

**Gatos Bravos
1st Rufford Small Grant
Six Month Report**

1. Name and affiliation
Thamara Fariñas Torres: CRILAR-CONICET
2. Project title
Gatos Bravos: conserving the most endangered small felids in La Rioja, Argentina
3. Reporting period
6 month report: September 2024 – March 2024
4. Contributing individuals—
 - Valeria Olmos, Field Technician, CRILAR-CONICET, full-time, participated in the November 2024 campaign and laboratory activities.
 - Mauro Lucherini, Researcher, GECM-INBIOSUR-UNS-CONICET, part-time, participated in the November 2024 campaign, and project planification.
 - Carlos Nieto, Field Technician, CRILAR-CONICET, part-time, participated in the November 2024 campaign.
 - Pedro Gonzales, Local Guide, Independent, participated in the November 2024 campaign, helped with logistic, site selection, and contacts with local residents and authorities.
 - Rebecca Lobo, Researcher-Profesor, UNdeC, external consultant, helped us with logistics and contact with local authorities.
5. Collaborating organizations, government agencies, and other involved institutions
 - Museo Quyllir Ñan, Vinchina, helped us organize our first activities with local people and contact educational centers.
 - Andean Cat Alliance (AGA), helped us with institutional support for the project and donated materials for DNA sample collection and analysis.
 - Instituto Tecnico de Formación Docente y Tecnico Profesional, participated in field work during the November 2024 campaign.
 - Municipality of Vinchina, collaborated with logistical facilities for the development of the first workshop and activities with the I.T.F.D.y T.P., we have their support to continue the activities.

Project Activities and Results

6. Activities—

The activities carried out so far have focused primarily on logistics and a first field trip.

 - In September 2024 we started the procedures for the purchase of camera traps, external disks and other necessary supplies for fieldwork. We also started the logistics for the organization of the November 2024 campaign. We also began the tasks of creating social network pages for the project, as well as the design of a logo that identifies us. We participated in the Jornadas de infancias Ciencia es Cultura organized

by CRILAR and the municipality of Anillaco, in which educational activities and talks were held with neighbors and children from the community.

- In October 2024 we made contacts with various organizations, institutions (AGA, PCWG, UNDeC) and the local government. These contacts were extremely productive and provided great support to the realization of the project.
 - In November 2024 we carried out the first camera trap campaign in the northern part of the Laguna Brava reserve. This first field trip lasted 7 days, 2 days of travel and 5 days of work, during which 967 km were traveled by vehicle and hiking, with working days of approximately 10 hours. A total of 15 camera traps were placed, 11 of which are located above 3000 m a.s.l., following the camera placement protocol designed by AGA. The cameras cover an altitudinal gradient of more than 2200 m, the highest being at 4420 m a.s.l. In addition, the distance between the cameras cover more than 100 km. In addition to the cameras, 4 feline fecal samples were collected and sent to the Andean Cat Alliance for genetic analysis.
 - During the November trip, a public talk was also given at the Quyllur Ñan Provincial Archaeological Museum, with the participation of neighbors and 40 students of the Natural Areas Management and Park Rangers Technicature of the I.S.F.D and T.P. of Vinchina. Subsequently, these students also participated in a field practice, focused on the collection of indirect evidence of the presence of felines and the deployment of cameras.
 - In December 2024, the team received an invitation from the Argentinean National Parks Agency to join AGA and the NGO Natura Internacional in the research activities planned for 2025 in the province of San Juan. In addition, discussions have begun with the authorities of the Provincial Secretary of Mining, to ensure access to the southern part of the Laguna Brava Reserve in order to complete the survey of this protected area. Given the weather conditions during the months following the campaign, activities have focused primarily on logistics and communication. We also continued work to obtain research permits in the province of Catamarca, where we also plan field work
 - In February 2025, preparations began for the campaign to be carried out in March 2025, to pick up the cameras in Laguna Brava and carry out new workshops in the community of Jagüe. A call was made to university students to participate as interns in the project.
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- First results:
 - Preliminary analysis of the data obtained (aprox 67 thousand photos, with an effort of 129 days of active sampling), confirmed the presence of 9 species of native mammals, and possible a new species record for the province. However, no records of our small felines have been obtained yet. There is still a large area to be surveyed as well as sites with evidence in which we should place cameras again.
 - Workshops were held in the elementary school and with the neighbors of the town, as part of the project of integration of the neighbors for the conservation of small cats in the high Andes of La Rioja. The activities included a small presentation on native fauna, in which children and neighbors shared their knowledge about the different species. Including personal observations of the species and suggestions for new sites for camera placement.

- During the activities, the participants were given stickers and it was agreed to present flyers with information on the species recorded for the next visit, to be distributed at tourist points.
- Problems or constraints for the project
Until the moment, the difficulties in carrying out the project can be divided into three aspects.
 - Bureaucracy: we have encountered bureaucratic delays in obtaining research authorization for the province of Catamarca. While in La Rioja, we already have this permit, we have encountered restrictions imposed by the mining development authorities for certain areas. We are currently working to resolve these issues.
 - Economic aspects: given the economic situation that Argentina is going through, all our initial budgets have been devalued with respect to the current amounts due to inflation. Although we have purchased equipment for our study, this increase in costs will directly affect the number of areas we will be able to survey.
 - Climate: given the climatic characteristics of our study area, we have some limitations to access sites of interest during winter and early spring, as we must wait for the snow to melt and the roads to be cleared and access some sites. On the contrary, in summer, our activity is affected by the extreme hot weather and the vacation season for both government agencies, technicians and others collaborators.
 - Given the increase in mining exploration activity that is being carried out in our study area, it seems important to increase our efforts of survey, communication and institutional relations in this area, which will allow us not only to develop our project but also to present reports and conservation plans to the provincial authorities in charge of this area.

7. Activities for the coming year

- This report represents the first 6 months of the project, so we still have to carry out several activities. First of all, we hope to identify the areas where our target species are present and to perform the first statistical and threat analyses. An essential step is to obtain the permits to carry out the sampling in the areas that are still missing and in the province of Catamarca. On the other hand, we still have to reinforce the workshop activities in schools and with the local communities, which we will restart in March with the beginning of school year. Based on them, we will begin to propose threat mitigation and conservation projects. Another important aspect of the project will be to have access to a computer with storage and processing capacity to handle and analyze all the data collected; although we currently have a personal laptop, it is not up to the demand of analyzing the amount of data we expect to collect.



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