



SCOTTISH WILDCAT

The magnificent wildcat is in severe decline, facing extinction now with less than 100 pure bred species, all concentrated in the Scottish Highlands.

They need a large area of wild country and woodland to hunt their prey, which is in very short supply, and have been heavily persecuted by humans and culled by gamekeepers. They also mate with feral cats, which results in hybridisation, and dilution of wildcat genes. A fully protected species since 1988, there are efforts to increase their numbers by the Save Wildcats project, within the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. This is a complex project, needing the cooperation of local cat owners to neuter their moggies, and excluding any feral cats. A part of the Cairngorms now has permission to develop a special area for conservation and release of pure bred wildcat kittens.

Superficially similar to domestic tabby cats, the wildcat is a different animal in various ways. It is thickset, and up to 1 metre long including their tail, has longer legs, a more broad, blunt head, and a pale brown/ russet body with up to



11 black stripes. It has a very distinctive, thick tail with 3 black rings and a rounded black end. Pure wild cats are always this colour and never have white paws. It is silent apart from mating, and only has one litter a year in spring.

Nocturnal and solitary outside of the mating season, wildcats are carnivores, feeding on live prey, mainly rabbits, small mammals and birds, only eating grass occasionally for extra roughage and vitamins. Their soft feet allow them to approach their prey quietly, and then pounce and kill quickly with a bite to the back of the neck. Being solitary ensures each cat has exclusive hunting areas, and they rarely meet up apart from mating, so avoiding potentially damaging fights.



My own much loved moggie, Freddy, is also thickset, but black and white and very fond of lolling about on my bed, showing off his tummy. Unlike wildcats, he would be most insulted to be constantly out in the cold, making a 'nest' as they do amongst rocks, tree roots and old fox burrows and badger sets.

A piccy of Freddy here too, so you can clearly see the difference between a wildcat and a domestic cat!