

Wild Cat – Born to be wild! – *Felis silvestris*

They lead a secluded and hidden life, often sleeping during the day and hunting at night. Hardly anyone ever sees them. But they are here – in the National Park Thayatal where they roam about again: wild cats. No, they are not stray house cats. They are bigger than their cousins from behind the stove, stronger and wilder than our tabbies. And they have been roaming the forests of Europe long before the Romans brought the first house cats across the Alps. Until recently wild cats were widely disseminated throughout Europe. Today they are extinct or threatened of extinction in many parts of the continent.

Wild cats like it quiet

Wild cats need semi-natural refuges with little disturbances, such as only large forest areas can offer. Wild cats are mostly active at sunset and during the night. In the daytime, they retreat to sheltered places to rest. Thick, thorny bushes; sprays of wood overgrown with blackberries; crests or root plates of fallen trees are among their favorite day camps. They tend to stick to particularly safe hiding places.

Occasionally they leave their hiding place during the day, for example to lie in the sun. But even then, it is difficult to see wild cats as they rely on their perfect camouflage and usually keep quiet if they hear a noise. This is why a hiker may walk by a few meters away from an animal without noticing it, while he will have been spotted long ago.

One of the main causes of death for wild cats is being run over by cars. In addition to this, in some European countries, wild cats are still hunted. The “shooting by mistake” due to a confusion with house cats during a regular hunt can be fatal to wild cats in many areas.

Cat and mouse – A wild cat’s prey

Wild cats are specialized hunters. They always go hunting alone, not in groups like lions or wolves. This is why they only attack preys that are smaller than them. Cat-like, they waylay their prey mostly under cover of darkness in order to take it by surprise. Mice, in particular voles, constitute the main prey of wild cats in Europe. But when this staple food runs short, wild cats also turn to other types of prey. Their menu can then comprise rabbits, birds, lizards or frogs depending on availability. Hares or fawns however are only rarely caught as shown in food analyses.

They will only settle for carcasses in times of need. The long winters with heavy snow are a difficult time for wild cats. As of a layer of 20 cm of snow mice are hard to catch. Because of their weight, wild cats are no longer able to walk on the snow surface, which limits their movements and therefore their chances at hunting. This is the reason why wild cats do not occur in areas with ongoing high snow levels as the animals do not hibernate and are therefore dependent on regular hunting results.

Wild cat territories

Wild cats keep to their territory. But young cats roam at large, particularly during the mating season. The roaming areas of females vary in size depending on their habitats and can cover between 300 and 600 ha. Males need areas of 1,000 to 3,000 ha. where they will mostly seek out the outer and inner borders of forests. Small clearings, meadows hidden in the woods and quiet forest borders with large configurations of hedges are the key elements of their habitat – these are teeming with all kinds of small mammals: various mice species from woods, forest borders and open land meet there and constitute a safe source of food. Studies of wild cats tagged with miniature transmitters show that wild cats are genuine “border crossers” which like to withdraw into the safety of the forest.