

Striped Polecat or Zorilla *Ictonyx striatus*



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Namibian conservation status	Least Concern
Global IUCN status	Least Concern
Namibian range	~750,000 km ²
Global range	Sub-Saharan Africa, excluding forests of the Congo basin and West Africa
Population estimate	~75,000
Population trend	Unknown
Habitat	Widespread throughout Namibia, from moist woodlands in the north-east to the Namib Desert in the west. Probably absent from dunes
Threats	No major threats, but road kills of this species are common

IDENTIFYING FEATURES

The striped polecat is a small carnivore with a black body and four white stripes extending from the head to the base of the tail. The head has three prominent white patches – one on the forehead and one at the base of each ear. The tail is bushy and mostly black but with varying amounts of white hair. This species can be distinguished from the African striped weasel by its larger, stockier body, longer fur and white facial markings that are absent in the weasel. The tail is often held upwards and fanned out, in an alarm gesture that gives a warning of its intention to spray a foul liquid over its opponents.

DISTRIBUTION

This species is widely distributed in Namibia, with past and recent records confirming a wide range of habitats from moist woodlands in the north-east through to the semi-arid and arid areas in the south and west (Coetzee 1969, Environmental Information Service 2021). In arid areas, it seems that they prefer drainage lines and areas with some scrub as cover (Smithers 1983). Absence of records from the

Namib Sand Sea suggest that they do not occur in barren dune fields, probably due to lack of adequate vegetation cover. There are over 250 records of striped polecats in Namibia in the Atlas in Namibia database (Environmental Information Service 2021), with verified records from all regions except Oshikoto, Oshana and Ohangwena. The lack of data in these areas is likely due to lack of recording effort, rather than absence of the species.

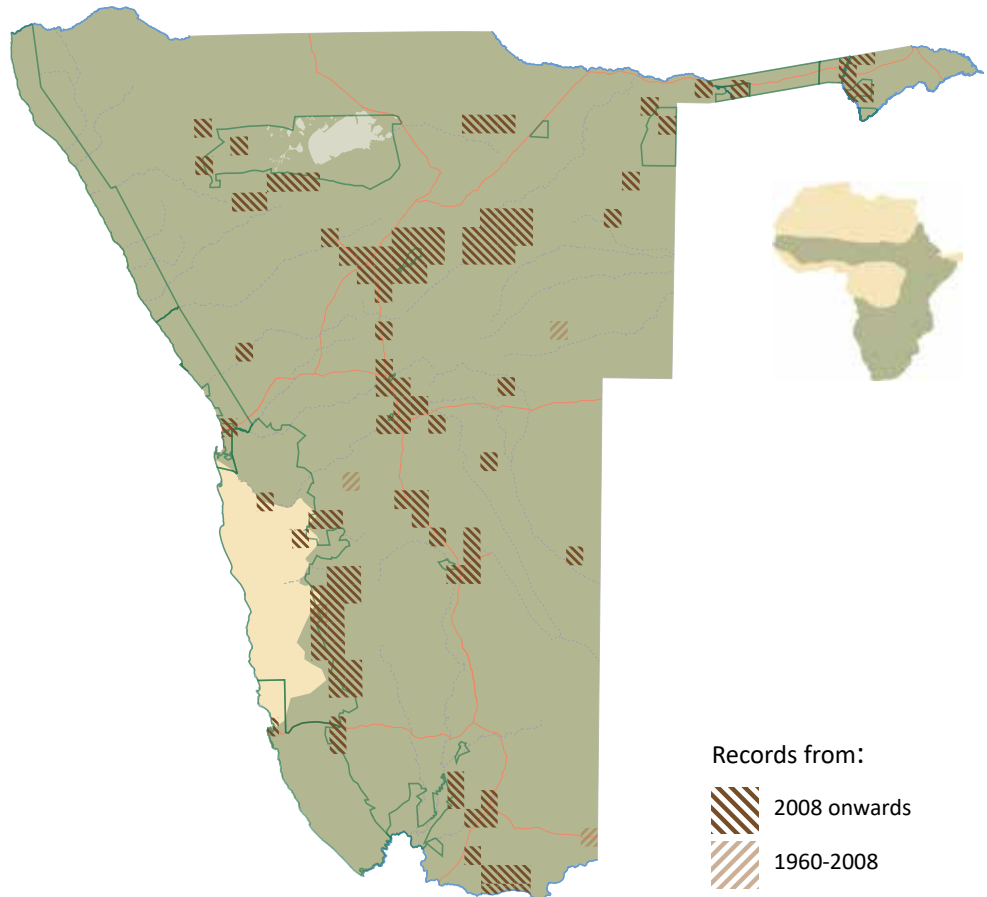
POPULATION ESTIMATE AND TREND

There are no population density estimates for striped polecats in Namibia. A study from East Africa estimated a density of 1–5 individuals per 10 km² (Hendrichs 1972 cited in Stuart *et al.* 2015a). If we assume that this species occurs throughout most of Namibia except the Namib Sand Sea (total area ca. 750,000 km²) and use a conservative density estimate of 0.1 individuals per km², the national population of striped polecats is ~75,000 individuals. The population trend for this species is unknown, but is assumed to be stable due to lack of severe threats.

Distribution records of striped polecat, and present estimated area of distribution in Namibia.

Inset: African distribution of striped polecat according to IUCN (Stuart *et al.* 2015a).

The Namibian distribution in the main map is more up to date and does not necessarily agree with the distribution shown in the inset.



ECOLOGY

Striped polecats are strictly nocturnal and prefer to move on the ground rather than in trees, but they will climb trees when stressed. Although they can dig their own burrows, they often use burrows made by other species or natural crevices for shelter (Larivière 2002, Skinner & Chimimba 2005). They are generalist feeders. While small mammals and invertebrates feature predominantly in their diets, they are also known to prey on reptiles, amphibians, arachnids, birds and their eggs, and occasionally carrion (Larivière 2002, Skinner & Chimimba 2005). Reptiles, scorpions, and solifuges comprise an important part of the polecats' diet in drier regions like the Kalahari in Botswana (Smithers 1983), which may be indicative of their diet in much of Namibia. Due to their generalist diet, striped polecats are highly adaptable, and seem to thrive in agricultural croplands and pastures in South Africa, in addition to an array of natural habitats (Rowe-Rowe *et al.* 2016). It is therefore likely that they are widely distributed in Namibia, on farmlands and within protected areas.

They are solitary, with males and females only coming together to mate, and the altricial young will accompany females until they reach maturity. Females produce 1–3

young per litter, and will only produce a second litter in the season if the first fails (Skinner & Chimimba 2005). Little is known about the striped polecats' ecosystem services, although it is likely they reduce local rodent and insect populations (Rowe-Rowe *et al.* 2016). Although black-backed jackals occasionally prey on them (Do Linh San *et al.* 2009), polecats defend themselves by ejecting a pungent, unpleasant fluid from their anal glands, thus making them undesirable for potential predators (Skinner & Chimimba 2005).

THREATS

There are no major threats to this species in Namibia. However, there are 12 records of polecats that were killed on roads. Polecat road kills are a fairly common sight and it is likely that many suffer this fate, but the threat to the national population is probably insignificant. In South Africa, free-ranging domestic dogs kill polecats around urban areas (Rowe-Rowe *et al.* 2016), but this threat is likely to be lower in Namibia due to the low human population. Finally, there is some evidence that the species is used in South African traditional medicine on a small scale (Simelane & Kerley 1998, Rowe-Rowe *et al.* 2016), but nothing is written about this aspect in Namibia.



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CONSERVATION STATUS

Least Concern. This species is listed as Least Concern internationally (Stuart *et al.* 2015a) and in South Africa (Rowe-Rowe *et al.* 2016) and Angola (Huntley *et al.* 2019). Previous international assessments in 1996 and 2008 gave the same listing (Stuart *et al.* 2008a).

ACTIONS

No studies have been undertaken on this species in Namibia, which limits our understanding of their ecological role, distribution, habitats, and threats. The Atlasing in Namibia system has contributed greatly to revealing their distribution, but it could also help to understand the extent of road kill incidents for this species. Raising public awareness about reporting road kills using the Atlasing in Namibia application would expand our understanding of the impacts of road kills on this and other species.

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