

The Cairngorms Wildcat Project



Annual Report 2009/10



Introduction

In 2007, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) included the Scottish Wildcat on a list of 32 species for priority conservation action, which would mean that effort and resources would be focused on its conservation. The first steps to create a wildcat conservation project in the Cairngorms National Park (CNP), an area previously identified as being a stronghold for wildcats, were also taken in 2007, when the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) added the wildcat as a key priority species to the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan. Following on from this, a meeting of potential project partners was called at the CNPA offices in Grantown in September 2007 in order to discuss how best to take forward a conservation project in the CNP. This was attended by representatives of the CNPA, SNH, Scottish Gamekeepers' Association (SGA), and Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS). Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) would later join this steering group as would the Wild Media Foundation (WMF) although the WMF's direct involvement was temporary and concluded prior to the official launch of the Project.

In order to identify a way forward for a Cairngorms-based wildcat conservation project, it was decided to hold a conference. The conference, entitled "Practical wildcat conservation in the Cairngorms National Park" was held in Aviemore in April 2008. This event was well attended by around 100 delegates from a wide variety of sectors and, through several workshops, served to identify options for progressing a conservation project, as well as helping to raise awareness of wildcats and their plight, both locally through discussions amongst those in attendance, and nationally by way of resultant press coverage.

The steering group of partner organisations designed a Project which would be funded largely by SNH's Species Action Framework, but also with significant funding contributions from CNPA and RZSS. The CNPA's ecologist, David Hetherington, previously organiser and chair of the Steering Group since its inception, was employed as full-time Project Manager in February 2009. The Project's aims are to:

- To secure the future of the Scottish wildcat within the Cairngorms National Park (CNP), leading to further action across a wider area of Scotland
- To raise awareness of the plight of the Scottish wildcat

The Cairngorms Wildcat Project (CWP) was officially launched by Environment Minister Roseanna Cunningham at the Highland Wildlife Park on May 5th 2009.



I. Raising awareness of wildcats and their conservation

The Scottish wildcat is a rare, elusive and largely nocturnal species confined to the most thinly populated parts of the UK. Its conservation is complex, for a range of reasons. Firstly, the species is a predator, and can therefore be perceived as a threat to some land management interests, such as gamebird conservation. Furthermore, the species can be superficially similar to a tabby-marked domestic cat, which presents difficulties in accurate identification during species surveying and monitoring, during feral cat control activities practised by estates, and feral cat neutering work conducted by cat welfare groups and vets. This is further confused by hybridisation, which results in the occurrence of wild-living cats with shared features of both wildcats and domestic cats. This had also led over the years to scientific disagreement on defining the Scottish wildcat and how the species should be conserved.

From the outset of the CWP, it was agreed that awareness raising of the wildcat and its plight, both at a wide public level but especially at a more specific, local level, was critical to the success of any wildcat conservation project. In order to catch the public's imagination and inspire them about wildcat conservation efforts, the CWP chose a strong awareness-raising brand, 'Highland Tiger' (HT). A number of awareness raising materials utilising this brand were developed to raise the profile of the wildcat and communicate conservation issues and actions, including a website, Facebook page, postcards and an introductory DVD.

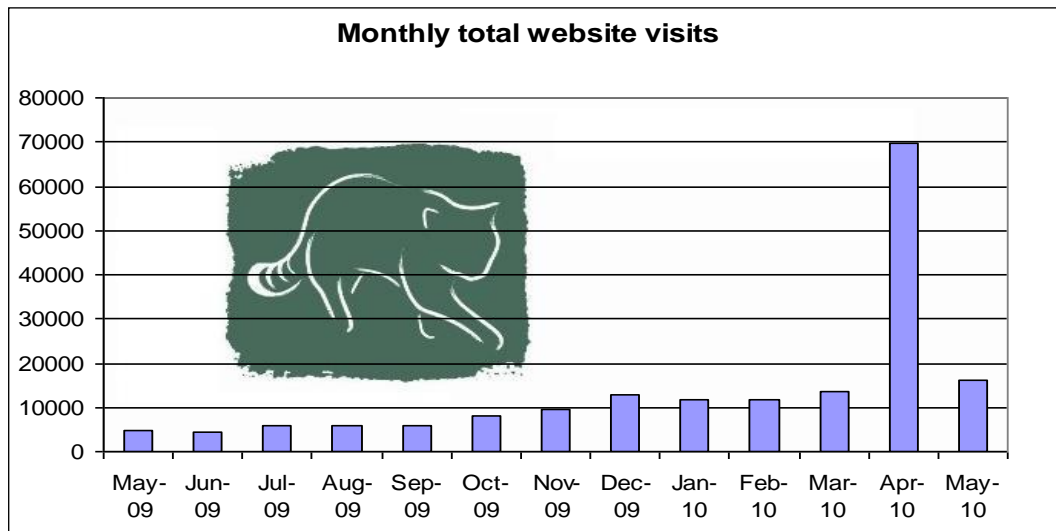
Project web presence



The homepage of www.highlandtiger.com

Since its launch on May 5th 2009, the CWP website, highlandtiger.com, has attracted much public interest which continues to grow, both nationally and globally. The website provides information about wildcats and their ecology and details the objectives and activities of the CWP in a visually attractive, user-friendly way. A news section and blog regularly update visitors on CWP developments, while the public are encouraged to contribute to wildcat conservation by reporting wildcat sightings via an online form. There is also an opportunity to donate money to a wildcat conservation fund administered by the RZSS, the proceeds of which are used to further wildcat conservation and research in the Cairngorms National Park. All articles and press releases on the CWP will encourage the public to visit the website to learn more.

A BBC Reporting Scotland news item and accompanying BBC web story about the CWP on April 19th 2010 attracted a great deal of public attention and subsequent media interest. The BBC web story attracted almost a million visitors, a quarter of who were outside the UK. The story was the second most shared on the entire BBC news website that morning. This resulted in many people linking to the HT website where of course they could find out further detail about the CWP. Over 46,000 people visited the HT website on that particular day, resulting in a surge of reported sightings, donations to the RZSS wildcat fund, and new fans of the HT Facebook page. The total visits for each month in the year from May 2009 to May 2010 are as follows:



Web traffic visiting highlandtiger.com from May 09–May 10

A HT Facebook page has operated since May 2009, and since January 2010 has been managed by RZSS. Currently (15th June 2010) this site has 1404 fans who are automatically alerted when something new is added. This means that specific messages, such as advertising an event or making a plea for assistance, can be delivered within a very short space of time to a large audience. The number of fans is growing steadily and is already twice the number it was 3 months ago.

Talks

The Project Manager (PM) has responded to invitations to speak about the CWP at society meetings around the National Park. Priority is given to groups based on audience composition and size, and also geographical location. To date the Project

Manager has delivered 17 presentations, with a further one delivered by David Barclay of the Highland Wildlife Park. Total audience size to date is almost 700.

Media coverage and articles

To date, the project has enjoyed positive and widespread coverage in all media – print, broadcast and web - locally, nationally and globally. Much of this coverage has been achieved through proactive approaches from journalists who have heard about the Project, and coverage has a ripple effect encouraging more coverage in other titles. A press release was issued to coincide with the CWP's ministerial launch in May 2009, resulting in widespread media coverage including on BBC Reporting Scotland and on STV News as well as on local radio and in Scottish newspapers.



Left: the front cover of the Spring/Summer 2010 edition of 'Scottish Gamekeeper.'
Right: A wildcat at the Highland Wildlife Park used to launch the new postage stamp.

Since then the CWP has enjoyed frequent and significant media coverage without the need for further press releases. Following an approach from the BBC, the CWP featured on the 'One Show' in June 2009, attracting a TV audience of 4.5 million. Other significant media coverage arose when the Royal Mail launched a new first class stamp featuring the Scottish wildcat on April 13th 2010. The Royal Mail press release was written in consultation with, and gave prominence to, the CWP, while the accompanying photos were taken at the Highland Wildlife Park. The resultant story was carried in several local and national newspapers. There was a double-page spread about wildcats in the Observer newspaper on April 28th, which included the CWP. Very significant media coverage, including articles in a wide variety of national and local press, in several magazines, on many websites, and on local and national radio, resulted from BBC Scotland's TV and web coverage of the CWP on April 29th 2010 (mentioned above). Much of this coverage included the URL of the HT website. The equivalent advertising cost of the coverage stemming from, and including, the BBC coverage was calculated by media consultants at over £637,000.

A variety of organisational magazines have carried articles to specialist readerships, such as cat owners and gamekeepers. Two articles about the CWP have been written in the SGA's magazine 'Scottish Gamekeeper' to date, resulting in a front cover photo of a wildcat on both occasions. One was drafted by the PM and set out in detail the potential value of the gamekeeping profession's contribution to wildcat conservation by adopting wildcat friendly predator control and monitoring.

Public events

In summer 2009, the CWP formed the main focus of a staffed presence within the CNPA marquee at two large public events: the Grantown Show and Braemar Gathering. At both events CWP partnership personnel interacted with the public, handing out large numbers of HT postcards to help kick-start conversations with passers-by about wildcats and the CWP. Prior to a talk at the Big Biobuzz event in Ballater on May 22nd 2010, the PM manned a CWP stand and explained about wildcat conservation to visiting members of the public.



David Hetherington discussing wildcat conservation with visitors to the Braemar Gathering

Awareness-raising materials

The CWP funded the production of HT postcards and introductory DVDs. The rationale behind the postcards was to provide a quality, but low-cost product free of charge to the public, which would celebrate the wildcat, help to raise its profile but, by including the HT URL in large letters on the reverse, would help the spread the word about the CWP, particularly as postcards are designed to be sent to others. 250,000 postcards were produced, and can be handed out in mixed packs of five or singly. As well as being distributed to members of the public at CWP talks and events, postcards have been handed out to Highland Wildlife Park visitors during the wildcat feeding time talk delivered by the keepers, often resulting in donations to the RZSS wildcat conservation fund. Large quantities of postcards have been passed to organisations such as Wild Scotland and Cats Protection to hand out at public events. Approximately 50,000 postcards remain.

The HT DVD is more costly to produce and consequently is distributed to people who are in a position to show it to a wider audience, e.g. at society meetings, school classes etc. Around 120 DVDs have been distributed so far.



A Highland Tiger postcard. Photo by Cairngorms-based photographer Peter Cairns.

2. Working with estates

The CWP approached five estates spread across the Cairngorms National Park to trial a draft protocol designed to ensure predator control activities are wildcat-friendly and which makes use of the expertise and experience of gamekeeping staff in the monitoring of wildcat and feral cat occurrences on their estate. The aim of the protocol was to provide a clear working definition of a wildcat, based on pelage characteristics, which is both practical and precautionary.

Predator control workshop

In order to raise awareness of the need for predator control to be wildcat friendly, and also to improve the relevance and practicability of the estates protocol, a workshop on 'Predator control and the Scottish Wildcat' was organised by the CWP and held at the Lecht Ski Centre on the 17th of December 2009. Despite the first heavy snowfall of the winter, the workshop

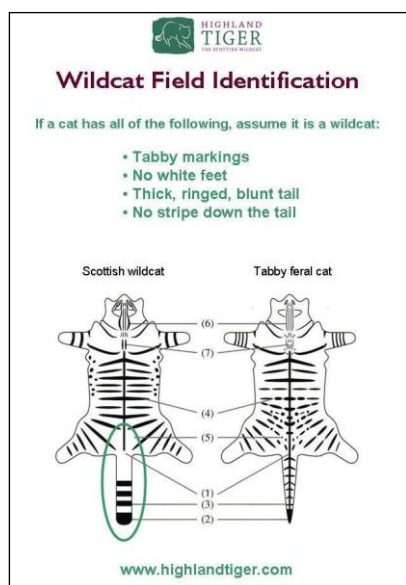


attracted 41 delegates, the majority of whom were gamekeepers from in and around the National Park. Almost 20 estates were represented, covering around 60% of the Park. Discussions and exercises were both productive and constructive and informal feedback suggested the event was well received, with several keepers saying they found it more interesting, informative and relevant than expected. Delegates were asked to comment on the draft estates protocol, and in doing so, helped to make this document more relevant for wildcat conservation and more practical for

gamekeepers to use. All in attendance subsequently received a comprehensive workshop report which summarised the presentations given, as well as the discussions that took place and the results of the interactive exercises. Several other interested estates couldn't make the workshop but have received copies of the workshop report, while several others have been sent a report with a covering letter introducing the Project to them. Estates thus aware of the need for a precautionary, wildcat-friendly approach to predator control, as well as for monitoring the wildcat population, amount to around 85% of the area of the Cairngorms National Park.

Precautionary approach to feral cat control

Gamekeeping staff from each of the five estates working directly with the CWP have received training in wildcat identification and, when engaged in their routine feral cat control work, are encouraged not to shoot if there is any doubt about a cat's identity. All estates are in the process of being licensed to live-trap wildcats and extract hair samples for genetic analysis prior to their release. The protocol encourages the estate to re-home errant pets via the Cats Protection, while feral cats are neutered via the Cats Protection or humanely dispatched by estate staff. Carcasses of feral cats are retained as a research resource and transferred to CWP freezers.



Left: Wildcat identification cards are laminated and provided to gamekeepers, as well as Cats Protection volunteers. Right: A gamekeeper on the Glen Tanar estate assisting the Project with camera trapping.

Monitoring

Gamekeepers from all estates have been reporting sightings to the Project Manager (PM) of cats matching the Project's definition of a wildcat. Gamekeepers also advise on locations for camera traps (see research & monitoring section for further detail) and each estate has had at least two units deployed since February or March. None of the Project camera traps have as yet photographed a wildcat on the participating estates, although 3 ferals have been snapped on two estates. Gamekeepers on one of the estates informed the PM that two farms on one part of the estate have 35 cats

between them. CP and local vets have been informed with a view to encouraging the farmers to allow Trap Neuter Return (TNR) and re-homing of kittens.

3. Managing domestic cats



Vets believe many of the National Park's unneutered cats live around farm buildings

Since the PM and Douglas Richardson of the RZSS gave presentations about the CWP at the Cats Protection's Scottish conference in June 2009, the CWP has developed a working relationship with Cats Protection (CP) staff over a series of meetings. It is clear from the objectives of both Cats Protection and the CWP, that there is much scope for co-operation.

New Cats Protection branch

Following on from discussions, a new Cats Protection volunteer branch was launched in April 2010 in Deeside, the only part of the Cairngorms National Park that had lacked a Cats Protection branch. Anecdotally, it would appear that the Deeside area has a considerable population of feral cats and a Cats Protection branch there, which will promote responsible cat ownership, neuter feral colonies and provide financial assistance to local people to have pet cats neutered, should be a significant step forward in 'turning off the taps' of the flow of domestic cats into the wider countryside where they could impact on wildcats, as well as on gamekeeping and other wildlife conservation interests. The Deeside branch now covers the area from Braemar to Banchory, has 10 trained members and a committee, and has taken delivery of their own feral cat TNR equipment.

Volunteer coordination

Cats Protection expressed an interest in employing a volunteer coordinator whose job it would be to ensure that all Cats Protection volunteers in and around the Cairngorms National Park are trained in wildcat identification, are aware of wildcat conservation issues, and operate in a coordinated, strategic manner across the

region, especially with regard to feral cat TNR. The CWP will contribute one third of the annual costs of employing that Cats Protection staff member and their role should also include recruiting and training new volunteers. It is hoped that the new angle to the Cats Protection's work in the Cairngorms National Park of contributing significantly to wildcat conservation, might tempt more people e.g. wildlife management students, to volunteer their time. It is hoped that the coordinator will be in place by the end of summer 2010.

Veterinary buy-in

The involvement of the veterinary community of the Cairngorms National Park is critical to the implementation of both increased responsible cat ownership as well as intensified and expanded feral cat neutering. Consequently, the PM organised a meeting with eight vets from across the Cairngorms area and CP staff on January 8th 2010. Having been brought up to speed on wildcat conservation and the aims of the CWP, those present contributed to positive discussions on how best to progress increased responsible cat ownership (which includes greater neutering and vaccination) and intensified feral cat neutering. The vets felt that the majority of unneutered and unvaccinated cats in the Cairngorms National Park are farm cats. They agreed to act as unofficial advocates for the Project when dealing with farmers, including surveying for the presence of unneutered farm cats and persuading the farmers to allow Cats Protection to come and trap them for neutering and return, something which the CP said they could help fund through their voucher scheme if branch funds allowed. Unwanted young kittens can be re-homed. All veterinary practices provided neutering and vaccination data from recent years which the CWP can use as a baseline.



Volunteer training and involvement

In order to ensure that the Cats Protection's branch work across the National Park is coordinated and intensified in the interim period until the employment of a coordinator, a workshop was organised for June 5th 2010 by the CWP and Cats Protection for representatives from seven Cats Protection branches from across the NE of Scotland. Attendees were provided with information on wildcat ID, priority areas for TNR around the five participating estates, as well as impressed with the need to collect standardised data on TNR. It was agreed that more volunteers were required as well as some more facilities and resources, which the Cats Protection will investigate. Two TNR training days for existing and new volunteers, to incorporate CWP messages, are now planned for early autumn, when the coordinator post should have been filled. The branches have agreed to help raise-awareness of wildcats and the CWP wherever possible, and several branches have been supplied with both Highland Tiger postcards to distribute at local events and DVDs to show at branch meetings and other events.

Responsible cat ownership leaflet

A leaflet promoting the need for responsible cat ownership is in the process of being compiled by the CWP. This will adapt existing Cats Protection literature and tailor it to the specific biodiversity and land management issues of the Cairngorms. The leaflet will be endorsed by all local veterinary practices, and commented on by Cats Protection prior to printing and distribution.

4. Researching and monitoring wildcats

Sightings & Carcasses

Records of sightings and roadkill carcasses are very useful sources of data about the potential distribution of wildcats in and around the Cairngorms National Park and carcasses in particular can provide much-needed information on hybridisation, diet, disease etc. Sightings are regularly reported via the online form on the HT website but several are also reported via word of mouth. The importance of reporting sightings to the CWP is stressed during talks and at events, as is the reporting and collection of roadkill carcasses. Freezer facilities for carcasses are located at the Highland Wildlife Park, SNH office at Aviemore, and at the Glen Tanar estate. Talks by the PM at two well-attended NESBReC events in Aberdeen and Boat of Garten should result in improved confidence in wildcat identification amongst wildlife recorders, while input to a SNH/CNPA development management workshop on April 21st, as well as to a Forest Enterprise Scotland training event on June 10th, should see improved surveying for wildcats prior to potentially damaging operations. The PM is collating sightings and carcass records for plotting on a GIS. Combined with records from the Cairngorms National Park collated during the SNH Wildcat Survey 2006-08, this could provide a useful resource for helping evaluate the distribution of the wildcat and indeed hybridisation in the region.



Although a sad loss to the population, roadkill carcasses can provide a variety of information useful for wildcat conservation, e.g. genetics, distribution, stomach contents etc.

Camera traps

The CWP originally purchased 12 digital camera traps to help monitor the presence of wildcats on participating estates, and determine if animals are hybrids from coat markings. The cameras are also useful public engagement tools, by generating interest among gamekeepers who are keen to assist in setting them up, but also amongst the general public who are eager to view images of rare and elusive wildlife from the Cairngorms National Park. Indeed the focus of the extensive media coverage in April was a camera-trap photo of a wildcat taken on one of the participating estates. As well as camera traps deployed on participating estates since



A camera trap photo of a nocturnal visitor to the Highland Wildlife Park in February.

February 2010, other CWP cameras have been deployed at Abernethy, Mar Lodge and to the north of Grantown, while RZSS have deployed several cameras around the Highland Wildlife Park. None of the Project camera traps have as yet photographed a wildcat, although ferrets and an array of other species such as golden eagles have been photographed.

The PM introduced Kerry Kilshaw of Wildcru to staff from two of the participating estates in order for her to choose a suitable location for a SNH-funded research project on experimental intensive camera-trapping for wildcats. She chose one of the estates and deployed 40 cameras between February and May. Consequently, no CWP cameras were deployed during this time on that particular estate.

The PM has facilitated the purchasing and/or deployment in the National Park of other camera traps by individuals or organisations, in order to maximise the detection and monitoring of wildcats around the National Park. The PM assisted Glen Feshie Estate in setting up two of their camera traps on the estate. He also ordered a further batch of discounted camera traps. The majority were bought on

behalf of the RZSS (for intensive camera trapping of wildcats in the National Park) and SNH (for wildlife monitoring on National Nature Reserves in the East Highlands). Another 10 were ordered on behalf of individuals and ranger services for wildlife monitoring within the Cairngorms National Park, while the remaining cameras will be used by the CWP on participating estates and loaned out to National Park rangers to intensify and expand coverage.

In February 2010, the RZSS employed Roo Campbell to do post-doctoral research on wildcats in the Cairngorms National Park. Roo has recently begun to initiate intensive camera trapping on the CWP's five participating estates in order to provide baseline data on wildcat abundance. This will allow the impact of the CWP's estates protocol on wildcat populations to be evaluated further down the line.

Plans for Year 2

Over the course of the second year of the Project, we'll continue to raise awareness of wildcat conservation and what people can do to help. In particular, alongside local vets and Cats Protection branches, we'll continue to communicate the need for responsible cat ownership. We hope to consolidate a co-ordinated approach to feral cat trapping and neutering across the National Park. We will also expand and intensify camera trapping for wildcats so we can better understand their whereabouts, numbers and hybridisation levels.

How you can help

- Report sightings of potential wildcats to the Cairngorms Wildcat Project via www.highlandtiger.com/help_report.asp or by contacting David Hetherington on the details below.
- If you find a roadkill carcase of a stripy cat please take it to a freezer immediately (there are freezer facilities at the Highland Wildlife Park, Kincaig; the SNH office at Aviemore; and the Glen Tanar Estate near Aboyne) or contact David Hetherington on the details below.
- We would also be very interested to hear about any unneutered domestic cats, particularly colonies of ferals. We will then pass the information on to local Cats Protection volunteers who can organise for the cats to be neutered.
- Of course, if you are a cat owner you can help by making sure your pets are neutered and vaccinated so that they can't interbreed with, or pass on any diseases to, our endangered wildcats.
- The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland manages a Highland Tiger fund, the proceeds of which are used to support wildcat conservation work throughout the Cairngorms National Park. If you would like to contribute by adopting a wildcat, or by donating, please visit: www.highlandtiger.com/help_adopt.asp.

Contact

Dr David Hetherington, Project Manager, Cairngorms Wildcat Project, Cairngorms National Park Authority, 14 The Square, Grantown on Spey, Morayshire PH26 3HG
E-mail: davidhetherington@cairngorms.co.uk Phone: 01479 873535

Photo credits: Front cover - Gray Garner & Pearl Manson; P5 – Andrew Duke; P6 – Alan Smith; P7 – David Pirnie; P8 – Lorne Gill, SNH; P9 – Lorne Gill, SNH; P10 – Louise Kerr; P11 - Peter Cairns.