


wildcat wrap-up

June 2024
-
June 2025



**Saving
Wildcats**
#SWAforLIFE



A photograph of a wildcat walking away from the camera through a sun-dappled forest. The wildcat has a dark, striped tail and is sniffing the ground. The forest floor is covered in green grass and moss, with several tree trunks visible in the background.

One of the released wildcats recorded by the extensive network of trail cameras in the release site

Overview

In June 2024, **the team took time to reflect on the year following the first releases** of 19 wildcats into the Cairngorms National Park. Shortly after that wrap-up was shared, **a further nine wildcats were released into the Cairngorms Connect landscape**. Not only this, but following the exciting discovery of **the first ever kittens born to two released wildcat females** in May, a further seven litters were born throughout the summer, which brought the known total to 24 kittens across nine litters.

And that wasn't all. The Saving Wildcats partnership went on to have yet **another successful breeding year at the conservation breeding for release centre** (CBRC), based at the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland's **Highland Wildlife Park**, and **Saving Wildcats' animal team were awarded a gold BIAZA award** for their

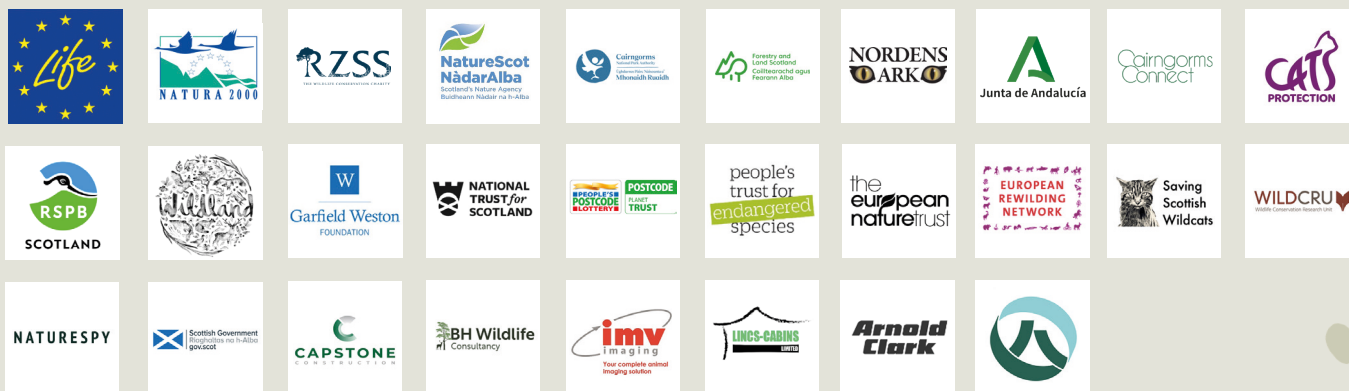
care of captive wildcats. Other activities include the field team adapting to **tracking the released wildcats that were no longer wearing GPS-radio collars**, which can be challenging over such a vast and complex landscape, and **working closely with land managers** with wildcats on their land.

The project was also the focus of **a two-part documentary, filmed and produced by BBC ALBA**, which aired in January. In the same week, the team's expertise was called upon to **assist with the safe, humane capture of four lynx**, which were illegally released into the project area.

None of this work would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the project's volunteers, or the support of Saving Wildcats' partners, the local community, **supporters, donors, and sponsors**.

Saving Wildcats is incredibly grateful to all those that support wildcat conservation in Scotland.

This includes the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), Norden's Ark and Consejería de Sostenibilidad, Medio Ambiente y Economía Azul de la Junta de Andalucía. Releases are being conducted with the support of Cairngorms Connect, and Cats Protection has partnered with the project to promote responsible cat ownership. The project is funded with the contribution of the LIFE Programme of the European Union and the generous support of the Scottish Government, the Garfield Weston Foundation, the National Trust for Scotland, the People's Trust for Endangered Species, The European Nature Trust, players of People's Postcode Lottery, Rewilding Europe's European Wildlife Comeback Fund, Tilgate Nature Centre, Rotary Club of Spey Valley and CT Construction.



Additional thanks

Saving Wildcats' Advisors - Andrew Kitchener, Axel Moehrensclager, Christine Breitenmoser, Urs Breitenmoser, Stuart Brooks, Darragh Hare, Matt Wilson, Kerry Kilshaw (WildCRU), Roo Campbell (NatureScot) and Jenny Macpherson (Vincent Wildlife Trust), Guillermo Lopez Zamora (Junta de Andalucía), Emma Nygren (Nordens Ark), Alex Sliwa (EAZA Felid TAG Chair and Cologne Zoo), Antonio Rivas Salavador (Centro de Cría de Lince Ibérico 'El Acebuche'), Rodrigo Serra (Centro Nacional de Reprodução de Lince Ibérico), Marianne Hartmann (EAZA Felid TAG Advisor), María Díez León (Royal Veterinary College London) and Tiit Maran

Saving Wildcats is proud to work locally with Strathspey Veterinary Centre, and is very grateful for the invaluable support of the local community and landowners.



Fieldwork and wildcat life in the wild



28

wildcats released into the wild
in 2023 and 2024



24

known kittens born in the wild
to released females in 2024



132

feral domestic cats neutered in collaboration
with Cats Protection since start of the project



2,500,000

camera trap images analysed to date

2024 was another significant year for wildcat restoration efforts in Scotland. With the release of nine young wildcats throughout the summer, a total of 28 wildcats have been released into the Cairngorms National Park to date. Sadly, two individuals died shortly after release. It is our responsibility to learn from these losses, as they can further inform this approach to wildcat restoration and help build on our understanding of wildcat ecology. This includes furthering knowledge on hunting behaviours and diet, so the team produced [a blog on what the released wildcats have been eating](#).

The overall survival rate of the released wildcats has been much higher than anticipated, and more encouraging still, wild births have further increased wildcat numbers in the project area.

After almost 12 months of intensive monitoring, using the GPS-radio collars and a network of nearly 100 camera traps, [the very first kittens born to a released wildcat female were captured on camera in the spring of 2024](#). Four feisty wee felines trotted across the screen after their mother. Following that incredible milestone, eight more litters were born throughout the summer.



The first known litter born to a released wildcat in the Cairngorms National Park

Inka, a female born in the wild to a released wildcat in 2024, returning to the project area as a young adult



Monitoring the uncollared kittens was challenging, particularly given the juveniles dispersed away from their mothers as young as four months of age. While many were difficult to track, some continued to appear on the trail cameras. Even **those that were thought to have moved out of the project area have started returning**, including Inka, one of the four young wildcats from the first recorded litter. Inka was pictured earlier this year returning to her birthplace of Balavil estate. The team are grateful for the ongoing collaboration with local estates to monitor the wildcats on their land.

While it is difficult to determine paternity without genetic testing, **the GPS-collar accelerometer data** was able to identify which male wildcat “crossed paths” with the females. Samples were obtained from some of the kittens across multiple litters for analysis.

Although there is still a high risk of interbreeding (hybridisation) and disease transfer from domestic cats, Saving Wildcats continues to manage those

threats in collaboration with **Cats Protection** and **Strathspey Vets**.

The project is running a trap, neuter, vaccinate, return programme for any feral domestic cats identified in the project area, and regularly promotes responsible pet ownership through community events and neutering vouchers.

Released wildcats
have been breeding
in the wild for the
first time.



vital conservation breeding and wildcat research



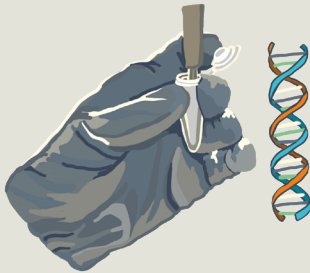
51

kittens born in the conservation
breeding for release centre to date



21,000 kg

weight of food consumed by the wildcats in the
conservation breeding for release centre so far



217

wild-living cat samples analysed for
DNA to test for hybridisation to date



7

number of research projects that Saving
Wildcats has contributed to since June 2024

A third successful breeding season was welcomed at the breeding centre. Since the breeding began at the centre in 2022, there have been 51 kittens born. Each kitten is one step closer to helping secure a future for their species in the wild.

This year, the wildcat keepers carefully selected four breeding pairs, in the hope they continue to boost the genetic health and diversity of the captive wildcat population. At the time of writing, the team are patiently waiting to see if any of the four females will give birth this year.

Meanwhile, the litters born in summer 2024 were moved into much larger pre-release enclosures, designed to support the development of the skills they'll need to survive the challenges of life in the wild. The young wildcats are closely monitored using CCTV to assess their behaviour, including whether they are hunting for themselves, climbing effectively and remaining out of sight of the keepers when they enter the enclosure for essential husbandry.



A wildcat kitten born in the conservation breeding for release centre in 2024

To encourage these behaviours, the team have provided food in a variety of ways, including hanging from trees or in enrichment devices that mimic wild situations,

such as having to reach into holes to retrieve rodents. The enclosures are also designed to allow wildlife to move through naturally, and many of the wildcats have been observed catching prey successfully!

In addition to assessing behaviours, the keepers and veterinary team must also assess each wildcats' health. So, **the development of bespoke weighing boxes** was incredibly exciting, as they meant keepers could monitor the wildcats' weight remotely, minimising disturbance to the animals. The scales were developed by a fantastic team at the University of Seville in Spain, led by Professor Jorge Fernández-Berni.

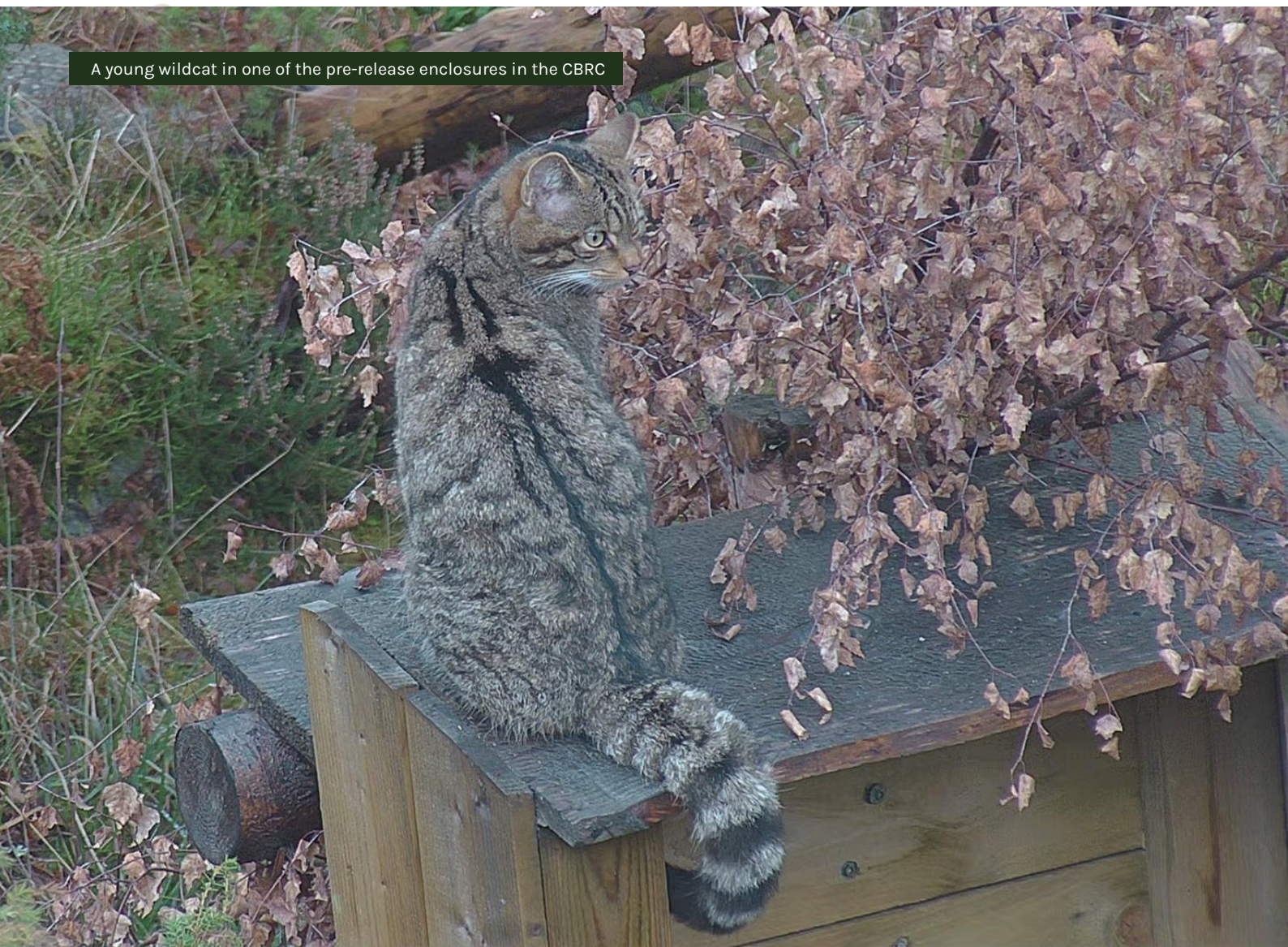
Those wildcats are now eligible for release this summer to improve population connectivity and boost genetic diversity.



A released wildcat entering a remote weighing box



A young wildcat in one of the pre-release enclosures in the CBRC



wildcat Science

On a complex species recovery project like this, it's important to take an evidenced based approach to decision making. The project continues to work with a wide range of scientific partners, advisors and PhD students.

We are particularly grateful for the continued support of Dr Kerry Kilshaw, WildCRU University of Oxford, Dr Maria Diez Leon, Royal Veterinary College London and Professors Mark Beaumont and Dan Lawson at the University of Bristol.

Some recent
papers in
support of
the project:

Mortality and morbidity review in the United Kingdom ex-situ population of European wildcats (*Felis silvestris*) between 200 and 2021 (2024)

Conservation translocations in a changing climate (2024)

Explaining inter-individual differences in habitat relationships among wildcat hybrids in Scotland (2024)

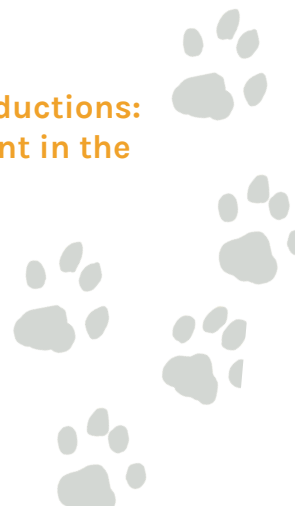
[Variable importance and scale of influence across individual scottish wildcat hybrid habitat models](#) (2024)

Comparing the performance of global, geographically weighted and ecologically weighted species distribution models for Scottish wildcats using GLM and Random Forest predictive modeling (2024)

A generalist species of highly specialized individuals? (2025)

Practical Application of Disease Risk Assessment in Native Species Reintroductions: A Case Study of a European Wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) Population Reinforcement in the Cairngorms National Park (2025)

Sign up to our newsletter if you want to receive the latest updates from the project, including wildcat scientific research.



wildcats and people



12,500+

people reached at community events and talks to date



£3,428,613

spent in the local area to date



23

long-term volunteers since 2022



102

talks given nationwide since 2023

This partnership is committed to raising awareness about Scotland's wildcats, and working with the community to support co-existence with this iconic species, and enhancing the local economy through collaborations with businesses in and around the release site.

The two-part BBC ALBA documentary 'Wildcats: Cait ann an Cunnart', which aired in January, went into detail about the first ever releases of wildcats into the Cairngorms National Park, and gave audiences the opportunity to see the work that goes on behind the scenes restore a species. Following the broadcasts, the team shared **updates on some of the stories mentioned in the episodes.**



Project officer, Chloe, demonstrating wildcat monitoring to high school pupils

Other highlights from the past year have included **appearing on BBC's the One Show**, **a visit from Affric Highlands** to discuss a shared vision for nature recovery in the Scottish Highlands, and being the focus of **episode 16 of the Rewild Podcast**, produced by project supporter **Rewilding Europe**. Saving Wildcats' project lead Dr Helen Senn, ex-situ team leader Estelle Morgan and field operations manager, Louise Hughes, also offered [a deeper insight into the work involved in conservation breeding and releasing animals into the wild through an online presentation.](#)

Support from the local community is vital to the success of this project, and it has been great to be part of community events and to work with local schools, including **working with partners Cairngorms National Park Authority to host Kingussie High School Junior rangers**, and meeting so many enthusiastic children at **Alvie Primary school's fundraising event**. The team also appreciate the ongoing conversations with surrounding land owners and land managers living with wildcats, and **support those affected by poultry predation** and pheasant disturbance. The project also hosted the third annual gamekeeper workshop in March to find practical solutions to concerns raised by sporting estates.

There was also lots of national and international collaboration and in February, **the team were delighted to welcome project supporters Saving Scottish Wildcats** all the way from the United States

of America to **Highland Wildlife Park**. The team have also given over 100 national and international presentations since 2023, and travelled to Europe to share knowledge, including **an inspiring visit to learn from another EU LIFE funded project, LIFE WolFlux**.

Finally, this project has been supported by wonderful long-term volunteers and researchers from both the UK and abroad. We are incredibly grateful to all of those who have contributed, from analysing hundreds of thousands of camera trap images, to supporting with animal husbandry, monitoring hours of CCTV footage or assisting with events, volunteers have been invaluable.

Saving Wildcats would also like to highlight the crucial and ongoing contributions from wildcat **supporters, donors**, and **sponsors**, without which, none of this work would be possible. Thank you!



One of the wildcats in the CBRC, eligible for release in 2025
INSETS: Volunteers supporting the project

What's next for wildcats?

Of the 28 wildcats released since 2023, the team are aware of four mortalities. Of the 28 wildcats released in 2023 and 2024, the team are aware of four mortalities, one settled outwith the project area, four presumed to be dispersed beyond the range of monitoring, and 19 that are considered resident in the release site.

The partnership is now conducting for the third set of releases this summer to reinforce the existing population, boost genetic diversity and encourage connectivity between settled individuals. Saving Wildcats is committed to growing the population of wildcats through conservation breeding and release into the wild, whilst continuing to tackle the threats facing this young population in the Cairngorms National Park.

There are many ways you can help restore this feisty feline to Scotland, from making sure your pet cat is neutered, vaccinated and microchipped, to **sponsoring a wildcat in the project's conservation breeding for release centre today >**



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