

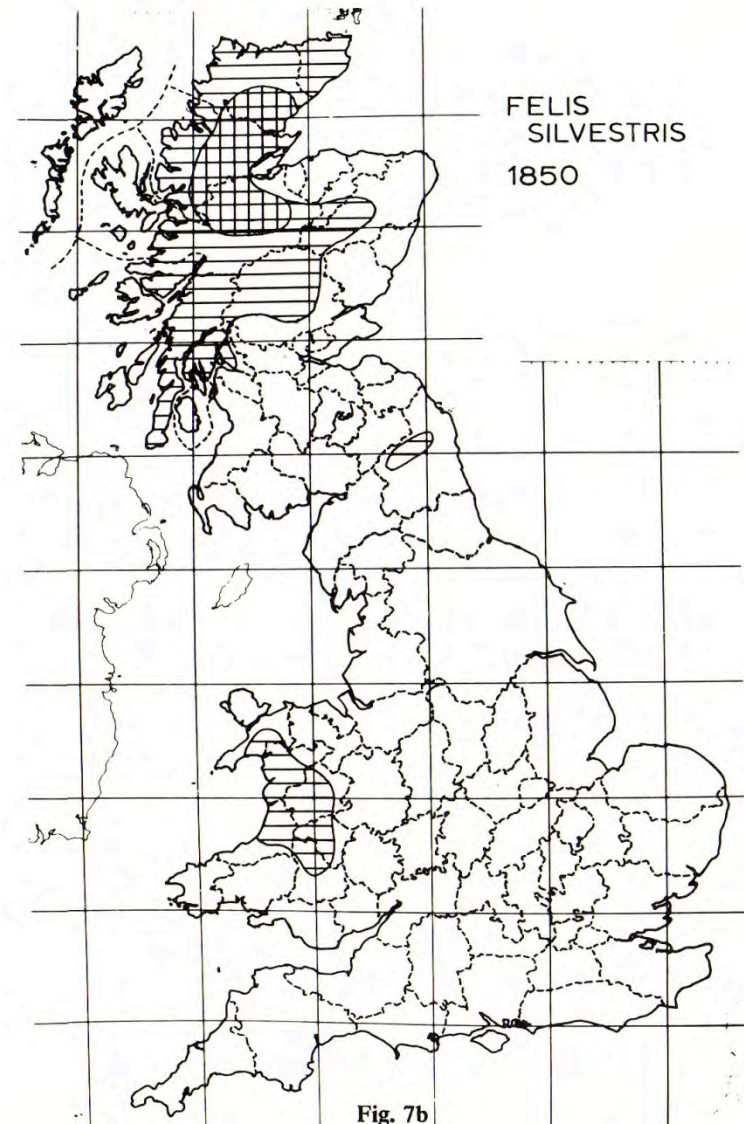
# The Cairngorms Wildcat Project

## Saving the Highland Tiger



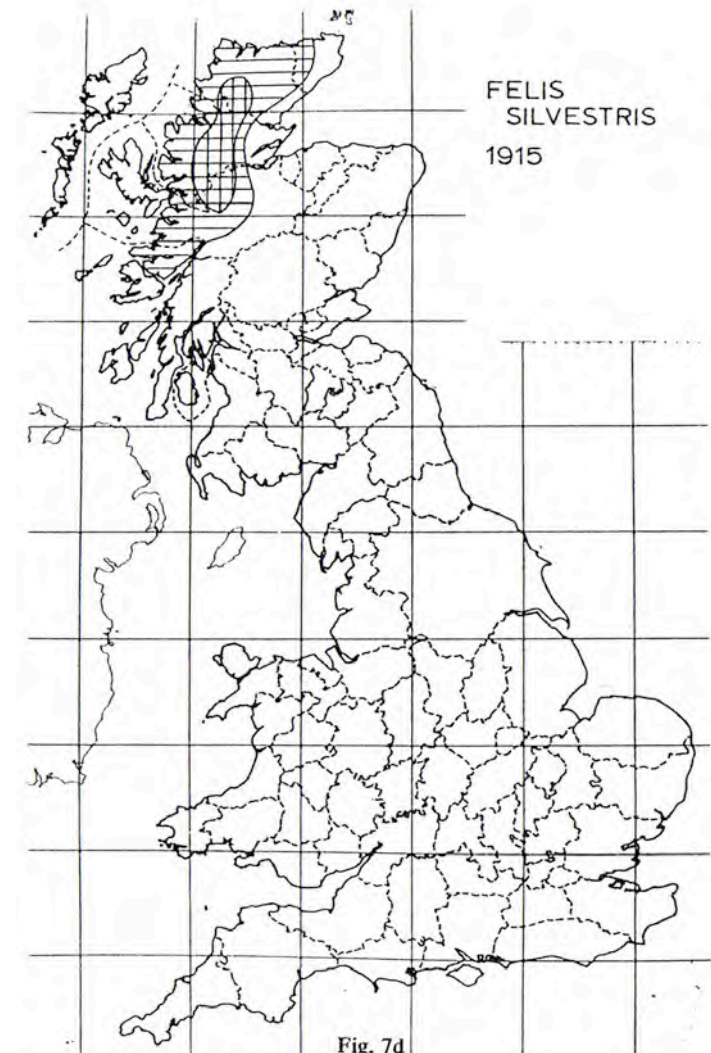
# The decline of the wildcat

- Once found throughout Britain, including some large offshore islands.
- Hunting and habitat loss led to decline in southern England before 1800. After this, restricted to uplands in north and north west.
- Development of sporting estates in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century sped up decline. Extinct in England & Wales by 1860.

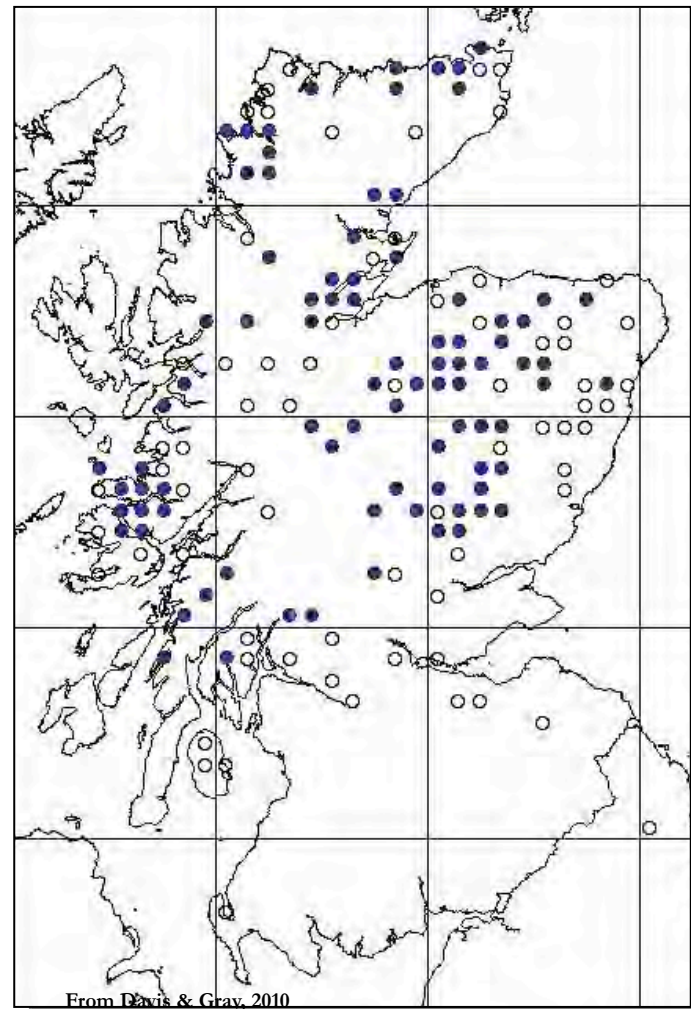


# On the brink of extinction

- Habitat loss (4% woodland cover in 1900).
- Persecution.
- Saved by World War I: fewer gamekeepers and more woodland.



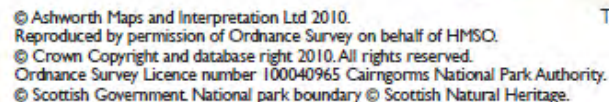
# Wildcats in modern Scotland



## ***The Cairngorms National Park is a special place that needs special care...***

- The Cairngorms National Park is considered a stronghold for the Scottish Wildcat.
- Like the Park itself, the wildcat is a very special species, being our last native cat and therefore needs special care.





# Diet

Prey items in 546 wildcat faeces  
Glen Tanar, 1975-78:

Rabbits & hares	92%
Rodents & shrews	18%
Grass	9%
Gamebirds	7%
Small birds	3%
Unidentified bird	3%



# Social organisation

## **Adult males:**

- Exclude other adult males from home ranges.
- Completely overlap with 2 or 3 adult females.

## **Adult females:**

- Exclude other adult females from home ranges.
- Tolerate juveniles.





# Home range

## Average home range size:

- Males: 4.6 km<sup>2</sup>
- Females: 1.8 km<sup>2</sup>
- Much bigger territories in western Highlands due to less abundant prey.



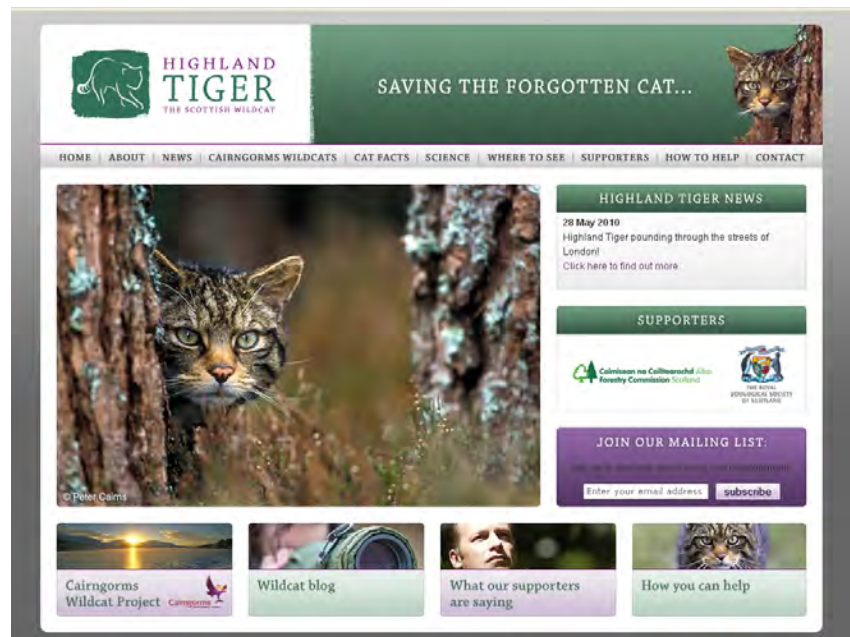
# Threats to the Scottish wildcat

- **Continued interbreeding with domestic cats seen as the biggest threat.**
- **Wildcat population has recently been estimated to be as low as only 400 'pure' wildcats – real risk of extinction!**
- **Risk of diseases which could be spread from domestic cat population (and vice versa).**
- **Wildcats being killed during otherwise legal predator control activities.**

# The Cairngorms Wildcat Project

- Awareness raising.
- Responsible cat ownership.
- Feral cat population control.
- Wildcat-friendly predator control.
- Monitoring.

# Awareness Raising





# Domestic Cats in the Countryside



- 10 million domestic cats in UK.
- Valued as both a pet and a mouser.
- Estimated to kill >100 million small mammals and birds each year in UK, including game.
- Capable of interbreeding with wildcats.
- Capable of spreading fatal diseases to wildcats.
- By defecating on feed, infected kittens can spread toxoplasmosis to sheep, resulting in ewes becoming barren or aborting.

# Neutering...

- Prevents further interbreeding with wildcats.
- Reduces the number of unwanted cats and limits population growth & spread.
- Prevents development of tumours of testicles, ovaries and uterus.
- Reduces likelihood of roaming and risk of being shot or run over.
- Reduces fighting and therefore injury and disease.
- Reduces wailing and spraying.

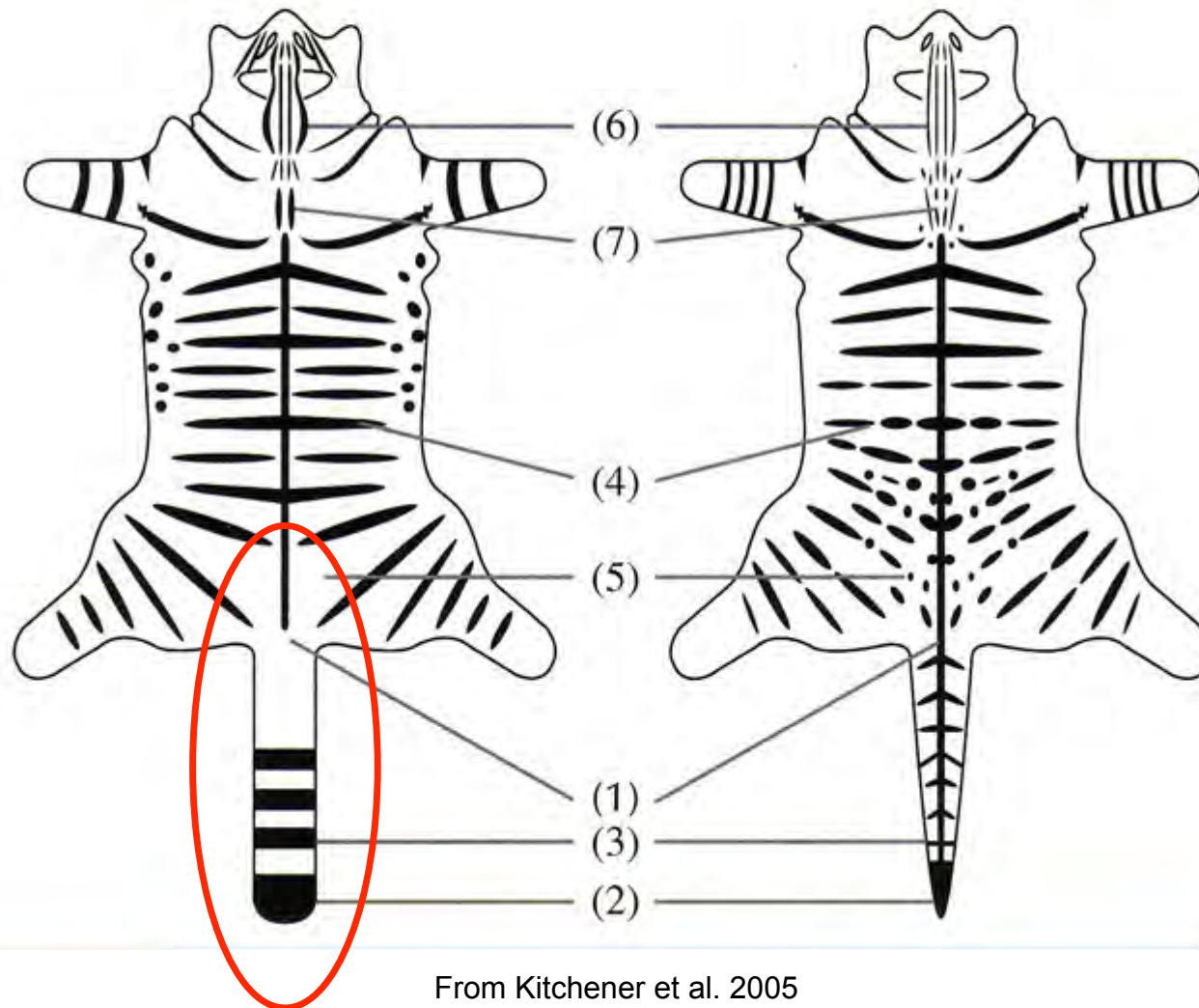
## Feral cat neutering...

- Working with Cats Protection on a coordinated programme across the National Park.
- Vets act as unofficial ambassadors for the project when making farm visits.
- Trained volunteers cage-trap cats and take them to local vet.
- Feral cats are tested for disease and euthanised if positive for certain conditions.
- If tested negative, they are neutered and returned.

# Telling wildcats and domestic cats apart

Scottish wildcat

Free-ranging tabby cat



From Kitchener et al. 2005



# Working with estates

- Adopt a precautionary approach to feral cat control.
- Practical definition of a wildcat for field conditions.
  1. Tabby markings.
  2. No white feet.
  3. Thick, ringed, blunt-ended tail.
  4. No stripe down the tail.
- Help monitor wildcat and feral cat occurrences.

# ***The Cairngorms National Park is a place to enjoy and get involved....***

## **Conclusions:**

- The wildcat is an icon for the people of the Cairngorms National Park, and Scotland as a whole.
- The Scottish wildcat faces a real risk of extinction.
- Efforts to save it will only succeed if **everyone** mucks in and pulls together!
- People can help by reporting wildcat sightings; reporting the occurrences of feral cats; being a responsible cat owner; and spreading the word!