

## Protecting the Wild cat: a ‘green corridor’ for Luxembourg

*This article is by Marc Moes. The summarised translation is by David Crowther. Please get in touch with me at [dcrowther@pt.lu](mailto:dcrowther@pt.lu) if you have any queries about the English text or the original version.*

Since the 1970s people have become more understanding and protective about the Wild cat, with the result that Wild cats now occur in virtually all parts of Luxembourg, and in neighbouring regions. But there are new — and potentially devastating — dangers in the medium to long term.

Wild cat territories are big, at more than 10km<sup>2</sup> (females have smaller territories than males). On reaching adulthood, youngsters have to leave the parental territory and search for territories of their own. It is this (genetically essential) dispersal migration that it so often fatal, as motorways and urban ribbon development cut off huge swathes of countryside and isolate populations within their confines.

Recent research would seem to indicate that more than 20% of the current Wild cat population is in fact hybridised: crosses between genuine Wild cats and domestic cats. This phenomenon is particularly marked in the south-west of Luxembourg, which is ‘cut off’ from the rest of the country by a dense network of motorways (see map on page 17). Knowing this, it is all the more important to keep certain existing ‘wildlife corridors’ open and accessible, and free of ‘enveloping’ development. This kind of thing is what land-use planning is all about. The map on page 15 shows Wild cat territories in the Mamer and Eisch valleys.

Keeping corridors open is one thing. Quite another is opening up passages that have already been cut off. The newest motorways (the Trier A1 and the Nordstroos N7) are equipped with wildlife bridges and underpasses. The older ones, though (the Arlon A6, the Dudelange A3 and the Collectrice du Sud A13), are impermeable. These too need new wildlife passageways, perhaps when the A3 and A6 are upgraded to 2 x 3 lanes.

All this requires joined-up thinking. It is all well and good building wildlife bridges over the A1, but they lose their point if building work on the N1 between Roodt/Syre and Berg then cuts off long-standing migration routes between the Gréngewald and the Moselle hinterland. If Wild cats and other forest dwellers are to migrate safely between forest massifs, they need adequate cover in the open countryside, e.g. hedges, copses and streamside vegetation. There are now plans to provide such newly planted cover, partly under national schemes, partly under Europe-wide arrangements (Germany and the Netherlands being particularly active in this regard).

What rural cat-owners can do to protect Wild cats: Get your cat castrated to prevent any further risk of hybridisation! There is also an organisation in Luxembourg that can help to catch ownerless cats and get them castrated: [www.deierefrenn.lu](http://www.deierefrenn.lu).

## *European Wild cat*

### *Ancestors and relatives*

- *the European Wild cat is the European subspecies of the nominate species Wild cat*
- *domestic cats are descended from the African Wild cat*
- *gone-wild domestic cats are not true Wild cats*
- *all subspecies of the Wild cat and domestic cats can mate and reproduce, i.e. hybridise*

### *Field characteristics*

- *Wild cats look bigger than domestic cats*
- *grey coat, not markedly tabby*
- *thick tail with black rings and blunt black tip*
- *black stripes on top of head and nape, black back stripes*
- *orange around the nose, white around mouth*

### *Diet*

- *mainly small rodents, e.g. voles*

### *Reproductive behaviour*

- *mates normally once a year — litter 2-4 young*
- *main mating period: February (also March)*
- *young born: April (also May)*
- *young become independent at the age of 4 months*

### *Social organisation*

- *lead solitary territorial lives*
- *territory borders are marked and are recognised by neighbours*
- *a male's territory overlaps with the territory of several females*

### *Conservation status*

- *Annex IV of the EU Fauna-Flora-Habitats Directive*
- *Annex II of the Bern Agreement*
- *other species protection agreements*
- *huntable status in Luxembourg: no hunting allowed*

Some 20 years ago, Regulus 2/1994 last ran an article (also by Marc Moes) on the Wild cat. It discussed the new, emerging population data and human threats to the Wild cat.

Since then, conservation has moved on, and we are now discussing other forms of species protection in the light of new information and emerging threats. Thus does conservation adapt to a changing environment.