

### Wildcat Sighting in Cairngorm National Park

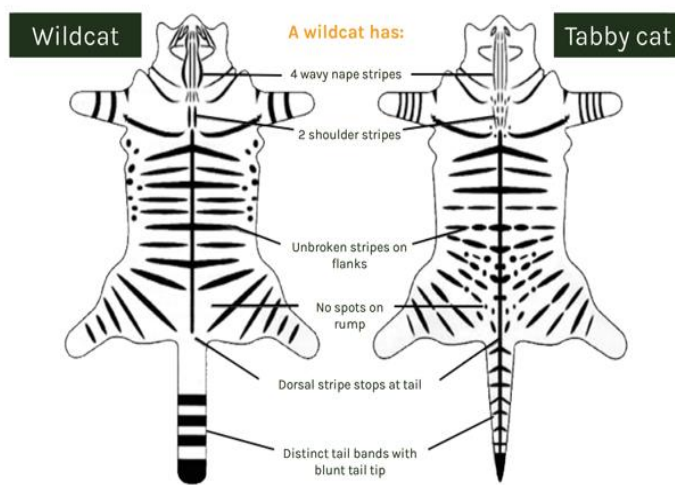
*Rachel and Kevin Hinchcliffe MBNA*

In September 2024 whilst visiting the Cairngorms National Park, we stayed in a cottage in Newtonmore, the home of the Scottish Wildcat Centre. During the holiday, we didn't expect to see Wildcat as they are rare and secretive, but we set up the trail camera in the garden of the cottage which captured footage of a cat that resembled one. We were also lucky to get sightings of the cat during the day (figure 1), allowing us to get some great photos of it to help us do its pelage score.



Figure 1: Hybrid Wildcat. Photo: A. Moore

Pelage scoring (figure 2) is looking at a cats distinguishing marks - seven features are scored out of three, which helps the identifier to tell the difference between a Wildcat, a tabby domestic cat, and a hybrid of the two. Not being exactly sure of what we were looking for, we scored it quite low - giving us a result of a hybrid Wildcat. For confirmation, we sent photos and information off to the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) to see what they said, and they confirmed it was a hybrid Wildcat.



In March 2025, we were once again visiting the Cairngorms National Park, this time staying near Kincaig. At the side of our cottage was a farm track leading to the fields, which ran right past our living room window. Looking out onto the track, we noticed there was an area of soft mud covered with various paw prints. On closer inspection of this area, we identified Deer tracks, Badger prints, and a smaller one that we thought looked cat like. We decided this would be the perfect spot to set up the camera trap.

On our first evening as we explored the garden with our thermal camera, it revealed something down the driveway that we believed was either a Badger or Fox. (The camera trap did capture a Badger a couple of nights later). We also picked up a herd of Red Deer in the field next to us, something we wouldn't have known without the thermal camera.

Checking the camera trap that first morning there, revealed footage of a cat (figure 3) coming down the track, stopping to look up and check out our camera. What we noticed straight away was its tail - a blunt black tip, with distinct black rings. We did a pelage score, moving and pausing the video to try and check out its markings the best that we could. We scored it at 18 - which was a true Wildcat. We didn't really need to do

Pelage Character	Score		
	1	2	3
1: Extent of dorsal line	Absent/cover entire tails	Continues onto tail	Stops at base of tail
2: Shape of tail tip	Tapered to a point	Intermediate	Blunt
3: Distinctiveness of tail bands	Absent/joined by a dorsal line	Indistinct or fused	Distinct
4: Broken stripes on flanks and rump	>50% broken/no marking	25-50% broken	<25% broken
5: Spots on flanks and rump	Many/no marking	Some	None
6: Stripes on nape	Thin/no stripes	Intermediate	4 thick stripes
7: Stripes on shoulder	Indistinct/no stripes	Intermediate	2 thick stripes

**Final Score**  
 21-17 = Wildcat    11-16 = Probable hybrid    10 and below = low-scoring hybrid / tabby cat

Figure 2: Pelage Score Chart

its pelage scoring at all, as also noticeable on the video - the cat was wearing a GPS tracking collar (figure 4). Surely this was all the proof that we needed to confirm that we'd finally caught a true Wildcat, but doing its score certainly did.

The video and sight details were sent off to the RZSS, and also recorded on iRecord too. A reply from the RZSS confirmed we had captured one of the released Wildcats, believed to be a male known as Randal, released in 2023.



Figure 3. True Wildcat caught on the trail camera  
Photo: K. Hinchcliffe



Figure 5. Wildcat Kittens © Saving Wildcats



Figure 4: GPS collar © RZSS

### Background information on the project

In 2023 19 Wildcats, bred at the Highland Wildlife Park, Newtonmore, were released into the Cairngorm National Park. Of those 19, sixteen are still monitored, two (a male and a female) have not been recorded and may have dispersed out of range. One died five weeks after the release, post mortem results showed an infection was the cause.

In May 2024 it was confirmed via trail cameras monitored by the Saving Wildcats team, images of the first two Wildcat kittens (figure 5) born in the wild.

During 2024 a further 9 Wildcats were released, with more releases planned for 2025.

### References

Wildcat Centre <https://Wildcatcentre.org/>

Royal Zoological Society of Scotland <https://www.rzss.org.uk/>

Saving Wildcats <https://www.savingWildcats.org.uk/news-events/2024/june/Wildcat-wrap-up-one-year-on-from-the-first-Wildcat-releases-in-scotland/>



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<https://savingwildcats.org.uk/>

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Kevin and Rachel Hinchcliffe are active members of the South Yorkshire branch and have visited the Cairngorms for several years. Their interests cover a wide section of natural history, including the Scottish Specials: - Crested Tit, Capercaillie, Crossbills and Wildcats. Kevin was awarded MBNA in 2015.

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