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# Wildcat in Scotland

An unfolding landscape of change driven by attitudes, management and loss of habitat ultimately eliminated wildcats from England and Wales by the end of the 19th century, leaving *F. silvestris* only in the northern half of Scotland. This was no romantic haven, as Scotland also did its best during the 19th century to eradicate any species seen as competition on the sporting estates, and the wildcat only survived by retreating to the more inaccessible and sympathetically managed parts of the country.

In England and Wales wildcats mostly featured as yet another member of the mammalian fauna but in Scotland it also entered the cultural tapestry of the country. The fossil record indicates wildcats have lived in Scotland since the glacial mass of the last Ice Age retreated far enough north to allow climate and landscape to develop and provide suitable habitat and prey. Across England and Wales much older (over 100,000 years old) wildcat remains have been recovered, but the destructive nature of glacial cycles has left Scotland with precious little forensic evidence of a faunal record older than from the end of the last Ice Age.

## Earliest records of the Scottish wildcat

The oldest Scottish wildcat artefact is probably a jaw bone from Elsay Brock in Caithness. Kurtén (1965) proposed the bone was from the Late Pleistocene Epoch (about 120,000–11,700 years ago), however the brock dates from the Bronze Age (4,200–2,400 years ago), and the mandible is unlikely to be from a period preceding the last Ice Age.

The famous Inchnadamph caves relinquished a post-glacial wildcat lower jaw bone that may be a similar age to the Elsay Brock specimen, and fossilised bones from Loch Borrallie cairn (Sutherland) and the coastal caves of Dumfries and Galloway were dated from the Iron Age (2,700–1,900 years ago).

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Wildcat in Scotland

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the highland landscape to the end of the century. Along with improved weaponry and transport continued the task of keeping competing vermin such as wildcats in check.

Grouse, hare and deer hunting were not considered suitable for a gentleman until the early years of the 19th century. Between 1840 and 1850, deer-stalking and grouse shooting became a status symbol for the wealthy as the aristocracy flocked to the moors for game. During the 1890s half a million grouse were killed annually. Shooting became a social occasion, and Edwardian estates competed with each other for the prestige of the greatest numbers of birds killed – the greater numbers killed meant landowners could charge more the following season. A premium was also set on salmon fishing rights: up to about 1850 this was often a communal activity carried out with lights, a net and a pronged fork, but it became a status sport of the wealthy,

*During the rise in the number and activities of gamekeepers in the 19th century, British populations of pine martens, polecats and wildcats were driven to the brink of extinction*



(dogs, bitches young and old), 224 eagles (fully grown, young and eggs), 936 ravens, 1,055 hawks, 1,739 carrion crows/magpies, and 548 King's Fishers (dipper, water ouzel).

**The list of animals killed at the Glen Garry estates in Inverness-shire between Whitsunday 1837 and Whitsunday 1840 highlights the wide range of animals and birds targeted as vermin in order to protect game**

Foxes	11	Ash-coloured hawks (male hen-harriers)	9
Wild cats	198	Blue hawks or peregrine	98
Martin cats	246	Hobby hawks	11
Polecats	106	Jer falcons, toe-feathered hawks	6
Stoats and weasels	301	Orange-legged falcons	7
Badgers	67	Merlins	78
Otters	48	Kestrels	462
House cats, going wild	78	Common buzzards	285
White-tailed eagles	27	Rough-legged buzzards	371
Golden eagles	15	Honey buzzards	3
Ospreys	18	Ravens	475
Gos hawks	63	Hooded or carrion crows	1,431
Kites	275	Common fern owls (short-eared)	71
Hen harriers	83	Horned owls (long-eared)	35
Marsh harriers	5	Golden owls	3

The golden owls are possibly barn owls, and it is important for recording purposes that wildcats and domestic cats are given separate entries. To put these figures into context we should consider the collective efforts of all sporting estates and not just the vermin list for Glen Garry.

Further persecution at Glen Garry continued for many years, and more wildcats were killed. No vermin list was maintained at Glen Garry for the years 1840 to 1842, but between 1843–46 a total of 34 wildcats were killed; 1847–1850 there were 61 killed; and 1851–54 there were 31 wildcats killed. The number of wildcats killed in the latter years was considerably less than the initial 198 recorded in the 1837–1840 period.

Other examples contributing to the ongoing demise of *F. silvestris* from the 1830s included 207 wildcats killed during a 19 year period at Glenquich, 48 killed at

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