

# Scottish wildcats

Naturally Scottish



SCOTTISH WILDCATS

NATURALLY SCOTTISH

SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

# Scottish wildcats

Naturally Scottish





# Scottish Natural Heritage Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland  
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

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**Front cover image:**

Close-up of wildcat.

**Frontispiece:**

Wildcat, Cairngorms National Park.

**Inside front & back covers:**

Close-up of wildcat fur.

# Scottish wildcats

Naturally Scottish

by Kerry Kilshaw





# Foreword

With a reputation of being wild and untameable, the Scottish wildcat is one of our most elusive and fearsome species. Agile and intelligent, the wildcat is representative of our wild lands, where survival depends on 'wit and will'. As a consequence, it is a creature that has long been surrounded in myth and legend. From the evocative pictures presented in this book, it is clear to see why this rare and graceful predator is also known as the 'Highland Tiger'. This book pairs stunning images with the latest studies and information on wildcat ecology to raise awareness of a species less familiar to many people than the tigers of South-east Asia and Siberia, but more endangered.

From the background information on wildcat ecology to a summary of the current approaches in conservation, this book presents the key issues facing our only native cat species. The main message, that hybridization is the key problem that could realistically lead to their extinction from Scotland, is of great concern. It is clear that we need to reduce the level of hybridization with domestic cats and the encroachment of feral cats further into wild cat territories. Responsible pet ownership will play a very important part in the future conservation of the Scottish wildcat.

The Scottish wildcat needs our help. I hope that this book will raise the profile of this iconic animal, highlight the importance of the wildcat as an important element of Scotland's wildlife and generate support for conservation efforts.



**Roseanna Cunningham MSP**  
Minister for Environment



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1

Thick fur enables the wildcat to survive even the coldest winters.







# Introduction

## History of the wildcat

The Scottish wildcat *Felis silvestris grampia* is the only native member of the cat family living in the UK today. It is believed to be a descendant of continental European wildcat ancestors (*Felis silvestris*), that colonized Britain after the last Ice Age (7,000–9,000 years ago).

The earliest fossil remains of the wildcat were found in Berkshire. After the Ice Age, the wildcat was found across mainland Britain and some of the Inner Hebrides including the Isle of Skye and Bute. However, when Britain's forests began to recede as a result of deforestation, the wildcat disappeared from much of its range. By 1800 it was already restricted to northern England, Wales (where it was scarce) and Scotland. By 1850 it had almost disappeared from west central Wales and was just south of the border in Northumberland. By 1880 the wildcat survived only in Scotland, and by 1915 its range had further contracted and was restricted to the north-west of the Scottish Highlands.

The initial decline of the Scottish wildcat occurred partly because of habitat loss, particularly the loss of forests, and partly as a result of being hunted for its fur and being persecuted. In particular, the development of sporting estates in Scotland from the mid -19th century onwards increased the rate of decline because the wildcat was shot as part of the game bird predator control carried out on many estates.

The Scottish wildcat is now found only in northern Scotland.

## Cultural significance and mythology

Culturally, the Scottish wildcat is an icon of Scottish wilderness and has been used in clan heraldry since the 13th century. For example, the title of the Chief of the Clan Sutherland is *Morair Chat* ('Great Man of the Cats'), there is a cat in the clan crest and their motto is '*Sans Pier*' ('without fear'). Historically, Caithness was known as *Caitaibh* or 'land of the cats'. The Clan Chattan Association (known as the 'Clan of Cats') consists of 12 different clans, most of which carry the wildcat in their badges, and their motto is '*Touch not the cat bot (without) a glove*', a warning to anyone threatening the Clan Chattan and its members.

Cats have also played a part in Britain's mythology and it is probable that wildcats were instrumental in this imagery. They are legendarily ferocious hunters with a bold and fiery spirit, and are considered "*of all truly Scottish wildlife...to be the most untameable*" (Thompson, 1978), often "*termed the British tiger*" (Aikman, 1843). One author, Charles St John, stated that "*When caught in a trap, they fly without hesitation at any person who approaches them, not waiting to be assailed. I have heard many stories of their attacking and severely wounding a man, when their escape has been cut off... If a tame cat has 9 lives then a wildcat must have a dozen*".

1

Fossilised wildcat bones found at Loch Borrallie in Caithness.

2

Sign on gate at Newtonmore, depicting the crest of the Clan MacPherson – the Scottish wildcat.

1



2





In Scottish mythology, the Cat Sith is a fairy creature, or sometimes a witch, resembling a large black cat with a white spot on its chest that haunts the Scottish Highlands. The legends surrounding this creature are thought to have been inspired by the Kellas cat, a large black cat that may be a distinctive cross between a wildcat and a domestic cat.

The long history of the wildcat in both Scottish folklore and culture indicates how important the wildcat was to our ancestors. For this reason, and because it is our only native felid and is fighting for its survival, it is important to take steps now to save the wildcat from extinction before we lose this charismatic species forever.



# Definition of a wildcat

The Scottish wildcat is a member of the cat family (known as the Felidae). In general, the Scottish wildcat is larger than the domestic cat, with longer legs, a larger head and, overall, a more muscular or robust appearance. Males can have a total length, including their tail, of 823–981 millimetres and weigh 3.77–7.26 kilograms. Females are smaller, reaching 730–895 millimetres in length and weighing 2.35–4.68 kilograms. The wildcat looks like a striped tabby, with its greyish brown to yellowish brown fur and dark brownish black stripes.

In the past, it has often been very difficult to distinguish between the Scottish wildcat and the domestic tabby cat. This is because the two have extensively interbred to produce hybrid offspring. These hybrids live in the wild and have a mixture of both wildcat and domestic cat genes. Although hybrids may resemble wildcats, there are some specific differences, notably that the stripes on the rump of hybrids tend to break down into spots and the tail tends to be more tapered. The dorsal stripe, one of the most prominent features of a wildcat, also tends to run onto the tail in hybrids rather than stopping at the base of the tail as it does in the wildcat. Identification can be especially difficult in the wild, when a sighting might be little more than a brief glimpse of an individual cat disappearing from view.

The Scottish wildcat has excellent hearing and is capable of independent rotation of each ear through 180 degrees.

1

Its distinctive markings have earned it the name 'the Highland tiger'.











3

2  
Heather moorland is an ideal  
habitat for wildlife.

3  
The Scottish wildcat is adapted to  
survive even in the coldest winter.







## Distinguishing features

There has been much debate over the features that make a Scottish wildcat different from a domestic cat or wildcat/domestic hybrid. Over the past 15–20 years, a great deal of research has been carried out on the Scottish wildcat to try to determine which features could be used to separate the wildcat from the domestic tabby. Studies conducted largely on dead cats have shown that wildcats are typically larger in size, with a shorter intestinal length, longer limb bones and a more robust skull than domestic cats. The Scottish wildcat has also been shown to be genetically different from the domestic cat.

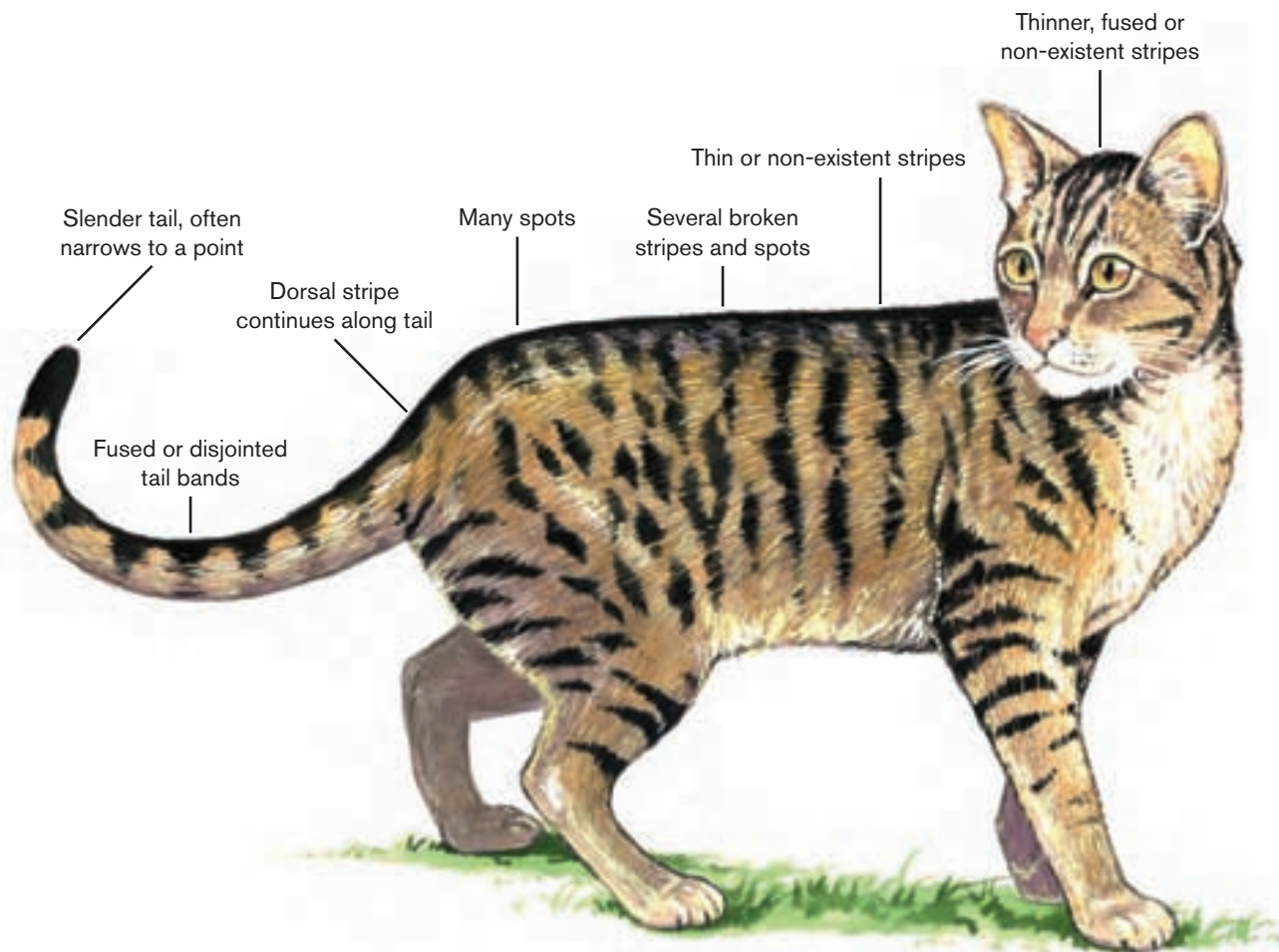
More recently, seven key pelage markings have been identified that suggest consistent differences in appearance between wildcats and domestic tabbies. These provide a useful way to distinguish the species in the wild.

Hybrids vary in appearance and some may be more similar to wildcats than others. They are generally larger than domestic cats but with a tabby coat that can be confused with wildcats. Domestic tabby cats and hybrids can have patches of white in their coat, such as white paws or white patches on their back or sides, but the Scottish wildcat has no such markings.

4

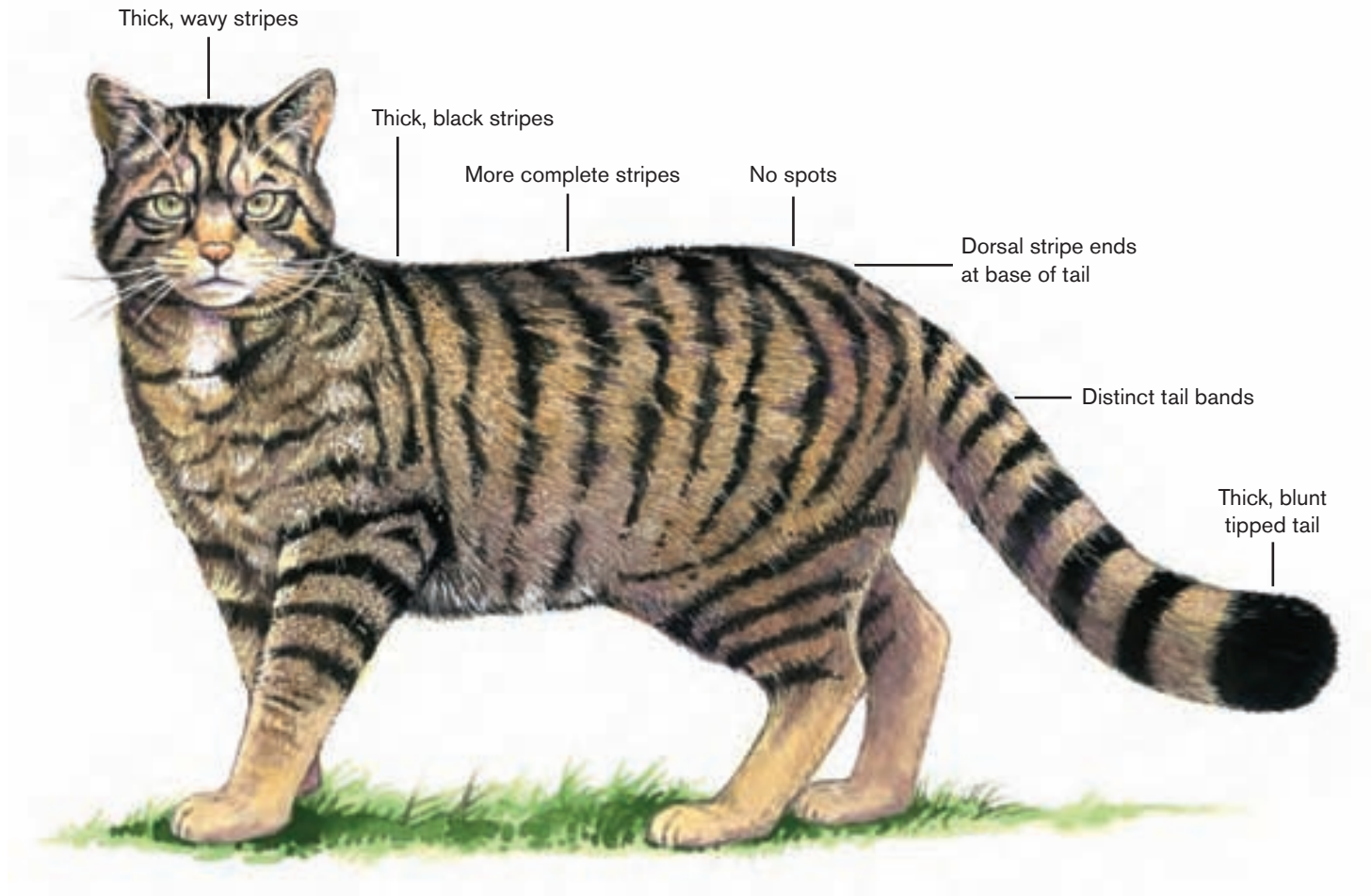
Wildcat climbing a fallen tree  
in a pine forest, Cairngorms  
National Park.

## Domestic cat





## Scottish wildcat





# Habitat preferences and current distribution

## Habitat

Wildcats live in habitats that satisfy two main requirements: shelter and food. Woodlands and areas of dense gorse or juniper thickets provide shelter and resting places. Young forestry plantations in particular are an important habitat for wildcats because they are protected from grazing and support a high density of small mammal prey. Rocky areas also provide den shelters for female wildcats during the breeding season.

Wildcats require open patches of habitat, such as pastures or riparian areas, for hunting. However, when moving around their territories, they prefer to avoid open areas, using woodland or scrub and stream edges for cover. Heavy snow makes it difficult for wildcats to move around or catch prey, and if there is deep snow on the ground for long periods, wildcats will move to forested areas or lower altitudes, where there is typically less snow cover.



1  
Ancient pine woodland with lush understorey of heather and blaeberry, Rothiemurchus Forest, Cairngorms National Park.

2  
Wildcats favour forested areas for shelter especially during periods of adverse weather.

3  
Female wildcats give birth to their kittens in dens where they remain for about the first five weeks.

4  
Open moorland is a favourite habitat for hunting.

2



3



4





The Scottish wildcat will venture to an altitude of around 800 metres but it is not generally found higher than 650 metres. It avoids heavily urbanized areas, areas of intense agriculture and exposed coasts.

The habitat used by the Scottish wildcat differs regionally. In the east of Scotland, wildcats prefer the margins of moorlands, pasturelands and woodlands, whereas in the west they prefer uplands with rough grazing and moorlands with limited pastures. These differences are due to the type of prey and cover available in these areas. For example, low rabbit densities in the west of Scotland mean that the wildcat needs to hunt voles and mice that are found in greater concentrations in areas of rough pasture, scrub and woodland edges.

5  
Ancient pine forest, Glenfeshie,  
Cairngorms National Park.

6  
Flood plain of the River Dee,  
looking west.

5







## Current distribution

In the early to mid 1900s, the wildcat had started to recolonize some of its former range. This was helped by woodland replanting following the First World War, thus increasing the amount of cover available for the wildcats. By the 1980s, the wildcat had strongholds in areas of Scotland including the Cairngorms, the Black Isle, Aberdeenshire and Ardnamurchan.

The most recent survey carried out in 2009 collected more recordings of sightings from the east of Scotland than the west.

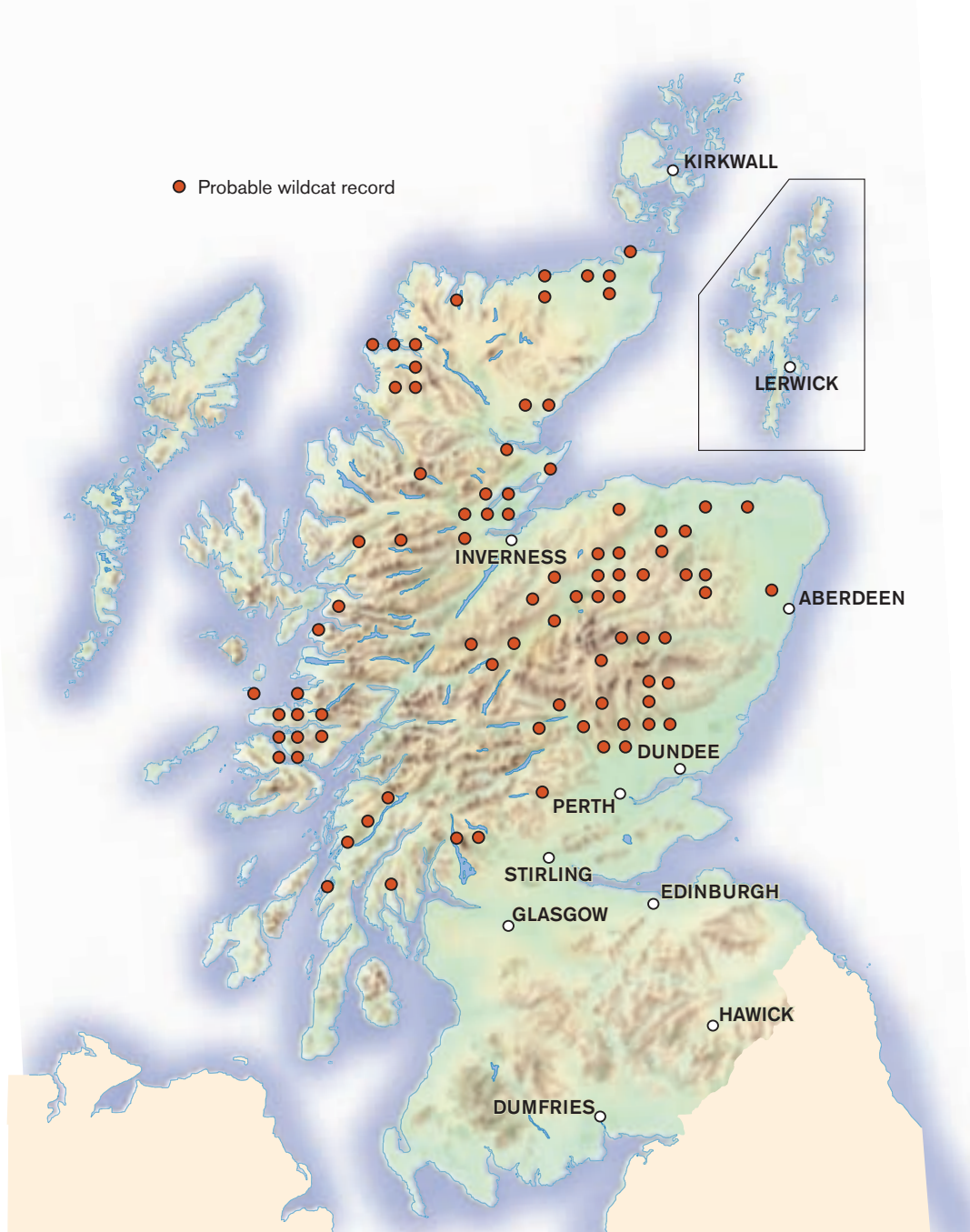
7

Clais, Ardnamurchan is typical wildcat country on the west coast of Scotland.

7



## Records of probable wildcat sightings from 2006–2008 survey



# Diet and hunting behaviour

Wildcats are carnivores. They have forward-facing eyes that give them the binocular vision and depth perception needed for hunting, and retractable claws, sharp teeth and strong jaw muscles to kill their prey. They also have excellent night vision and hearing for detecting small rodents. Like other members of the cat family, they have very sensitive whiskers that enable them to detect changes in air movement around them and help them to hunt at night.

The preferred prey of the Scottish wildcat is the European rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* but they also eat small mammals, mainly voles *Microtus* spp. and wood mice *Apodemus sylvaticus*. Rabbits can form up to 70% of the wildcat's diet in eastern Scotland where the prey densities are high. Small mammals form the majority of their diet (c.47%) in other areas, where there are fewer rabbits. The Scottish wildcat will also take birds, reptiles and invertebrates where these are easily available.

1

The wildcat is a stealthy hunter typically killing its prey with a single bite.

1





Examples of a wildcat's prey includes:

2

Water vole.

3

Wood mouse.

4

Rabbit.

4

2



3









Like most cat species, the Scottish wildcat relies on stealth to catch its prey, waiting patiently outside a rabbit hole until it can ambush a passing rabbit, or walking slowly in the grass or woodlands listening for the rustling sound of a small rodent. Prey are killed instantly by a swift bite to the neck and are either eaten on the spot or are half eaten and the remains buried or hidden for later. Wildcats need to hunt for 7 to 9 hours a day in order to catch enough food to survive.

5

A wildcat with its captured prey.





# Breeding behaviour



Wildcats often create dens in rock cairns, large logging piles and among tree roots. They also use empty rabbit warrens, fox dens and badger setts where these are available. Females are potentially fertile from December until August but the main mating season is in late winter (January to March). Females come into oestrus for only two to eight days and produce one litter a year in the spring (April to May). In some cases, a second litter may be born later in the year if, for example, the first litter dies young.

The gestation period for wildcats is 63–68 days. They can give birth to between one and eight kittens, although the average is three or four per litter. Kittens are born blind and their eyes open after 10–13 days. These appear blue until the kittens reach about seven weeks old when they begin to change to the yellow colour of an adult. Wildcat kittens begin to walk at 16–20 days and emerge from the den to play when they are four or five weeks old. They begin to hunt with their mother when they are 10–12 weeks old and are normally fully weaned by 10–14 weeks old.

Wildcats reach independence between the age of 5 and 6 months when they start to move around looking for potential territories. Males reach sexual maturity around 9 or 10 months old, whilst females are a little older at around 12 months. Male kittens typically leave the mother's territory where they were born and disperse before their first winter, sometimes moving up to 55 kilometres before settling down. Female kittens can stay within their natal territory during the first winter before dispersing.

Wildcats have been known to live up to the age of 15–16 years in captivity. Studies in Scotland have shown that only 7% of wildcats live longer than six years in the wild, with females living up to a maximum of 10 years and males up to eight years. Young wildcats have a very high risk of mortality within the first few weeks of leaving their natal territory, with many succumbing to road accidents or predation by other species such as foxes and eagles.

2

1

Young wildcat kittens have blue eyes but these change to yellow at around seven weeks of age.

2

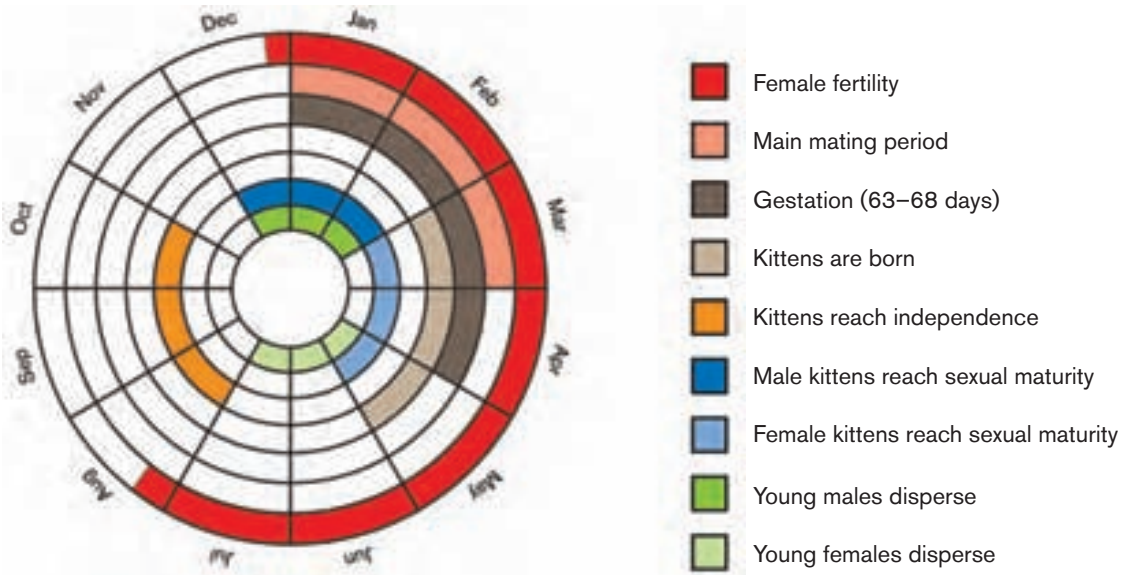
In the early weeks of life, the bond between mother and kitten is strong. They learn to catch prey by accompanying their mother on hunting trips.



# Wildcat annual life cycle

3

Initially after kittens have started to walk, they do not venture far from the safety of the den.







The Scottish wildcat epitomises the independent and wild spirit of the Scottish Highlands.



4

Ancient tree roots can provide a suitable den.





# Social behaviour and organization

Wildcats are generally solitary, living alone for most of the year except during mating or when females are raising their young. They have a dispersed social system, where the home range of one male overlaps with one or more female home ranges. In areas where a lot of food is available, the home ranges overlap to a greater extent than in areas where food is less abundant.

Wildcats use scent to mark out their territories. Scent-marked faeces (scats) are deposited in prominent places, such as on rocks or in the middle of paths. Urine is sprayed on trees or bushes. They also scratch and rub their cheeks against trees and other objects to spread their unique scent around their territory to communicate with other wildcats.

The size of an individual's territory or home range is related to the amount of prey available. For example, in areas where rabbits are plentiful, such as in parts of the Cairngorms National Park, the home range is between 0.3 and 6 kilometres square. In areas where rabbits are scarce and they rely on small rodents, wildcats have to cover a larger area in order to find enough food to eat. In these areas, such as on the west coast of Scotland, their territories can range in size from 8 to 18 kilometres square.

The Scottish wildcat is generally considered to be nocturnal or crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk). They are more nocturnal in areas where there are greater numbers of people around, for example on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. They may be active 24 hours a day in winter; however, in particularly bad weather they will avoid leaving their shelters for up to 24 hours.

1

Wildcats are territorial and guard the boundaries of their territories jealously.













The wildcat is a strong climber but if it falls it is able to land on its feet and walk away unscathed.

2

Wildcats are accomplished climbers.







# Threats

There are several threats to the Scottish wildcat population, some of which are related to human behaviour and can be addressed.

## Hybridization

The greatest problem facing the Scottish wildcat is hybridization with feral or domestic cats. Hybridization occurs when two species mate and produce offspring that get half their genes from one parent and half from the other. It is not known how long hybridization has been occurring between feral/domestic cats and wildcats in Britain but it may have begun when the Romans brought pet cats into the country, about 2,000 years ago.

Hybridization is thought to be a bigger problem in areas where there are high population densities of domestic and feral cats, such as villages and towns on the edges of wildcat areas. Hybridization may also increase where there is not enough suitable habitat, or where prey densities are reduced. Under these circumstances, wildcats may have to cover a larger area in order to find enough food and as a consequence are more likely to come into contact with feral or domestic cats. In 2001, there were estimated to be 6 million domestic cats in the UK, of which 20% were feral cats. At least 16% of these feral cats are in Scotland (about 192,000 cats), and this number is likely to increase.

Hybridization has led to problems distinguishing Scottish wildcats from hybrids and domestic tabby cats. In addition to the problems this posed in assessing their distribution and abundance, it also made legal protection difficult to implement as the Scottish wildcat is protected under law whereas the hybrids are not. If left unchecked, hybridization could eventually lead to a situation where there are no pure wildcats remaining (genetic extinction).



2

- 1  
Domestic tabby cat.
- 2  
Hybrid wildcat.





## Disease

Contact with feral and domestic cats exposes the Scottish wildcat to novel diseases. Although these can be benign or treatable in feral or domestic cats, they can be fatal to the Scottish wildcat, which has no natural immunity against them. Notable problems arise from common feline diseases such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline calicivirus (FCV). Both FeLV and FCV can lead to pneumonia or 'cat flu'. FeLV is easily transmitted via infected body fluids between young cats, as a result of fighting or mating, and can lead to the development of many severe illnesses such as anaemia and cancer, and is almost always fatal. Feral/domestic cats also carry a number of endoparasitic diseases including *Toxoplasma gondii*, which causes toxoplasmosis and results in lethargy, poor coordination, blindness and sometimes death. Toxoplasmosis has been found in the Scottish wildcat population.

## Habitat loss and fragmentation

Changes have arisen in the Scottish landscape over the last century as a result of a growing human population as well as increased agricultural and industrial pressure. Scotland was once extensively forested but a programme of deforestation in the early 20th century led to extensive losses. The woodland that remains is quite fragmented, making it difficult for the wildcat to find areas of forest big enough to survive in.

Habitat loss and fragmentation isolates individuals or small populations from one another. This makes it difficult for wildcats to find a mate, which may, in turn, increase interactions with feral or domestic cats in areas where these species co-exist. Isolation can also increase exposure of wildcats to roads, with a likely increase in accident-related deaths, whilst the loss of habitat leads to a reduction in the amount of prey available to the Scottish wildcat. As well as deforestation, heavy grazing by deer, sheep and cattle can also have an impact on the vegetation that encourages the wildcat's prey species.

3

Remnants of ancient pine forest,  
Rothiemurchus, Cairngorms  
National Park.



## Mortality

Before the Scottish wildcat received legal protection in 1988, approximately 92% of wildcat deaths were attributable to hunting. Data from the Game Conservancy's National Game Bag Census for 1984–85 recorded the death of 274 wildcats on 40 shooting estates in central, eastern and north-eastern Scotland. This represents an annual mortality of nearly 10% of the estimated wildcat population, although it is not known what percentage of these, if any, were hybrids. Increased mortality in low density, isolated populations is a particular problem because it could lead to localized extinction.

Wildcats are also at risk on our roads where they may be casualties of road traffic accidents, particularly near areas where there are many people or on popular tourist routes.

4

The Scottish wildcat is able to merge into the landscape.

5

Tracks left in deep snow may be one of the few signs that there are wildcats about.



4



# What you can do to help

If you live in an area with Scottish wildcats, there are a few key actions you can take to help their conservation. An easy action is to use a reflective collar on your cat to help local gamekeepers identify your pet more easily. However, there are a few other actions you can take too.

## Neutering

Hybridization is the greatest threat to the Scottish wildcat. It is important to try and reduce or prevent this and one way to do this is to ensure local pet and feral cats are neutered. This not only prevents domestic cats from being able to breed with a wildcat but also reduces the number of feral cats moving into the countryside. As feral cats can have an impact on many of our wild animals, reducing their numbers can be beneficial in many ways.

1



1

Inspecting a camera trap at Glen Tanar Estate, Aberdeenshire.

2

Domestic cat at Greystone Farm, Glen Tanar, Aberdeenshire.

3

Photograph of a Scottish wildcat taken using an infra red camera trap.



2



Some organizations, such as Cats Protection and local vet practices, carry out a process called Trap–Neuter–Return (TNR). This involves trapping feral cats, neutering them at a local veterinary surgery and returning them to the wild. Kittens and tame cats can be adopted into good homes. Over time, the feral cat population will be unable to breed and the numbers will reduce. It also helps to prevent them from breeding with the Scottish wildcat, thus further reducing the threat of hybridization.

If you see any cats that look like strays, know of any areas where there are lots of feral cats or live on a property that is regularly visited by feral cats, you can help by alerting the local Cats Protection branch or veterinary surgery. Volunteers are always welcome to help with trapping feral cats, feral cat kitten re-homing or generally supporting the work of these organizations.

3



## Vaccination

Many of the diseases carried by the domestic cat can be fatal in the wildcat because they have no natural immunity to them and can not be treated. Inoculating your cat can help to reduce the spread of potentially fatal diseases. More information on these issues can be obtained from your vet, Cats Protection or the SSPCA.

## Report wildcat sightings

The more information we have about where the Scottish wildcat is, and its behaviour, the more we can do to help conserve them. If you see a wildcat you can report this online at [www.highlandtiger.com](http://www.highlandtiger.com) or to your local SNH office ([www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk)).

Useful information that you could provide is:

- Location of the sightings.
- What it was doing.
- The date and time of day it was seen.
- The type of habitat in which it was seen.
- Ideally a photograph!

## Reducing the number of road casualties

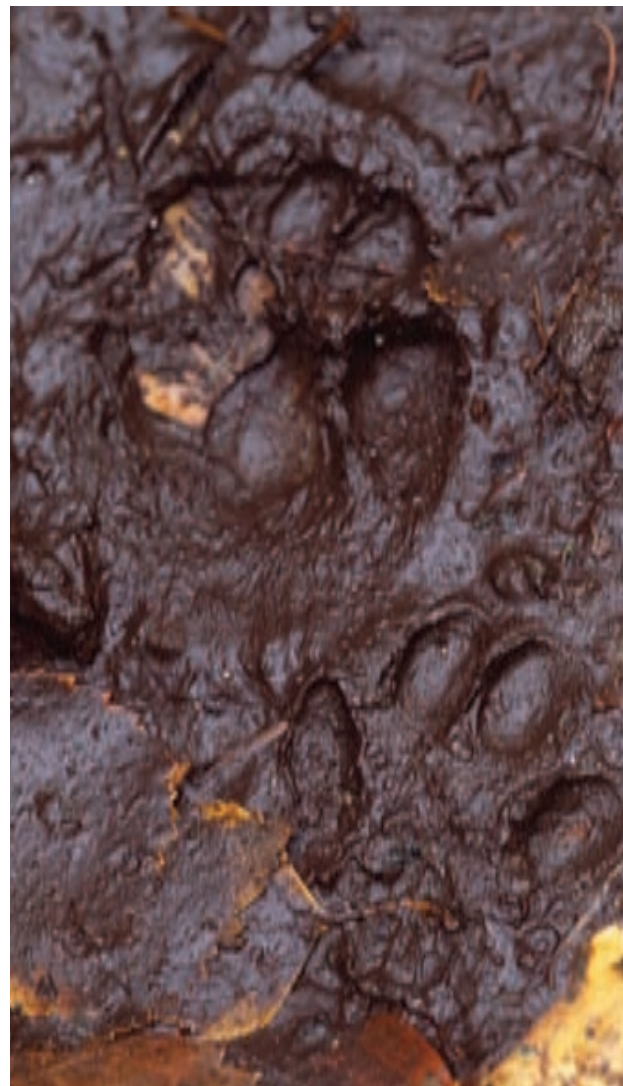
Sadly, one of the most common places to see wildlife in Scotland is when it is lying dead at the side of the road. Wildlife in general is particularly vulnerable to road accidents during the winter months when it is darker and more difficult for drivers to see animals crossing the roads.

If you do see a wildcat lying at the side of the road, please contact your local SNH office with details of the location. Carcasses can provide us with a lot of useful information and location details are always welcome.

## Report any illegal activities

The Scottish wildcat is protected by law. However, if you see anything suspicious, or anything you think could harm a wildcat, please contact your local SNH office or wildlife crime officer.

4



4

Wildcat paw prints in mud.

5

Wildcats are always alert and watchful for any signs of danger.











## Wildcats and the Law

This section is intended only as a guide to the law. For further information, please refer to complete copies of the relevant legislation.

Internationally, the Scottish wildcat is classified as 'Vulnerable', meaning that it is at risk of extinction unless action is taken to conserve it. It is a European Protected Species (EPS) and receives protection through inclusion on Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994 that transposes the EU Habitats Directive into UK law. It was formerly listed on Schedule 5 for protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, but was removed from this domestic legislation through an amendment to the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) Regulations in Scotland in 2007.

The following provides a brief summary of the provisions of this legislation, under which it is an offence to:

- deliberately or recklessly capture, kill or injure a wildcat;
- deliberately or recklessly harass a wildcat;
- disturb a wildcat in a structure or place it uses for shelter or protection;
- disturb a wildcat whilst rearing or caring for its young;
- obstruct access to a wildcat's breeding site or resting place or deny its use of such a place;
- damage or destroy breeding sites or resting places of a wildcat;
- disturb a wildcat in such a manner that is, or in circumstances which are, likely to significantly affect the local distribution or abundance of the species; or
- impair a wildcat's ability to survive, breed or reproduce, or rear or otherwise care for its young.

1

The Scottish wildcat is classified as vulnerable and effort is required to help conserve it for the future.









The Scottish wildcat was added to the Scottish Biodiversity List in 2005 as a species of principal importance for biodiversity conservation. In 2007, the Scottish wildcat was also added to the revised UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) list of Priority Species for priority for conservation action at a UK level. It is on the SNH Species Action Framework as a species for conservation action, which includes steps taken to clarify their distribution and reduce the threat of hybridization with feral/ domestic cats.

The Scottish wildcat is also listed on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) through which trade is carefully controlled and may require a permit in order to protect the survival of these species.

2

Centuries of woodland clearance and more recently persecution, have pushed the wildcat to it's current, precarious position.

## Names

Scottish names for the wildcat are 'will cat' (two words) or 'wullcat' (one word).  
The gaelic for wildcat is 'cat fiadhaich'.

3





# Finding out more

## Further reading

A natural history of beasts, birds, & fishes, or, Stories of animated nature. Aikman, J. (1843) Edinburgh: Nelson.

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## Useful websites

Scottish Natural Heritage species page  
[www.snh.gov.uk/about-scotlands-nature/species/](http://www.snh.gov.uk/about-scotlands-nature/species/)

Highland Tiger Project website  
[www.highlandtiger.com](http://www.highlandtiger.com)

Scottish Wildcat Association  
[www.scottishwildcats.co.uk](http://www.scottishwildcats.co.uk)

Mammal Society  
[www.mammal.org.uk](http://www.mammal.org.uk)



# Scottish wildcats

## Naturally Scottish

### About the author

Kerry Kilshaw works for the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, part of the Zoology Department at the University of Oxford. She has carried out research on small carnivores for almost ten years and has been focusing her research on the Scottish wildcat for the past three years.



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