

# Wildcat wrap-up

One year on  
from the first  
wildcat releases  
in Scotland



**Saving  
Wildcats**  
#SWAforLIFE







One of the wildcats in the conservation breeding for release centre, fitted with a GPS-radio collar.

Last year in June, **the Saving Wildcats partnership began the releases of 19 wildcats** into the Cairngorms Connect landscape of the Cairngorms National Park. One year later, we are taking time to reflect on the highlights of the last twelve months.

Since the releases occurred, the partnership has had a busy year. Activities of note include tracking released wildcats across the vast landscape they now call home using their **GPS-radio collars, recollaring some of the released wildcats** to continue

monitoring them and continuing to breed and prepare the wildcats for a challenging life in the wild in the off-show conservation breeding for release centre (CBRC) at the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland's **Highland Wildlife Park**.

None of this work would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the staff and volunteers of the project, as well as our partners, **supporters, donors and sponsors**.



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

This includes lead partner, 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. 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' project management group** - Martin Gaywood (NatureScot), David Hetherington (CNPA) and Kenny Kortland (FLS).

**Saving Wildcats' Advisory Group (SWAG)** - Andrew Kitchener, Axel Moehrensclager, Christine Breitenmoser, Urs Breitenmoser, Stuart Brooks and Darragh Hare.

**SWAG in-situ subgroup** - Matt Wilson, Kerry Kilshaw (WildCRU), Roo Campbell (NatureScot) and Jenny Macpherson (Vincent Wildlife Trust).

**SWAG ex-situ subgroup** - 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.

We're proud to work locally with Cats Protection and Strathspey Veterinary Centre.

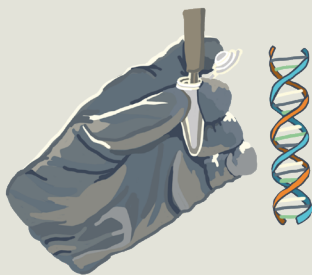


# Fieldwork and wildcat life in the wild



19

wildcats released into the wild



154

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



100+

hours spent trapping feral domestic cats to conduct TNVR



1,500,000

camera trap images analysed

**2023** was a significant year for wildcat restoration efforts in Scotland. Following extensive health checks by the project's experienced veterinary team, 19 wildcats were fitted with GPS-radio collars and released at several locations in Cairngorms Connect over the summer. The project used what is known as a 'soft release' approach, which includes an acclimatisation period in the animal's intended release habitat. This involved moving wildcats from the CBRC into enclosures within Cairngorms Connect temporarily before their eventual release.



One of the female wildcats released into the Cairngorms Connect landscape in 2023.

Once released, the Saving Wildcats field team began tracking the movement of the wildcats every day, with the help of an extended team of contractors and volunteers. The GPS data collected by the collars has revealed many new insights into the behaviour and ecology of the released cats, particularly their activity patterns and habitat use. Daily tracking also allowed us to monitor the welfare and condition of the cats. By watching their activity and placing camera-traps in the local area, we have been able to view valuable footage of the wildcats exploring their new homes. The data has also allowed us to keep local landowners and managers up to date with their locations, to help mitigate any potential risks.



Alex, a project officer, tracking released wildcats from a vantage point.

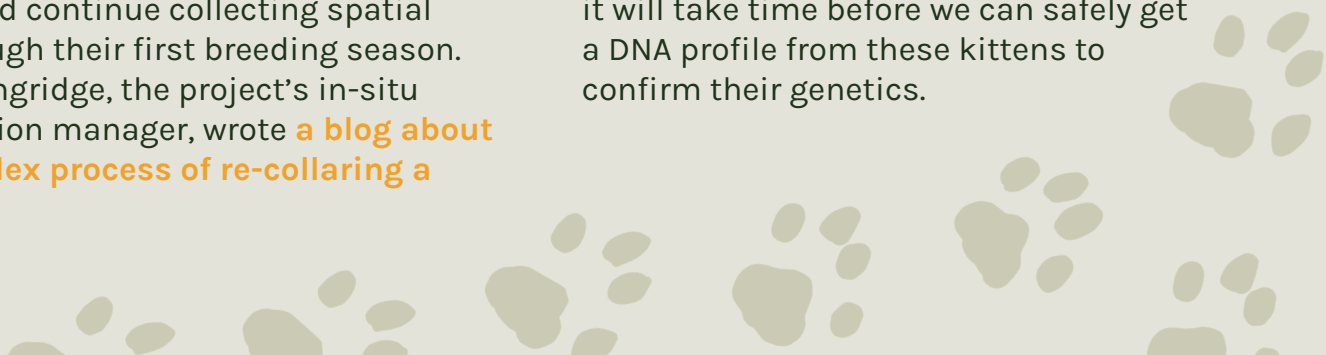


At time of writing, of the 19 wildcats released in 2023, 16 are still monitored regularly by the field team. Two of the original 19 have not been found since April 2024 (both are male and have likely dispersed out of the area; we continue to search for both). One female cat died five weeks after release. A post-mortem examination carried out by our expert veterinary team revealed the cat sadly died of peritonitis, which is an infection in the abdominal cavity.

The battery life of the GPS-radio collars was projected to be around nine months, although it can be difficult to predict, as it depends both on the settings used and external factors like the terrain, habitat, weather and activity of the cats. In Autumn 2023, we decided to try and replace the collars on as many of the released wildcats as possible, so that the team could continue collecting spatial data through their first breeding season. Dr Keri Langridge, the project's in-situ conservation manager, wrote [a blog about the complex process of re-collaring a wildcat >](#)

In late May 2024, we were delighted to finally have confirmation of an incredible project milestone when the first wild-born wildcat kittens were recorded on trail cameras in the release area. The field team were hopeful for successful mating between the released wildcats after the tracking data revealed that males had overlapped in location with females on multiple occasions across the release site during the winter breeding season. To date, we know that two of the females have given birth and raised their kittens to at least four weeks of age, which is when they first appear outside the den.

While it is hoped that the kittens born to the released female wildcats have been fathered by one of the male wildcats that was also released last year, there is always a risk of interbreeding (hybridisation) between wildcats and domestic cats, and it will take time before we can safely get a DNA profile from these kittens to confirm their genetics.





The team have spent over 100 hours trapping feral cats, which have either been neutered, vaccinated and returned, or young kittens have been socialised and rehomed by Cats Protection, who also continue to trap and neuter feral cats across a much wider area. Samples are taken from these cats by the veterinary teams, and these are sent for testing to help assess the disease risk in the wild-living cat population.

Saving Wildcats also carries out genetic research into hybridisation between wildcats and domestic cats across Scotland. The field team collect samples from both TNVR cats and from road mortalities, and these are tested by the **RZSS WildGenes Team** to determine the level of wildcat ancestry. However, from the 154 samples analysed across Scotland, from the start of the project in 2020, none of the samples have scored above the

minimum threshold to be considered a wildcat (which is 75% - equivalent to a cat having one grandparent as a domestic cat).

This reinforces the approach that Saving Wildcats is taking to restore the wildcat in the Scottish Highlands.

wildcats are on the  
brink of extinction  
in Scotland and  
breeding them  
for release is the  
species' last hope.

One of the female wildcats released last year with her two kittens.





# Wildcat life at the conservation breeding for release centre



35

kittens born in the conservation breeding for release centre



36

enclosures built in the conservation breeding for release centre



1500

metres of climbing structures built in the conservation breeding for release centre



12,000<sub>kg</sub>

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

The Saving Wildcats project has had two successful breeding seasons so far, with **22 kittens born in 2022** and **13 kittens born in 2023**. The **2024 breeding season is also going well**, with 16 adult wildcats paired up earlier this year with the hope they would produce kittens over the summer months. With births already occurring, Saving Wildcats will provide an update on the total number of kittens born this year later in the summer.

All these kittens have been born in the project's conservation breeding for release centre (CBRC), which is comprised of 16 breeding enclosures and 20 pre-release enclosures. Located in a quiet and remote off-show area of Highland Wildlife Park, the breeding enclosures are designed in a way to promote successful breeding behaviour.



A female wildcat, Morag, and one of her kittens, born in the project's CBRC in 2023.

Once kittens are six to eight months old, which is when they would naturally disperse from their mothers in the wild to begin a life on their own, they are moved into pre-release enclosures. These enclosures are larger, natural enclosures that promote the development of key behaviours, helping to prepare wildcats for the challenges of life in the wild.



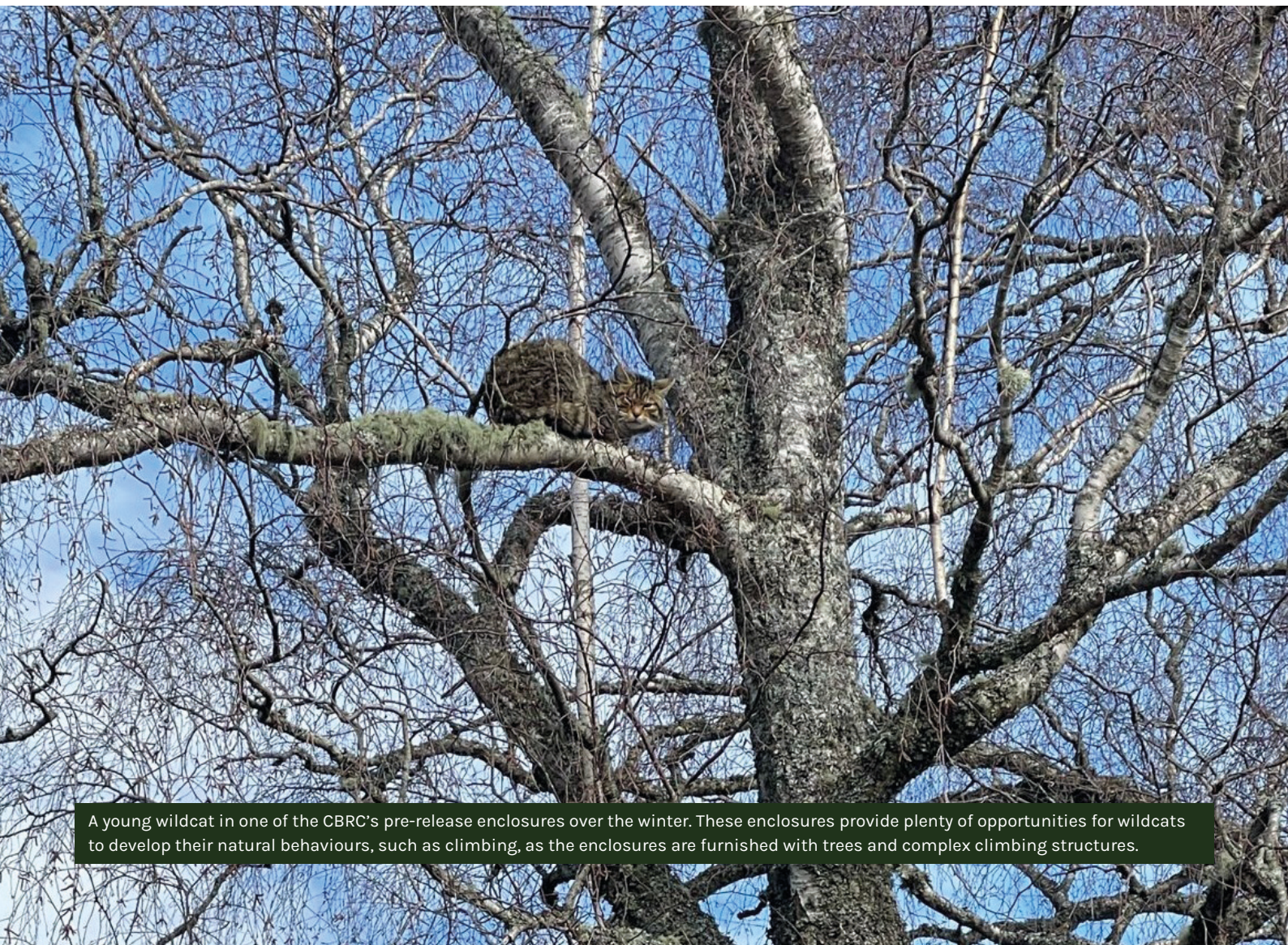
Comprising of extensive natural vegetation, hiding places, den sites and complex climbing structures, the enclosures help the wildcats adjust to the varied landscape they will hopefully be released into.

All of these enclosures are monitored by an extensive CCTV camera system, easily allowing the team to observe the behaviour of the wildcats from the project office with no disturbance to the animals.

Ensuring wildcats develop the behavioural skills needed to survive in the wild is at the core of the efforts of the animal management team at Saving Wildcats. To achieve this, providing a physical and social environment that is as natural as possible from birth until they are released is essential. **One of the project's advisors recently wrote a blog about this approach >**

Preparing wildcats for their potential release is no small feat. Construction of the CBRC finished in early 2022, with the animal keeper team having to furnish all 36 enclosures, including building over 1,500 metres of climbing structures. The structures are of varied heights, widths and wobble to develop the wildcats' ability to cope with moving branches and logs that they may have to traverse in the wild.

Making sure that the wildcats are exposed to a wide variety of food, including natural prey items wherever possible, prior to their release is also important. In the CBRC, the wildcats are fed whole prey, including rabbits, mice and rats. By exposing them to these foods, the hope is that they could recognise these animals or similarly related ones in the wild and hunt them when available. Since the project began, the wildcats in the centre have been fed a staggering 12,000kg of food so far!



A young wildcat in one of the CBRC's pre-release enclosures over the winter. These enclosures provide plenty of opportunities for wildcats to develop their natural behaviours, such as climbing, as the enclosures are furnished with trees and complex climbing structures.



# wildcats and people



7587

people reached at community events and talks



£2,486,295

spent in the local area



15

long-term volunteers given positions



67

talks given nationwide since last year

Saving Wildcats is as much about people as it is about wildcats, and the project works with local communities to understand how best people can benefit from the presence of this iconic species.

Team members have engaged with 7,587 people at talks and events directly in the project's local community, including at family fun days, after-school clubs, primary school visits and pop-up tables in local supermarkets since the project began in 2020.



Dr Keri Langridge giving a talk at the Boat of Garten Community Hall to members of the local community.

The partnership is also committed to helping boost local economies through local procurement, supporting longer term employment and wildlife tourism. So far, the project has spent £2,486,295 in the local economy and is continuing to build its relationships with local tourism operators to offer the best opportunity for visitors to the Cairngorms National Park to appreciate and learn about wildcat conservation.

The team have been working closely with gamekeepers across the release site, with the second workshop held at Badaguish Outdoor Centre in Glenmore on 8 March 2024. It was attended by 17 gamekeepers from 13 estates across the national park. Saving wildcats is grateful for the continued support of a wide range of landowners including **Mar Lodge**, **Rothiemurchus** and **Invercauld** estates.



It has also been wonderful to interact with so many supporters across the world this year. From working with **Saving Scottish Wildcats** to reach new audiences in the USA, to speaking with colleagues at conferences such as **EuroWildcat** held in Germany and the 3rd International Conservation Translocation Conference in Perth, Australia, the project has given 67 talks across the UK and internationally this year.

Saving Wildcats is also committed to providing opportunities for those wishing to gain experience in the conservation sector and has welcomed 15 long-term volunteers since 2023. These volunteers are provided with local accommodation and their expenses are covered, to make these opportunities accessible to as many individuals as possible. Volunteers are an integral part of the project and help with animal management, behavioural monitoring, **tracking released wildcats and other types of field work.**



Volunteers have played a vital role in assisting the field team with tracking the released wildcats.



# 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:

**How admixed captive breeding populations could be rescued using local ancestry information** (2024)

**Genetic swamping of the critically endangered Scottish wildcat was recent and accelerated by disease** (2023)

**A common statement on anthropogenic hybridization of the European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*)** (2023)

**Epidemiology of a Hybrid Swarm: Evidence of 11 Feline Infectious Agents Circulating in a Population of Sympatric European Wildcat Hybrids and Free-Living Domestic Cats, in Scotland** (2023)

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





# What's next for wildcats?

Last year's releases marked a significant milestone for wildcat restoration efforts in Scotland.

Of the 18 wildcats released in 2023, 16 are alive and two are presumed to be alive but have dispersed beyond the range we can track them. Astoundingly we have confirmed our first births in the wild. The partnership is now preparing for a second set of releases this summer to reinforce the existing population. The risk to this young population is high and tackling the threats from hybridisation and predator control activities are top of the agenda.

As always, Saving Wildcats is committed to growing the population of wildcats through release of wildcats into the wild and continued to removal of the threats facing the species in Scotland. There are also several ways that you can help to restore this feisty feline, from making sure your pet cat is neutered and microchipped or by **sponsoring a wildcat in the project's CBRC today >**



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