

# Species Factsheet: Scottish Wildcat (*Felis sylvestris*)



info@themammalsociety.org  
www.mammal.org.uk  
023 8023 7874

## Quick Facts

**Recognition:** Similar to domestic tabby cat but larger, more robust. Fewer, darker body stripes, with no white patches. Thicker, bushier tail with distinctive stripes and blunt black tip.

**Size:** Average 56cm head & body length, tail 29cm.

**Weight:** Kittens 100-160g at birth. Adult males 5kg, females 4kg.

**Life Span:** Average 10-12 years in the wild.



## Distribution & Habitat

Wildcats are confined to Scotland, north of Glasgow and Edinburgh, being absent from all of the Scottish Islands. They prefer areas with varied habitats on the edge of moor and, with pasture, scrub and forests. High mountains, where prey is scarce, and intensively farmed lowland regions are avoided. In winter, bad weather drives wildcats into more sheltered wooded valleys.

## General Ecology

### Behaviour

Wildcats are active at night, mainly around dawn and dusk. During the day, and in periods of heavy rain and snow, wildcats lie up in dens located amongst boulders and rocky cairns, or in old fox earths, badgers sets, peat hags, or tree roots.

Wildcats are solitary and territorial, living at a low population density; there may be one cat to 3km<sup>2</sup> in good habitats but only one cat in 10km<sup>2</sup> in less favourable areas. Urine sprayed on boulders and tree trunks and droppings deposited in prominent places marks territories.

### Diet and Feeding

Rabbits, hares and small mammals are their principal prey, but quite large birds and animals freshly killed on the roads may also be taken.

### Reproduction

Mating generally takes place in February with litters of 2-6 kittens being born in May, though litters may be born up until August. Wildcats produce only one litter a year. Kittens are weaned at 12 weeks and stay with their mother until about five months old. Wildcats can successfully hybridise with the domestic cat, which threatens the genetic purity of the species.

## Conservation status

Wildcats used to be found throughout mainland Britain but due to persecution and woodland clearance, populations have declined. Wildcats almost became extinct in Britain in the early years of the 20th century, but declines were reversed. However, this recovery now seems to have slowed down. The urbanised habitat seems to be a barrier to further dispersal. The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981 and 1988) now gives strict legal protection to wildcats and their dens.

Although increasing afforestation helps the spread of wildcats, mature forest plantations become less suitable for the small mammals on which wildcats prey. Forestry management to encourage wildcats should therefore aim to diversify the age of plantations.