

En Øuer fir d'Natur

Lend an ear to nature



Episode 13

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PROFILE

EN: EUROPEAN WILDCAT
LAT: *FELIS SILVESTRIS SILVESTRIS*



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Did you recognise the wildcat in the clip?

This meowing may sound familiar to cat owners, but beware – this sound comes from a European wildcat, a typical inhabitant of Europe's natural deciduous and mixed forests. To be precise, it is the *mating* call, which is made by the male during the reproductive season.

What many people often don't realise is that the wildcat is not a feral, 'stray' domestic cat, but a distinct endangered species that has lived in our forests for thousands of years.

At first glance, wildcats (*Felis silvestris silvestris*) and domestic cats (*Felis sylvestris catus*) may look similar, but there are characteristic differences:

- The **wildcat** always has a dense, **grey-beige to sand-coloured** coat with rather blurred stripes. However, there is a very clear dark stripe along the spine, called the **eel stripe**.
- Its **tail** is **thick and bushy, bluntly rounded** and has **two to three black rings** and a **black tip** – the most reliable distinguishing feature.
- The **nose** is also different: in wildcats it is **flesh-coloured**, while in most domestic cats it is dark or black.
- Wildcats appear to be **slightly more powerfully built** overall and have a broad head

However, only precise morphometric or genetic analyses can reliably distinguish between the two species.

Way of life

The European wildcat is a **solitary animal**: it lives alone, except during the mating season from January to March. During this period, its characteristic mating call can occasionally be heard at night or at dusk, but rarely – because it is a shy animal and stays away from human settlements.

Its habitat consists mainly of extensive old **deciduous or mixed forests**. These must be structured, i.e. consist of many different layers of trees and shrubs of varying ages and have dense forest edges. The wildcat also needs **hiding places** such as tree stumps, rootstocks, crevices or fallen trees. Here it sleeps during the day or raises its young. It usually gives birth to 3 to 5 kittens between April and May, which become independent after about three to four months.



To get from one forest to the next, the secretive wildcat prefers to stay under cover of hedges, bushes or tall grass. That is why these landscape elements are important as so-called **migration corridors** on agricultural land – this makes it easier for them (and many other animals) to migrate from one habitat to the next.

Their territory is quite large: females often have **territories** of 200 to 500 hectares, while males have a roaming area of up to 2,000 to 2,500 hectares, which can encompass several female territories – always in search of food and to mark their territory.

At night, they go **hunting** and eat mainly mice. Only occasionally do they eat birds or insects.

Distribution in Luxembourg

The European wildcat is found **throughout Luxembourg** and, despite historical hunting, has never become completely extinct in our country. Its main areas of distribution are the Moselle hinterland, the deciduous forests of the Gutland, especially along the river valleys, and the Lohhecken of the Ösling.

However, the population is only **cautiously estimated** – exact figures are difficult to obtain because the animals are shy and rarely observed. But it is assumed that their population in Luxembourg is around 250-300 animals.

Scientific evidence of wildcats is obtained using wildlife cameras and the '*hair trapping method*' – for this purpose, roughened wooden pegs are set up in potential wildcat territories and sprinkled with valerian as a scent lure. The wildcats are attracted by the scent and rub against the stake (as domestic cats like to do against people's legs) – the hairs that stick to the wooden stake are then collected and genetically analysed in the laboratory.



Dangers and threats

The wildcat is considered an endangered species and is protected by European and national law.

For an animal species that requires such large territories in which to roam, the main threat is obvious: **fragmentation by urban sprawl**. This refers to the fragmentation of natural habitats by human infrastructure such as roads, residential areas and settlements. This leads to the **isolation** of the wildcat's habitats: on the one hand, the habitats become smaller and more isolated from each other because the necessary migration corridors between the individual habitats (such as hedges) are missing. This makes it difficult for the wildcat to move around, find mates or explore new areas.

This results in **traffic accidents** being a frequent cause of death – cats crossing roads are often run over. Despite efforts to build wildlife bridges, natural corridors are rare in Luxembourg, but roads are unfortunately common, so many wildcats suffer this fate.

Immediate habitat loss as such is also a threat: old forests, structurally rich edges, hedges and undergrowth are being removed; fewer old trees and less cover = fewer safe places to sleep and retreat. This makes the population vulnerable – especially when young cats cannot find enough protection.

Another danger is **hybridisation** with domestic cats. Free-roaming or stray domestic cats can mate with wild cats. This dilutes the genetic independence of the wildcat, so to speak – important adaptations to the forest habitat and their shyness towards humans can be lost – thus reducing their chances of survival in the wild. Viral diseases carried by domestic cats are also a risk to wildcats, as wildcats cannot be vaccinated.

How can you help wildcats?

- **Neuter your domestic cat:** Domestic cats that are allowed to leave the house should always be neutered. This reduces hybridisation with wildcats and the transmission of diseases. Especially on the outskirts of villages or isolated farms, free-roaming domestic cats pose a direct threat to the survival of wildcats.
- **Create and maintain natural migration corridors:** Support nature conservation organisations that maintain, restore or promote structurally rich landscapes – this creates migration corridors of hedges, bushes and herbaceous vegetation for wildcats and many other species. Actively approach your local authority to ensure that such projects are implemented on their land.
- **3. Manage forests in a natural way:** Old trees, native species, plenty of undergrowth, dead wood and hiding places are very important for wildcats. If you own a forest, work should be planned in such a way that retreats are preserved and not everything is 'cleaned up'

Further information on wildcats can be found here:

- Comprehensive information on wildcats and conservation projects from BUND in Germany (in German):
<https://www.bund.net/themen/tiere-pflanzen/wildkatze/europaeische-wildkatze/>
- Video from the 2017 series 'Eist Wëllt Lëtzebuerg' (in Luxembourgish):
<https://www.bund.net/themen/tiere-pflanzen/wildkatze/europaeische-wildkatze/>

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