. 6. Lion pictured in Boé National Park, 30 December 2015.

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Supporting Online Material SOM Video V1 is available at www.catsg.org.

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