The Wildcat

Hidden tiger in Germany's forests

They live alone and hidden, far away from any human settlement. Deciduous forests are their habitat of choice, and they would never set foot outside of the forest. They sleep through the day and go hunting at night, and their amazing camouflage makes them almost invisible to human eyes. Nobody can see them – but they are there. They still roam our forests - Felis silvestris silvestris, the European wildcats.

Wildcats are not regular domestic cats that have gone feral. They are only distantly related to our living room lions, who are descendants of the african variation of the Wildcat, Felis silvestris lybica. The ancient Egyptians spent a long time taming those cats, mainly to have them defend their crop supplies against mice and rats. These tame cats only came to Europe 2000 years ago when the Romans brought them across the Alps. The European wildcat however has wandered our forests for a much longer time, namely for more than 300.000 years – ancient bones from the prehistoric era confirm it.

Only forests are an acceptable habitat for these shy hunters. Open areas make them nervous as they can not instantly go into hiding. They usually never go further than 100 meters out of the forest, and even that only if they have high grass or bushes close by. However, forest edges are actually the perfect habitat for wildcats. The mouse population is usually a lot higher in those areas compared to the inner forest, giving

the cats a good food supply while also giving them a route for retreat in case of danger.

Up until the 20th century, Wildcats appeared all over the entire continent. They were often considered a pest by farmers, and hunters were eager to get their thick and soft winter pelts. Those threats were not big enough to cripple their populations as a whole, but around the 19th and 20th century, a much greater threat arose. The big conjoined forest areas that served as the wildcat's home were slowly torn apart by street- and urban construction as well as agriculture. This had dire effects on a great amount of forest animals, but especially on wildcats.

"Safety net for the Wildcat"

Without being able to wander from one patch of forest to another, wildcats have barely any opportunity to populate new areas or to exchange genes with other populations, and thus they have no way of ensuring their long-term survival in Germany. Due to this, the project “Safety net wildcat” was initiated in 2004. The goal: 20.000 km of green corridors, consisting of trees and bushes, that would connect the forests of Germany once again. The forest animals would then be able to wander through the corridors and reach different areas that were out of their reach before. This would enable genetic exchange, the spread of populations and overall more biologic diversity in our forests. The wildcats are the flagship animal of the project due to their status as an endangered species, but also due to their high standards concerning their habitats, making them a great indicator of the biologic “quality” of a forest.

A method very important to the project is the “Lure stick method”. Wooden sticks are driven into the ground of the suspected or confirmed habitats. Their sides are roughened up and notches are cut into their corners; then, they are sprayed with valerian extract. Valerian is very similar in smell to the sexual pheromones of cats; that means that the wildcats cannot resist the scent. They will rub themselves on the sticks, and due to the rough sides and notches, cat hairs will get stuck on the stick. These hairs are collected and sent to a genetic lab. The genetic material contained in those hairs can be used to determine whether the hair actually belongs to a wildcat, and if yes, even which specific wildcat it is. This way, a genetic databank encompassing all of Germany has been created, allowing precise monitoring of wildcat movements throughout the corridors.

http://www.wildkatze.info

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Characteristics

Only slightly different from a common domestic cat in size and shape, the main indicator that you are seeing a wildcat is the gray, washed out fur with a subtle black muster, and the thick, bushy tail with three dark rings and a black tip. Unlike the tail of a domestic cat, a wildcat's tail doesn't narrow; it has the same width throughout its entire length. If spotted during winter, the wildcat seems very burly and massive; that is due to the very thick and warm winter fur these animals grow. With 20.000 hairs per square centimeter, it provides a lot of warmth and isolation, allowing the wildcat to survive the sometimes harsh winters.

The weight of a wildcat varies slightly between the two genders; males average around 5kg, females come in slightly lighter at 4 kg. There is, however, no big difference in size and look between a male and a female cat.

80% of a wildcat's diet consists of mice; however, a wide variety of small mammals and insects are caught by them, mostly depending on availability. Small rabbits, lizards, frogs and small birds are all fair game; however, the wildcat stays clear of bigger animals like deer. Normally, only animals smaller than themselves will be caught. They also usually stay clear of carrion, and only touch non-carnivorous food if they are close to starvation. Their digestive track is specialized on carnivorous food and cannot digest plants very well.

The mating season starts in late winter, around February. The gestation time lasts for 9-10 weeks. If the first litter is lost, the mother might have a second litter at around September. The newborn kittens stay with their mother for about five months, getting taught hunting techniques by her once they reach the appropriate age. After the five month period has passed, the young cats leave their mother and start living on their own. The expected age is around seven to ten years; however, in captivity they can get older than 15.

Source: Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland e.V. (BUND)