



Encyclopedia of Life

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Scottish Wildcat Podcast and Scientist Interview

Felis sylvestris grampia

Scottish Wildcats or *Felis sylvestris grampia* have been around since the last ice age. A symbol of strength and independence, the cats used to roam the whole of Great Britain, but researchers believe there are now fewer than 400 left in the rugged highlands. We journey to Highland Wildlife Park in Scotland to learn about the threats that have this secretive species on the run and what the Cairngorms Wildcat Project is doing to help protect them.

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is: One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Ari: Listen closely...It SOUNDS like a housecat. And when you look up and SEE it crouched above you on a catwalk here at Scotland's Highland Wildlife Park, you'd be forgiven for thinking it IS a housecat. Just an especially fluffy and cautious one. So what's it doing at a wildlife park in the middle of Scotland?

Richardson: You really need to look at them a bit closer.

Ari: Because when you do, says the park's animal collection manager Douglas Richardson – you'll see a few telling differences.

Richardson: That strong black banding on the tail. The blunt end as opposed to a tapering tip on the tail. When a domestic cat gets annoyed and its tail fluffs out, Scottish wildcat – their tails are permanently like that. So that is the real giveaway.

Ari: The giveaway that you're looking at a Scottish WILD cat, or *Felis sylvestris grampia*... an ancient resident of Great Britain that was here since the last ice age long before the domestic housecat, and even humans. I came here to see the wildcat because, well, they're actually hard to find in the wild. The cats used to roam the whole of Great Britain, but researchers believe there are now fewer than 400 left.

Hetherington: We've had wildcats in Britain for about 9000 years. But of course, the wildcat in the last few hundred years has faced quite a number of challenges.

Ari: David Hetherington is the manager of the Cairngorms Wildcat Project.

Hetherington: There's been a great deal of deforestation historically. Then there was very intense persecution so that actually by 1860, the wildcat existed only in the Scottish Highlands, and of course that's the most wild, and most remote, most thinly populated part of Britain.

Ari: The Highland Wildlife Park sits on the edge of Scotland's huge Cairngorms National Park. The park and the surrounding landscape are filled with gently flowing streams and deep stands of pine. The rugged hills and woods of this region are one of the only places where the wildcats still roam free. But even researchers like Hetherington have trouble finding them.

Hetherington: Here's hoping that we do actually get some wildcat photographs.

Ari: Hetherington uses camouflaged cameras to try to take photos of wildcats.

He opens one of them and clicks through the images.

Hetherington: Yeah, there's a soay sheep. Another soay sheep.

Ari: The cameras are motion-activated, so other creatures often end up in the frame.

Hetherington: There's a roe deer and what appears to be a badger. So yet again, the Scottish wildcat eludes us today.

Ari: But the wildcat does occasionally pose for a cameo.

Hetherington: We've certainly had it confirmed that we do have pure wildcats in the national park.

Ari: But there's a problem. Turns out there are other cats here as well. Not Scottish wild cats... but domestic cats that have gone wild...in Scotland.

Hetherington: We also can tell from the photographs that we've got hybrids.

Ari: You see, Scottish wildcats and domesticated cats are closely enough related that sometimes even THEY can't tell the difference. They can interbreed. And that's the biggest threat to the Scottish wildcats today.

Hetherington: Over time, what you see is fewer and fewer pure wildcats, and more and more hybrids, which are of course less well adapted to the environment. There may well be other issues – for example, there's the risk of disease transmission from feral cats.

Ari: Hetherington's trying to get the local population of feral cats under control. He's also pushing for stronger legal protection of the true wild cats. It's the only wild feline left in Great Britain. Even the lynx has gone extinct here. So for Hetherington, it's also about trying to change cultural attitudes. He and his colleagues have begun a public relations, or PR campaign to rebrand the Scottish wildcat as the Highland tiger.

Hetherington: It's very much an animal of the Highlands. It's one of us. It's a tough animal living in a tough landscape, just like these Highlanders themselves. It's not like some big southern pussycat that you might get elsewhere in the UK.

Ari: It's a message on signs throughout the Highland Wildlife Park, which – like any good zoo these days – also serves as a captive breeding center. Today, the furry wildcats here have drawn the attention of a group of schoolchildren in bright jackets.

Kid 1: It's really hard to find a real wildcat just, like, hanging around in the forest and all that. And it's really easy to see them in like a zoo.

Kid 2: I really like the wildcat. Well, cats are kind of like my favorite animal. And I like the wild, so putting them both together is just my favorite.

Ari: It's that uncanny combination of wild yet familiar that helps people here relate to the Scottish wild cat, and that supporters of all ages hope might just help preserve them in the end.

Ari: Who wants there to be more wildcats in the wild and not just in captivity?

Kids: Me, me, me, me...

Ari: Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. For the Encyclopedia of Life, I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Meet the Scientist

Meet David Hetherington, who you heard in the Scottish Wildcat podcast:



Where do you work?

Cairngorms Wildcat Project, based at the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Scotland.

What do you study?

Working with others to understand more about the conservation status and ecology of the Scottish wildcat, and develop ways in which the public can help tackle the threats the species faces.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

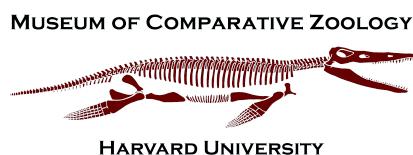
restoration ecologist, dreamer, Scotsman.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

Walk around the Scottish Highlands and dream up of ways of restoring its ecosystems. I enjoy watching films and also take very seriously my role as a taster and consumer of friends' cooking.

What do you like most about science?

Plugging the gaps in our understanding, communicating discoveries to the world, whipping up public enthusiasm for the natural world, and changing perspectives along the way.



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