

Status

The Scottish wildcat is a subspecies of the European wildcat, and is unique to Britain. Once ranging across the mainland, it now faces extinction. It has become confined to the remotest part of our island, the highland moors of Scotland, and numbers continue to decline. The Scottish wildcat may soon be lost forever.

Like many British predators, the Scottish wildcat has suffered from human persecution. During the 19th Century huge numbers were trapped to protect game and livestock. It has also been affected by habitat destruction and, as an inevitable result of this, population fragmentation.

Perhaps the most serious threat facing the wildcat originates from the domestic cat. There are 100,000 feral domestic cats in Scotland and these cats cause two problems for wildcats.

- They can carry diseases which can be passed to wildcats.
- They breed with wildcats, producing hybrids and diluting the purity of the population.

It is very difficult to tell if a wildcat is pure or a hybrid. There are thought to be around 3,500 wildcats left, with only 400 of them pure, but it is impossible to be sure. Some scientists believe that there are no pure wildcats left in the wild. Techniques are being developed that use a blood test to determine the purity of wildcats. Of 50 captive wildcats that have been tested so far, all have been found to be hybridised to some degree.

Solving this threat may seem to be impossible, but is actually very achievable. Charity groups are working to re-home feral cats within the wildcat's range. If domestic cats cannot breed or pass on infections they pose no threat. Cat owners are being encouraged, and in some cases subsidised, to get their cats neutered and inoculated.

In the long term, there are hopes for a carefully monitored re-introduction program using captive bred wildcats from wildlife parks and private collections across the UK.

What is Wildwood doing?

Wildwood has one breeding pair of wildcats, Hamish and Flora. This pair has produced several kittens, and will be retired to a comfortable off-display enclosure next year due to old age. In 2007 a male kitten, 'McCavity' was born, who we hope to pair with an unrelated female to create a new breeding pair. This year (2008) a female kitten, 'Carna' was born.

Wildwood has sent blood samples from Hamish and Flora to Scotland to be tested. This will determine whether our cats are hybrids, and to what degree, and will establish whether they can be part of the official captive breeding

program. This is a frustratingly slow process, but we expect to have the results by the end of 2008.