

The National on Saturday

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Cat and mouse game



Paws for thought: the conservationist Peter Roosenschoon baits a trap in the hope of catching a Gordon's wildcat. Sardines with extra spice appear to be the animals' favourite. Sarah Dea / The National

road to safety

A third of parents still not using child seats

Law requires them for under-ones

Experts urge families to put safety before convenience after survey finds small children are held on laps or allowed to ride in front

Marie-Louise Olson

Parents are getting better at using child safety seats in their cars but more than a third still shun the devices, a survey reveals.

The poll, conducted for Al Aan TV's *Nabd Al Arab* ("Arabs' Pulse") programme by YouGov Siraj, found that 44 per cent of respondents were unaware of the law requiring car seats for children younger than one, while 35 per cent did not use car seats for children of ages one to four.

The latter figure appears to show an improvement in the number of people using child safety seats. In 2008, a study by UAE University found only 2 per cent of parents used them.

Of the 30 per cent who did not use seats for their very young children (under-ones), nearly a third (31 per cent) said it was because they preferred to hold them on their laps.

This behaviour angers many other parents, who fear for the safety of unrestrained children in the event of a crash.

"I see people doing it all the time. They know it's dangerous, but it's one of those situations where they think an accident will never happen to them," said the Emirati mother Khawla Saleh, 30.

About 15 per cent said they did not use car seats because their children "don't like it and struggle" when they try to put them in one.

One in five (19 per cent) said they rarely took their children in the car. Just six per cent said the cost of seats was holding them back.

Dana Shadid, project manager at Al Aan TV, said the resistance could be blamed on laziness. "Putting a child seat in the car and strapping the kids in can be time-consuming," she said. "These figures show that parents seem to be more concerned with what is convenient."

Child seats, continued on a6 →

Bid to save wildcats from amorous cousins

Armed with chillies, volunteers take stock of interbreeding

Colin Simpson

DUBAI // Volunteers at a nature reserve are taking part in a conservation project to save the rare Gordon's wildcat.

The story of this species' plight is not the usual one of overhunting or habitat loss; its nemesis is none other than ... the domestic pussycat.

The wildlife expert Peter Roosenschoon, who launched the project at the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, says the wildcat's survival as a distinct species is threatened by interbreeding with domestic and feral cats.

And he has made an important discovery towards ensuring the feline's survival: nine out of 10 wildcats prefer sardines with chillies.

He tried many different baits for his traps, including cat food, tuna, raw meat and quails' entrails. None worked, however, until he experimented with tinned sardines and chillies and found that cats were turning up regularly in the traps.

"We want to see what the interaction is between feral cats and Gordon's wildcats within the reserve," Mr Roosenschoon said. "That means capturing as many cats - feral or Gordon's - as possible."

Six volunteers are taking part in the first UAE project by Biosphere Expeditions, a UK-based non-profit company that runs conservation holidays around the world.

The trips give members of the public a chance to contribute to serious scientific research, and the manpower they provide makes it possible to collect more data than would otherwise be possible.

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Volunteer effort to save wildcat

→ Wildcats, from page a1

The group consists of visitors from the United States, Australia, France, Germany and Austria who have flown in specially for the expedition, plus the Austrian Evelyn Brey, who lives in the UAE. They are spending a week at the reserve, where 16 cage traps and 14 camera traps have been set up.

Each evening they bait the cages, and the following morning they return to see if anything has been caught overnight.

"With the Biosphere Expeditions team we are looking for the range: how many cats we've got throughout the reserve," Mr Roosenschoon added. "It's a real help having these guys."

The trapped animals are micro-chipped and a tiny piece of tissue is taken from their ears for DNA testing before they are released. The results will be used to determine whether each individual is a pure Gordon's or a hybrid, and any which are found to be the result of interbreeding will be removed from the reserve.

This will open up more territory to

the Gordon's wildcat and enable a pure population to develop. In the future, specimens obtained from captive breeding centres may be introduced and it is hoped that lessons learnt from the project can be applied elsewhere.

The volunteers also weigh and measure the cats, and are working on a second project to evaluate the reserve's Arabian Oryx population.

Ms Brey said: "If I can help in any way, if what we are doing here is actually giving great data that takes these projects forward, then I'm very happy."

The National spent a day with the volunteers, staying overnight at their base camp, and found they were learning the frustrations as well as the satisfactions involved in desert conservation.

The group's fleet of three Land Rovers frequently became trapped in soft sand when venturing off established tracks. What is more, problems with GPS equipment meant the teams could not find some of the traps, which proved to be as elusive as the rarely seen wildcat.

"It wasn't only us inexperienced drivers getting stuck, it was also the staff from the reserve taking us into the dunes," said the expedition leader Malika Fettak, from Germany. "It's unpredictable, if you come to a very soft spot you just sink in and there's nothing you can do."

The long day, which had started at 6am with saucepan lids being struck together as a wake-up call, ended with dinner around the campfire followed by shisha. The volunteers then retired early to their tents, exhausted from digging out all that sand from beneath the cars.

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Above, from left: Evelyn Brey, Yan Nguien and Peter Gosnell watch as Peter Roosenschoon gets to grips with a Gordon's wildcat-feral hybrid.



Left, Malika Fettak, the expedition leader, relaxes with Peter Gosnell, an Australian travel writer. Courtesy Biosphere Expeditions and Sarah Dea / The National

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