Will wildcats harm our already struggling wildlife?

Understanding the impacts of wildcats on key species in the region including bats, dormice and songbirds was an important part of the feasibility study.

We undertook an extensive literature review around wildcat diet. From this we conclude that there is little evidence that they will target rare and vulnerable species. For example, research from Europe shows that bats are not recorded as prey, while hazel dormice are only rarely taken.

Our research shows that the benefits of re-establishing a critically endangered species should outweigh the low risk of any localised negative impacts. The presence of wildcats will act to balance local ecosystems (see 'Why bring wildcats back?' section) rather than simply adding to predator pressures.

The close ongoing monitoring of wildcats after release will be a key element of a reintroduction project. Monitoring will allow us to learn more about their impacts and to intervene with mitigating measures if challenges arise.

Photo: Tom Mason

Do people support the idea of wildcats returning?

Yes, the project's research showed a strong majority of people in the region are in favour of the return of wildcats.

The project commissioned independent research which gathered the opinions of more than 2,400 people.

It found that a significant majority felt positively towards the reintroduction of the animals to the South West of England:

- 71% of 1,000 people (representative by age and gender of the region's population) contacted by researchers supported the idea of wildcat return.
- 83% of 1,425 people who responded independently to an online questionnaire supported the idea of wildcat return.

However, the research also revealed concerns from some people and communities around wildcat reintroduction. These were especially strongly felt around the perceived impacts of wildcats on farming/livestock (especially poultry and game birds), on domestic cats and on existing wildlife. Concerns were also raised about the health and welfare of a reintroduced wildcat population.

To be successful and maintain future public support a wildcat reintroduction project would focus on:

1. Establishing open and ongoing communication with those who have concerns about wildcats. This is especially key with communities living close to wildcat release sites.
2. Working with stakeholders to establish and maintain a robust wildcat monitoring and management programme which can quickly act if issues for people and wildlife arise.

Photo: Tom Mason

What next for wildcats in the South West?

We believe that wildcat releases in the South West of England are feasible and would have a positive impact on the region's wildlife and wild places.

However, a great deal of work remains to be done before this can take place. It is unlikely that any reintroduction of the animals could take place before the year 2027 at the earliest.

Key tasks include:

- Undertaking detailed assessments to determine exactly where wildcats should be released.
- Working with communities to ensure better understanding and acceptance of what wildcats are and will do.
- Sourcing a healthy and genetically diverse cohort of wildcats for reintroduction.
- Gaining the legal permissions to allow for the release of animals.
- Establishing a long-term monitoring plan for wildcats, along with securing support for local communities to help them live alongside wildcats.
- Securing funding to make a reintroduction programme a success.

Finding out more

You can read the full 'South West England Wildcat Reintroduction Report' at **devonwildlifetrust.org/south-west-wildcat-project**

The South West England Wildcat Project is a partnership between Devon Wildlife Trust, Forestry England and the Derek Gow Consultancy Ltd. With support from Wildwood Trust and University of Exeter.

Devon Wildlife Trust · Forestry England · Derek Gow Consultancy Ltd

We would like to thank Devon Environment Foundation, The Benindi Fund and Forestry England for their financial support.

www.devonwildlifetrust.org Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future

South West England Wildcat Project: a case for their return

Devon Wildlife Trust

Forestry England · Derek Gow Consultancy Ltd

Photo: Tom Mason

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Photo: Tom Mason

What did the feasibility stage of the South West England Wildcat Project set out to do?

The feasibility study stage of the South West England Wildcat Project began in 2023 and was completed in 2025.

Its purpose was to investigate whether a reintroduction of wildcats to the South West of England was feasible.

The project was led by Devon Wildlife Trust in partnership with Forestry England and the Derek Gow Consultancy Ltd.

The project's research covered a wide range of topics but concentrated on four main aspects of wildcat reintroduction:

1. Impacts on people
2. Impacts on other wildlife
3. Impacts on domestic animals (livestock and pets)
4. The long-term sustainability of a wildcat population in the South West

This leaflet provides a summary of the report. For its full findings, go to the 'South West England Wildcat Reintroduction Report' at **devonwildlifetrust.org/south-west-wildcat-project**

What is the conclusion of the project's feasibility stage?

The project found that South West England contains sufficient connected suitable habitat, along with a level of public support, to make the re-establishment of wildcats a possibility, so long as education around wildcats and community engagement were addressed.

Interbreeding with domestic/feral cats is recognised as a risk, however this is not sufficient reason not to proceed.

Why bring wildcats back?

Returning wildcats (also known as woodcats) to the South West of England is important for two reasons:

1. **To secure the long-term survival of the species in the UK**
   Wildcats in the UK are the classed as 'Critically Endangered'. The species faces extinction, with the remaining animals in Scotland subject to a 'last chance' conservation recovery programme.

   Action is urgently needed to reinforce this existing small population, coupled with the reintroduction of wildcats to other suitable places.

   The South West was identified in a previous study as the most suitable region of England to investigate for a wildcat reintroduction. Their return would be a positive step in securing a long-term future for the species.

2. **Restoring healthy local ecosystems**
   Predators are vital components of a healthy ecosystem. The loss of native and once widespread wildlife, such as wildcats, will impact their prey and the habitats they rely on. Predators provide a vital role in removing sick and weak individuals, while maintaining prey populations at levels that help reduce negative impacts on other species and habitats.

Wildcats are likely to predate the region's abundant grey squirrel population.

Photo: Tom Mason

Wildcats disappeared from our region once, could they survive here again?

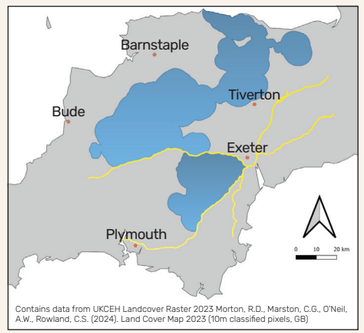
Wildcats disappeared from the South West of England in the 1800s, primarily as a result of human persecution. This was exacerbated by a contraction of the mixed woodland and rough grassland landscapes they like best.

However, our research suggests that the circumstances for their successful return are now in place. Public attitudes towards wildlife persecution have improved markedly and robust legal protection is now in place. Tree cover in the region has also increased over the past century, so that more suitable wildcat habitat exists today than in decades past.

The project identified specific areas of the region which contain enough suitable habitat for wildcats to flourish.

The map below identifies the most connected wildcat habitat in blue. Yellow represents the high volume road network.

Release areas would be selected where there is lower traffic levels and road densities. This is to reduce the risk of wildcat road deaths, a significant threat to existing wildcats in Europe.



Contains data from UKCEH Landcover Raster 2023 Morton, R.D., Marston, C.G., O'Neil, A.W., Rowland, C.S. (2024). Land Cover Map 2023 (10m classified pixels, GB)

Photo: Tom Mason

Would wildcats breed with local feral and domestic cats?

Interbreeding (hybridisation) between wildcats and feral/domestic cats has been a problem for the Scottish population, threatening the genetic security of the species.

Our research looking at populations across Europe suggests that hybridisation is not inevitable. It is suggested that addressing the drivers behind interbreeding could result in a self-sustaining wildcat population with a lower risk of hybridisation. Put simply, when there are enough wildcats around and enough food to eat, wildcats are less likely to come into contact with and breed with feral or domestic cats.

A key task for any wildcat reintroduction project is to promote responsible pet cat ownership and work to reduce numbers of unneutered cats within potential wildcat areas. This can only be achieved through working closely with local stakeholders and cat welfare organisations. Programmes to neuter unowned cats in areas where wildcats are present will form an important part of this partnership effort.

What are wildcats?

- They look like a domestic tabby cat, but are up to 25% bigger, with chunkier bodies, longer legs and a thicker tail.
- Despite their physical similarities wildcats and domestic cats show very different behaviour.
- Wildcats are secretive and active mainly at night. They avoid people and pose no threat to us.
- Their scientific name *Felis silvestris* translates as 'Cat of the Woods', hence the old English name of 'woodcat'.
- They were once common across England, Scotland and Wales but by the 1800s had been hunted to near extinction.
- Today they exist only in parts of Scotland, but remain widespread in continental Europe, Turkey and the Caucasus region.
- They mainly prey on small mammals, especially mice, rabbits and voles.
- Wildcats live at very low densities and are solitary outside of the breeding season.