

# SCOTTISH WILDCAT CONSERVATION ACTION GROUP

## LAND MANAGERS' SCOTTISH WILDCAT CONSERVATION PROTOCOL

### Introduction

One of the greatest known threats to the survival of the Scottish Wildcat is cross-breeding (hybridising) with feral or domestic cats. The risk of hybridisation can be reduced by neutering domestic cats and by controlling feral cats. Land managers play a key role alongside others in the future conservation of the Scottish Wildcat, in particular by controlling feral cats.

Lethal control of feral cats is a legitimate and legal activity, but there is a risk of injuring or killing wildcats and therefore breaking the law. The difficulty in separating a protected wildcat from a non-protected feral cat or a hybrid poses a serious problem for all involved in predator control.

The following protocol has been developed following experience gained with land managers during the Cairngorms Wildcat Project, but is intended to be applicable across the wildcat range. It is intended to provide practical guidance for the legal control of feral cats whilst minimising the risk to the Scottish Wildcat.

The success this protocol depends on two main things: a precautionary principle and accurate identification of cats in the field.

The precautionary principle is simply: **IF IN DOUBT: LET IT GO.**

For the purposes of field identification and feral cat control: any cat which has **ALL four of these characteristics** should be considered to be a wildcat:

1. Tabby markings
2. Thick, ringed, blunt tail
3. No stripe down the tail.
4. No white feet

### Benefits to the Scottish Wildcat and benefits to Land managers

By adhering to the protocol below, land managers will play a significant role in protecting and conserving the Scottish Wildcat. Following the protocol clearly demonstrates a willingness to work to save the Scottish Wildcat in partnership with others and within the law.

## **‘WILDCAT FRIENDLY’ CAT CONTROL**

### **EXISTING REQUIREMENTS**

- In all cases, cats matching the Field Identification of a wildcat are not to be harmed; the precautionary principle, (if in doubt let it go) is always to be adopted.
- Where lamping and shooting are carried out, follow the lamping code<sup>1</sup> and always identify what you are shooting at; unless you get a good look a cat let it go.
- Where snaring is carried out, it must follow accredited standards and snares must only be set where they are unlikely to take or injure non-target protected species including wildcats.
- Any trapped wildcats are immediately released where they were trapped<sup>2</sup>
- All feral cat control is carried out humanely and in line with the law

### **GOOD PRACTICE**

- Before undertaking any predator control, the use of appropriate methods should be informed by local knowledge and camera trapping used to indicate whether or not an area is within a wildcat territory.
- In any area where there may be known or suspected wildcat populations, cage trapping should be used for controlling feral cats rather than shooting or snaring<sup>3</sup>.
- Any injured wildcat is immediately transferred to a local vet.
- Photos should be taken of any trapped cats (wildcats, hybrids or feral cats) as a record of their trapping and of their pelage markings. These should show side and top views, including tail and head<sup>4</sup>.
- Where any hairs (complete with follicles) or tissues (blood or scat) are found in a trap from any trapped wildcats or good-hybrids they should be sent for genetic testing<sup>5</sup>.
- All new records of wildcat sightings are passed on to “Highland Tiger” staff
- All new records of feral cats which could be targeted for neutering are passed on to “Highland Tiger” staff.

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<sup>1</sup> BASC Code of Practice - LAMPING (NIGHT SHOOTING) <https://basc.org.uk/cop/lamping/>

<sup>2</sup> Part of the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan includes the intention of setting up a breeding for re-introduction programme. This may involve the capture of wildcats in the wild for this programme. However, this work will be part of a planned programme which will be licenced by SNH. This will not include the deliberate capture of wildcats outwith this programme and hence the standard approach is that wildcats incidentally captured should be released.

<sup>3</sup> Recognising that shooting of foxes, rabbits and deer may be ongoing.

<sup>4</sup> Photographs should be submitted to Highland Tiger and where appropriate as evidence for SRDP claims.

<sup>5</sup> Need to add details of how these should be stored and where they should be sent.

# Wildcat Field Identification

If a cat has all of the following, assume it is a wildcat:

- Tabby markings
- No white feet
- Thick, ringed, blunt tail
- No stripe down the tail

