

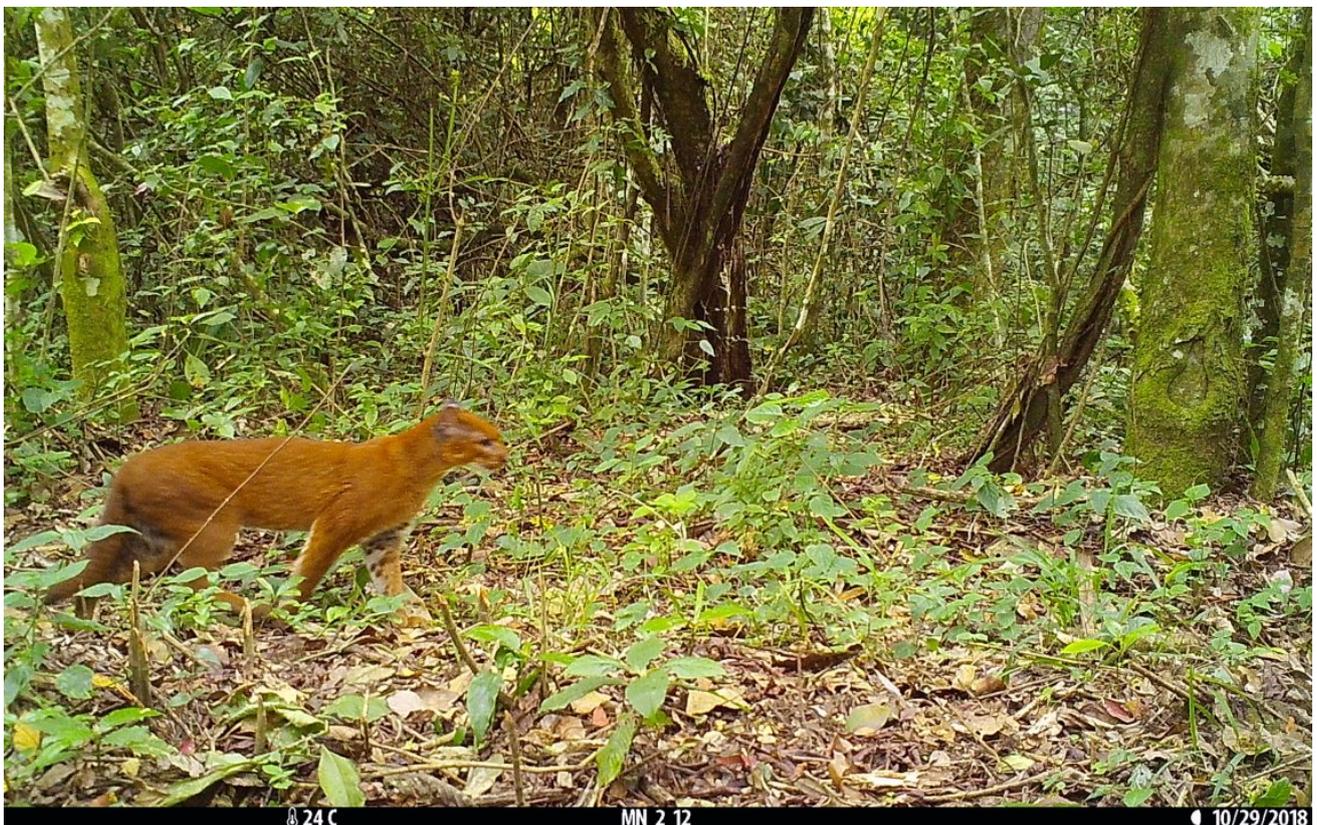
Oryx

Caught on camera: the African golden cat has moved to Tanzania

By Ilaria Greco, 12th November 2020

Tanzania is home to circa 20% of Africa's large mammals, and has designated 38% of its total surface for protected areas, to conserve tropical forests and other biomes and the biodiversity within them. However with continuing forest degradation and consequent loss of habitat, these areas face pressures from an expanding urban population and a growing economy. Minziro Nature Forest Reserve is the largest forested area in north-west Tanzania and supports multiple rare and endemic species.

While conducting a biodiversity assessment in this Reserve in 2018, our camera traps captured the first ever record of the African golden cat *Caracal aurata* in Tanzania. This extremely rare and elusive species is the least known African felid. The Vulnerable golden cat is medium-sized (males can grow up to 130 cm and weight 14 kg). It is typically found in the equatorial forests of West and Central Africa and has recently been observed in Kenya. Minziro Nature Forest Reserve is c. 200 km from the closest confirmed population, in Uganda.



African golden cat detected in Minziro Natural Forest Reserve in 2018, using camera traps, in its typical

golden/orange fur colouration. Photo: Francesco Rovero

Our [research](#) was coordinated by the Science Museum of Trento and the University of Florence, and was implemented in close collaboration with the Tanzania Forest Service. In Minziro forest we deployed 70 camera traps, recording 169 photographs of the golden cat, 33 of which were independent photographic events belonging to 10 individual cats over an area of 257 km² (c. 4 per 100 km²). This included a clowder of three individuals, several kittens, and adults, displaying all their colour variation: from bright orange to dark grey.

Footage of an adult golden cat and its kitten in the Minziro forest, 2018. Video: Francesco Rovero

The African golden cat is the only forest dependent felid in Africa. Unlike felids such as lions or leopards, its existence is bound to tropical forests, and thus it is directly affected by deforestation and habitat destruction. Our records of the species were mostly confined to the forest interior, which is characterized by intact, closed-canopy, and continuous vegetated habitat. Records decreased in proximity to the forest edge, which coincided with areas of more intense human activity and the presence of several villages bordering the Reserve. This suggests that habitat intactness and anthropogenic disturbance influence the presence of the African golden cat.



View of the Minziro Nature Forest Reserve, Tanzania. Photo: Francesco Rovero

The discovery of this cat species in Minziro highlights the uniqueness of this ecosystem. Before it was upgraded to a Nature Reserve in 2016 by the Tanzania Forest Service, Minziro was a poorly

managed Forest Reserve. The Nature Reserve is a separate, eastern outlier of the Congo-Guinea forest that extends across 26 countries, and hence it hosts a biological assemblage typical of West Africa and is a unique conservation site in Tanzania. This is most likely the only suitable habitat for the African golden cat in the country.

We also recorded several other species that are rare in Tanzania, such as the Endangered tree pangolin and the giant pangolin, the olive baboon, which is less commonly seen in tropical forests, the blue duiker, and the country's first record of the fire-footed rope squirrel. We detected a total of 23 medium and large ground-dwelling mammals, and an array of primates, such as the grey-cheeked mangabey, which is not found elsewhere in the country.



Selection of wildlife recorded through camera trapping. From top left: olive baboons *Papio anubis*, honey badgers *Mellivora capensis*, bush pigs *Potamochoerus larvatus*, grey-cheeked mangabey *Lophocebus albigena*, harnessed bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*, and the African civet *Civettictis civetta*. Photos: Francesco Rovero

However, despite the high number of species recorded in the Reserve, many occurred at low densities. This may be indicative of the heavy encroachment into the forest. Illegal hunting, along with logging, human-made wildfires, livestock grazing, firewood collection, fishing, charcoal

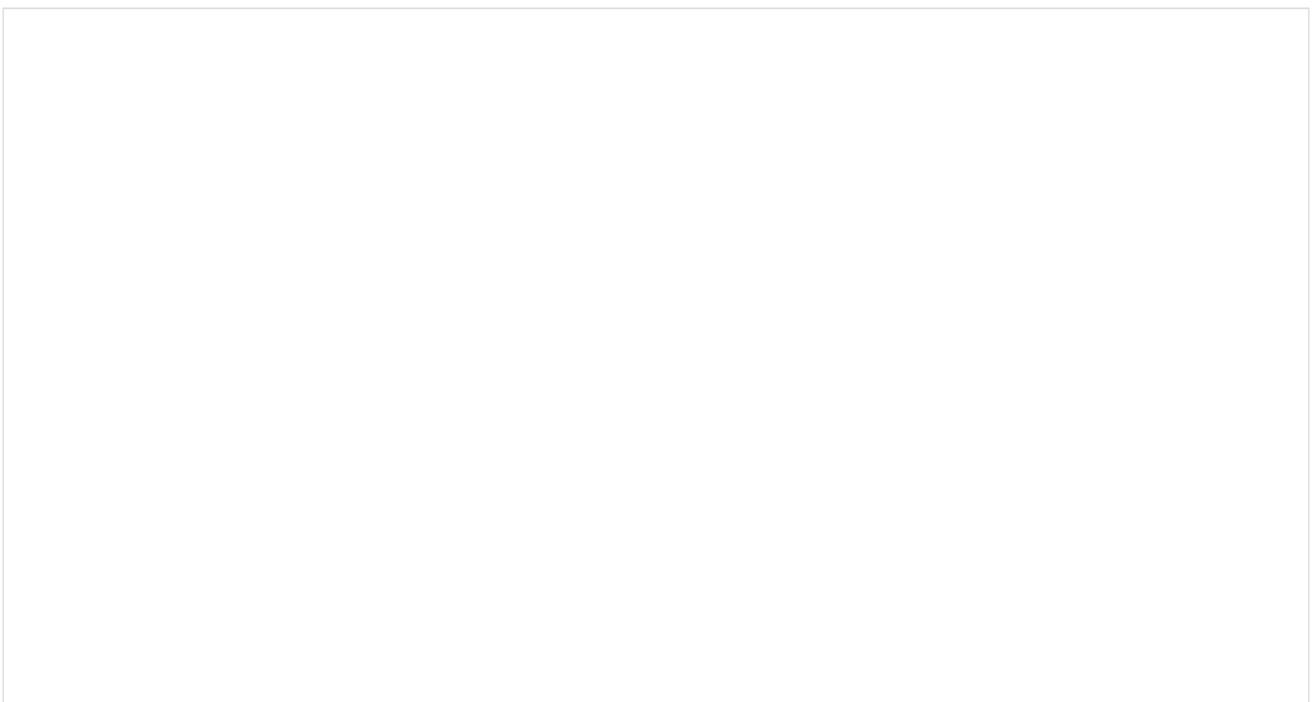
making, the creation of pastureland, and other illegal activities occur within the Reserve and can, both directly and indirectly, affect forest structure and the presence and survival of wildlife. There are also plans to construct an oil pipeline to the west of the Reserve.



Examples of anthropogenic disturbances affecting the Minziro Nature Forest Reserve. On the left, cattle grazing within the Reserve; on the right, a wildfire at the border of the Reserve. Photo: Francesco Rovero

An increase in law enforcement and conservation efforts will be paramount for the protection of this Reserve. The presence of the golden cat adds important information to the scarce data for this species and extends the species' range. This discovery cements the need for continuous monitoring and improved management and conservation efforts in the Minziro Nature Forest Reserve.

The article [The African golden cat *Caracal aurata* in Tanzania: first record and vulnerability assessment](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.





Ilaria Greco

Ilaria Greco is a PhD student in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology at the University of Florence, Italy, studying the occupancy and distribution of large mammals using camera trapping. She is interested in exploring mammalian community structure and occurrence in response to anthropogenic disturbances in tropical forest biomes.