

Annual Report 2025

Peruvian Desert Cat Project
a partner of the Pampas Cat Working Group



Cindy Hurtado, Alvaro García & Zoila Vega



CONTENTS

Introduction	02
Reducing retaliatory killings through community-led coexistence programs	03
Preventing roadkill through driver awareness and highway outreach	05
Environmental education and community outreach: Inspiring children	07
Advancing legal protection for 9,000 hectares of Dry Forest	09
Participation in Protected Area events and strengthening local stewardship	10
New scientific insights: our study reveals an endangered mangrove population of Desert Pampas Cats	11
Conclusion	14

Introduction

Across the coastal desert, dry forest, and inter Andean valleys in Peru, small wild cats such as the Desert Pampas Cat (*Leopardus garleppi*) face a complex mix of threats: retaliatory killings, road mortality, disease transmission, habitat loss and fragmentation, and declining genetic diversity.

This year, the Peruvian Desert Cat Project advanced a suite of community centered conservation actions that directly address these challenges while strengthening local stewardship.

Thanks to the collaboration of rural communities, protected area authorities, and conservation partners, the project continues to grow as a model for coexistence, education, and science-based conservation.



This report summarizes the major activities carried out this year and highlights a new scientific discovery, led by our team, that is reshaping conservation priorities for one of Peru's most unique Desert Pampas cat populations.



Reducing retaliatory killings through community-led coexistence programs

Retaliatory killing remains one of the most immediate threats to Desert Pampas Cats. When poultry is lost to predators, families with limited resources often feel they have no alternative but to kill carnivores in response.

This year, the project expanded its coexistence program to **50 new families** across Pedregal, Molle Corral, Trigopampa, and Papelillos towns in Cajamarca Region, northern Peru.

Up to date, 182 families have benefited from this program and **have become allies** in the conservation of small wild cats and other carnivore species.



Key Achievements

- Delivered workshops explaining the ecological role of *Leopardus garleppi* and the benefits of coexistence.
- Provided construction materials for **predator-proof chicken coops**; families contributed labor and local materials.
- Conducted field inspections to ensure coops met technical standards.
- Offered three **poultry-management workshops** on health, hygiene, feeding, and coop maintenance.
- Supplied five chickens per family (250 total) and balanced feed to establish secure poultry systems.
- Delivered three **veterinary first-aid kits** and trained families in disease identification and treatment.
- Organized three **vaccination campaigns**, immunizing more than 400 chickens per campaign.
- Installed 17 **camera traps** around households and coops to monitor wildlife presence and predation risks.

Reducing retaliatory killings through community-led coexistence programs

Why does this matter?

By reducing poultry losses and improving animal husbandry, families no longer feel pressure to kill Desert Pampas Cats, foxes, weasels, or other small carnivores. By eliminating conflict and providing a reliable source of protein and extra income potential, this approach **transforms conflict into coexistence** and strengthens long-term stewardship of native wildlife.



Preventing roadkill through driver awareness and highway outreach

Road mortality is a growing threat to small wild cats in Peru, particularly in regions where highways cut through desert and dry forest ecosystems.

The Peruvian Desert Cat Project led a **major awareness effort** near Huancayo (Junin Region, central Peru), where environmental police and local partners helped reach thousands of drivers.



Key Achievements

- Conducted environmental education campaigns at six major bus terminals.
- Distributed **250 posters to bus drivers** and transport companies.
- Installed posters at police control posts along highways.
- Distributed reflective **“I brake for wildlife” stickers** to drivers; stickers were also placed on 14 environmental police vehicles.
- Featured on **national television and radio**, amplifying the message across Peru.
- Coordinated with the Illescas National Reserve (Piura Region) to prepare a large-scale wildlife awareness campaign targeting **1000+ people and road users**.
- Submitted a **peer-reviewed article** about roadkill hotspots and species to a Peruvian scientific journal.



Preventing roadkill through driver awareness and highway outreach

Why does this matter?

Desert Pampas Cats and other small felids are particularly vulnerable to vehicle collisions due to their nocturnal habits and tendency to cross open roads. Increasing driver awareness directly reduces mortality and builds **national recognition of the species'** conservation needs.



Environmental education and community outreach: Inspiring children

Education is one of the most powerful tools for long-term conservation. This year, the project deepened its engagement with youth, and local leaders, groups whose involvement is **essential for sustaining conservation** outcomes.

Why does this matter?

When children learn to value wildlife and local leaders champion conservation, entire communities shift toward long-term stewardship. These activities help build a generation that understands the importance of protecting small wild cats and the ecosystems they depend on. **By nurturing curiosity, pride, and cultural connection**, we strengthen the social foundations that make conservation durable.

Key Achievements

- Participated in the 4th Anniversary Festival of the **Illescas National Reserve**, using games, mask-making, and interactive activities to teach children and adults about native wildlife.
- Supported a guided visit for winners of a **drawing and painting contest** inside the reserve.
- Participated in the 50th anniversary of **Cerros de Amotape National Park**, sharing information about the desert cat.



Environmental education and community outreach: Inspiring children



Advancing legal protection for 9,000 hectares of Dry Forest

The Dry Forest of northwestern Peru are among the **most threatened ecosystems** in the country; and one of the last strongholds for the desert-adapted Pampas cat. This year, the project advanced two parallel legal pathways to secure long-term habitat protection.

Key Achievements

- Completed fieldwork and species lists for the conservation concession application to SERFOR (Peruvian Wildlife Service).
- Submitted the updated application; the process is temporarily paused pending national land-use zoning.
- Pursued an alternative legal designation as a **fragile ecosystem or critical habitat**, submitting all required documentation and awaiting SERFOR's response.

Why does this matter?

Legal protection of these 9,000 hectares would safeguard **essential habitat** for *Leopardus garleppi* and other carnivores, reduce deforestation pressure, and create a foundation for **long-term conservation management**.



Participation in Protected Area events and strengthening local stewardship

The Peruvian Desert Cat Project continued to support events and activities that strengthen community ties to protected areas and reinforce the importance of conserving small wild cats.

Why does this matter?

Visibility and community pride are powerful drivers of conservation. By participating in public events, the project elevates the profile of small wild cats and **strengthens alliances with local institutions** and residents.



Key Achievements

- Supported events with the Illescas National Reserve (Piura Region) and Cerros de Amotape National Park (Tumbes Region).
- **Shared conservation messages** about the Desert Pampas Cat and its role as an indicator of ecosystem health.
- Highlighted **community participation** and celebrated local conservation achievements.



New scientific insights: our study reveals an Endangered mangrove population of Desert Pampas Cats

This year, the Peruvian Desert Cat Project in collaboration with other researchers, led a scientific study that **has reshaped our understanding** of one of Peru's most unique Desert Pampas cat populations. For years, the **Mangroves of San Pedro de Vice** were believed to be a healthy, wildlife-rich ecosystem supporting a stable population of *Leopardus garleppi*. Our long-term involvement in environmental education and conservation in the mangrove reinforced this assumption.

Our study revealed a very different reality

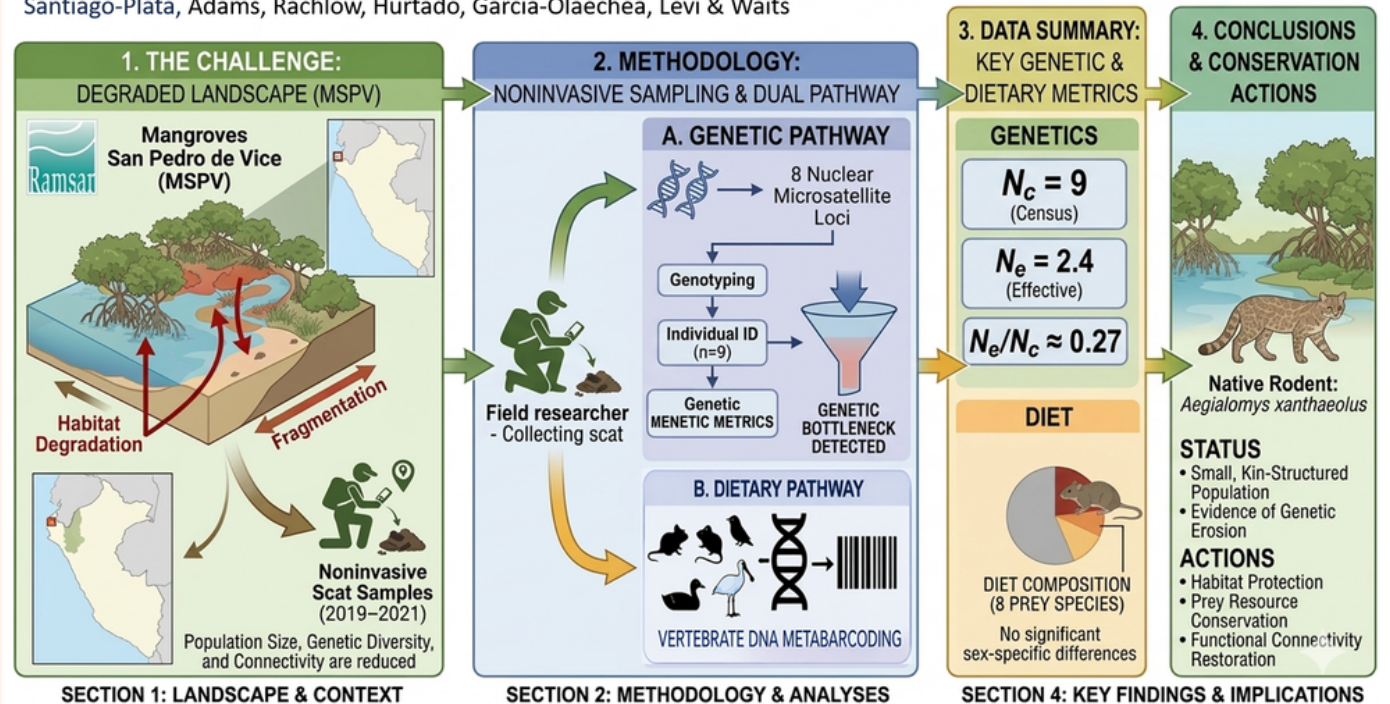
We discovered:

- Using non-invasive **fecal genotyping and DNA metabarcoding**, our team analyzed scat samples collected over multiple field seasons. The findings were striking:
- Only **nine individual** Pampas cats were identified from 68 scat samples.
- The population shows extremely **low genetic diversity**.
- Evidence of a recent **genetic bottleneck** suggests past declines.
- The effective population size ($N_e \approx 2.4$) is **critically low**.



Genetic diversity, demographic parameters, and trophic ecology of the Pampas cat (*Leopardus garleppi*) in a Ramsar Wetland of northwestern Peru.

Santiago-Plata, Adams, Rachlow, Hurtado, Garcia-Olaechea, Levi & Waits



These results highlight a broader concern:

Small wild cats may appear common in photos or sightings, but their true population health can remain hidden, especially in fragmented or highly distributed landscapes.

Why is this population unique?

- It hosts only one wild cat species, simplifying ecological interpretation.
- We have reliable scat detection sites, which is extremely rare for small felids.
- The habitat is compact and well-defined, making long-term monitoring feasible.

How did these findings change our strategy?

Before this study, our work in the mangrove focused on maintaining a seemingly healthy ecosystem and preventing new threats. The new genetic evidence changed our priorities immediately.

As members of the **Management Committee** of the Mangrove and Adjacent Areas, we informed local authorities and partners of the findings and began outlining a **conservation response**. Although recent national elections delayed formal committee meetings, our team has already developed a science-based plan.

Our current plan: Increasing connectivity through evidence-based action

- Survey a **nearby mangrove** to determine whether its Desert Pampas Cat population also shows low genetic diversity.
- Survey a second, more distant wetland to evaluate whether it could serve as a genetically suitable “source population”.
- Identify the **best population for future connectivity**, based on genetic health and ecological compatibility.
- Use these results to advocate for targeted **habitat restoration or wildlife corridors** that allow natural movement between populations.
- Present a formal proposal to the Management Committee and relevant jurisdictions once surveys are complete.

This approach avoids “blind connectivity,” which can take years to permit and may not benefit the population if the source population is also genetically compromised.



A broader lesson for small wild cats

Our study underscores a critical point for small cat conservation:

- Seeing a species does not mean it is thriving.
- Photographs do not reveal genetic diversity.
- Presence does not equal population health.

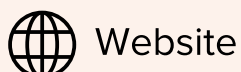


This study highlights the urgent need for genetic monitoring across the range of small wild cats; not only in Peru, but globally.

Conclusion

This year's work demonstrates how community engagement, education, habitat protection, scientific research, and conflict mitigation can come together to create meaningful, lasting benefits for Pampas cats and other small wild cats in Peru.

The Peruvian Desert Cat Project continues to grow as a model of grassroots conservation, one built on trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to protecting the unique wildlife of Peru's dry forests, deserts, and mangroves.



Website



@peruvian.desert.cat



/peruviandesertcat

Thank you!

All these efforts would not be possible without the support of our donors, partners, and volunteers.

