

The world's deadliest cat is deceptively cute. Meet Gaia.



By [Justine McDaniel](#)

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Gaia, an 8-month-old black-footed cat, in her enclosure at Utah's Hogle Zoo. (Utah's Hogle Zoo)

She weighs less than three pounds, she makes you go *aww*, and she's one of the best killers on the planet.

Gaia, an 8-month-old black-footed cat, is the newest resident at Utah's Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City. She's part of an effort to conserve her at-risk breed — a pint-size powerhouse species whose hunting prowess makes it the world's deadliest cat.

Adorably big-eyed and smaller than a house cat, black-footed cats are far more successful at hunting than lions. They can jump up to five feet in the air and 6½ feet in distance; they kill eight to 14 meals per night and can eat 3,000 rodents a year.

“They’re considered the fierce cat,” said Bob Cisneros, Hogle Zoo’s associate director of animal care, who described kitten Gaia as a “mighty warrior.”
“These guys are voracious hunters,” he said.



Video shows Gaia, the black-footed cat taking up residence at Utah’s Hogle Zoo. (Video: Hogle Zoo)

Among the most successful predators on Earth, black-footed cats are estimated to catch their prey more than 60 percent of the time, said Amanda Collins, vice program leader for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums black-footed cat consortium, which manages the breeding and conservation of the species in the United States.

The cats’ numbers in the wild, however, are decreasing. The species is listed as vulnerable, one step before endangered, by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. About 9,700 were living in the wild in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa as of a 2016 assessment.

Taters the cat stars in NASA’s first video streamed from deep space

In North America, where about 28 black-footed cats live in accredited zoos, the consortium works to pair up cats that are the most genetically different for breeding in hopes of helping to preserve the species, Collins said.

That's where cats like Gaia come in. She's been matched with Ryder, a 3-year-old male at the Utah zoo who's been waiting for a genetically suitable mate.

Weighing 2.64 pounds, with dark spots and stripes against tawny fur, big ears, and gold-green eyes, Gaia arrived at the zoo in October but entered the small-animals exhibit last week. She was one of four kittens born last year at Fossil Rim Wildlife Center in Texas, where Collins is a carnivore curator.

As she gets acclimated to her new home, she is elusive during the daytime but curious and watchful, Cisneros said.

"She's settling in at night when everybody's gone," Cisneros said. "When we all come in, she's hunkered down in her little cave."

The zoo is setting up cameras to find out more about her nighttime adventures. Her keepers have quickly established trust with her, Cisneros said, making them optimistic that she will settle in well.

"She's a pretty feisty cat," he said.

The zoo was previously home to a female black-footed cat named Sanura, who successfully gave birth to offspring. She died in September at a record-breaking age of 18½. The zoo acquired Ryder from San Diego in 2021, when he was a year old.

Once Gaia has matured, the zoo will attempt to mate her with Ryder, with a first try likely this fall.

"Gaia is most distantly related, so she makes the perfect match," Cisneros said. "We got him when he was pretty young, so we've just been waiting for the right moment."



Gaia peers through the glass of her enclosure at the zoo. As she gets acclimated to her new home, she is elusive during the daytime but curious and watchful, a zoo leader said. (Utah's Hogle Zoo)

The goal behind the cats' residency isn't just a new litter of kittens, but also attracting new fans for the species.

"While animals like Ryder and Gaia may be found in Africa, far away from what we do on a daily basis," Cisneros said, "they become representatives of a conservation message that applies to everything here."

Conservationists also hope increasing public interest in the cat will motivate more zoos to give them homes, supporting the conservation effort. Because the cats are elusive and nocturnal, they often hide from visitors, so interest in exhibiting them has historically been low, Collins said.

"If we do breed these animals but we have nowhere to put them, that doesn't help us," Collins said. "The more interest the public has in these cats, the more effort we can put into having a conservation effort for them."

In the wild, black-footed cats move stealthily through the savanna and desert under cover of darkness, using their excellent vision to spot small insects, rodents and birds. They are lightning-fast and make kills throughout the night, often roaming widely and adopting other animals' dens as hiding spots.

A female weighs 2.8 pounds on average and a male 4.2 pounds, according to the IUCN. That's far less than typical house cats, which often weigh between eight and 10 pounds, according to VCA Animal Hospitals, and some breeds weigh more.

What's it like to work with them? "Spicy," Collins said.

"Even though they do look like house cats, they are certainly not," she said. "They are not very cuddly or affectionate or anything like that toward us, and they are very much wild animals."

They are generally shy but can be very personable and confident, said Collins. During the day, the nocturnal cats are lazy and elusive, but they're very active when they are ready for hunting.

"Lions and tigers, they have a lot of really good rap. People love them. But small cats have a lot of pizzazz about them as well," Collins said. "Even though they're not those big, charismatic animals, they are very special for being some of the smallest animals out in that landscape in Africa."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2024/01/04/black-footed-cat-utah-zoo-gaia-deadliest/>

Ha! Maybe they could breed them and release them into the New York sewers. But maybe the rats there are too big.

Black-footed cats might make great barn cats till they started bringing down the chickens, and, maybe, cattle.

We overlook the ferocity of the average cat. Midnight, my semi-feral friend, can be as nice as pie then turn on a dime into an arched-back, hissing, merciless killer, should a dog appear near her kittens, or some careless sparrow or ground squirrel stumble into her path. She has to be to eat and survive stupid dogs.

