



Nine Lives Down

Love, Loss, and Longing in Scottish Wildcat Conservation

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Abstract Scottish wildcat conservation is a tricky business, dogged by rampant hybridization, habitat loss, illegal poaching, and, more recently, calls from ecologists to declare the creature functionally extinct. While conservation bodies refuse to declare the fight over, the wildcat's precarious position raises questions regarding extinction and its place in the wider conservation narrative. In this article the author tackles the possibly futile attempts by conservation bodies to save the Scottish wildcat from the brink of extinction in Britain's "last wild place"—the Ardnamurchan peninsula in the North West Highlands. Through an analysis of past, present, and future configurations of the wildcat in the popular imagination, and an examination of its status as a "ghost species"—surviving on borrowed time due to anthropogenic intervention—this article aims to conceptualize the wildcat's conservation as a sort of haunting. Existing as a wild emblem through a concentrated media campaign of inflated presence, it nonetheless remains hidden through hybridization and absence: a spectral being. The article therefore suggests that to truly save the wildcat is to account for its ghostliness and urge that conservationists instead accept the likely absence of wildcats in order to do the painful—but necessary—work of letting go.

Keywords wildness, rewilding, extinction, memory, myth, haunting, Scotland

Nine Lives Down: Love, Loss and Letting Go in Scottish Wildcat Conservation.

In a vast, gray building on the outskirts of Edinburgh lies the National Museum of Scotland collections facility. A cavernous maze, it is stuffed full of objects and specimens not kept on display in the museum itself. I have been lucky enough to be granted entry as part of the wildcat team from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), who have brought a selection of dead cats in an ice box to be identified by the museums' resident wildcat expert. In turn we are invited to see some of the center's collection of wildcat skins (fig. 1) and to participate in a master class in pure-blood wildcat identification. There are seven skins in total, alongside a selection of skulls. We are asked to guess which are pure wildcats and which are hybrids—the offspring of a wildcat mating with a feral or domestic cat.



Figure 1. Cat skin on display at the National Museum of Scotland.

The task proves difficult, despite the cats' visibly decreasing in size when arranged in chronological order (some of the skins are over a hundred years old). We are told to look for patches of white fur, stripes that extend all the way down to the tail, and a small narrow skull as evidence of hybridization, but even these signs are not completely accurate. In short there is no fool proof way of telling for sure if a wildcat is pure merely by looking at it; given that the wildcat's hostility toward human contact makes visual identification even harder, its conservationists seem to be facing an uphill struggle when it comes to even knowing what it is they're trying to save.

The Scottish wildcat's existence hangs in the balance. Some population estimates place the creature at a mere thirty-five individuals.¹ Yet it is not merely these figures that have galvanized conservation bodies into action after many decades of viewing the wildcat as a pest.² A member of the SNH team tells me that recent years have seen the wildcat "appeal to the zeitgeist" in terms of a desire to save something that is imagined to be more independent, wilder, and fiercer. How the wildcat has come to embody this descriptor is evident in the cat skins we had been identifying. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries museums would pay gamekeepers to hand over the biggest cats they had slaughtered, which were then arranged in exhibits to portray

1. McKie, "Why the Scottish Wildcat Is Staring Extinction in the Face."

2. Historically, wildcats have been treated in the same way as any predator threatening livestock, with farmers having no qualms about culling them.

the particularly fierce and frightening qualities that the species was perceived to embody at the time.³ The type specimen used at the British Museum was a particularly large cat killed at Invermoriston in 1907, and subsequently any cats that did not match that description were discarded as hybrids or inauthentic. The physical features of this skin have subsequently been used as a gold standard of wildcat purity, which continues to this day. In other words, what is deemed evidence of a pure cat today is based on a particularly Victorian sentiment that is now over a hundred years old.

A few weeks before the museum master class, I had taken a two-week solo trip into the heartland of wildcat territory—the remote Ardnamurchan peninsula in the Scottish Highlands—in an attempt to immerse myself both in practical conservation initiatives and the landscape itself. Through a series of walks and encounters with various wildcat conservationists, experts, photographers, artists and animal lovers, I pieced together a surely incomplete picture of the wildcat and its unsteady position in the undergrowth of Scotland’s “last wild place.”⁴ I certainly did not see one myself, and the creature’s absence to me loomed large throughout my research encounters: on the banks of the Shiel; over a cup of tea at the wildcat exhibit; in a rain-lashed Land Rover while hunting foxes in the dead of night.

Through this empirical study, this article attempts to interrogate the slippery question of what a wildcat is and how its confounding absence reconfigures both the question *and* the answer. On the surface wildcat conservation is very much rooted in biopolitical taxonomic orderings of genetic purity and particular aesthetic traits, valorizing species-based methods of categorizing with little regard for individual agency or outlying behavior.⁵ Presence must be monitored, population counts plotted. Excessive hybridity is unacceptable, and most of the work done by conservationists focuses on neutering feral and domestic cats to help strengthen the gene pool.⁶ Descriptions of the creature extoll its wild and independent nature as well as its inherent secrecy.⁷ It does not look good for the wildcat in these terms; conservation bodies have yet to identify a fully pure specimen since search efforts began in earnest. It may be that the pure wildcat is already extinct, bred down into a beast that no longer fits its own moniker. If this is true, is it simply a case of reconfiguring the boundaries of what makes a wildcat? If the hybridized wildcat performs much the same ecological function as its “wilder” counterpart, the push to safeguard the creature’s genetic purity suggests there is more to the story. As the search for pure wildcat specimens continues its stark absence takes on greater and greater weight. There are stories to be found in these absent spaces that speak of more than failure; it is my aim to tell them.

3. Smith, “Touch Not the Cat but a Glove.”

4. Tomkies, *Last Wild Place*.

5. Fredriksen, “Of Wildcats and Wild Cats.”

6. Lopez-Pujol et al., “Pure Species or Hybrid Species?”

7. The website for conservation group Wildcat Haven makes frequent reference to the wildcat’s “mysterious and wild spirit of the Highlands.”

Through this article I will show how attempts to render these secretive and declining animals more present and visible in the collective human imagination through a concentrated effort to restore a certain essentialist purity have transformed them into representatives for a distinct sense of loss. I will follow the wildcat through time, beginning with its checkered past within human history and folklore, following on to its present status as idealized wild embodiment, and finally to its uncertain future as mythological spectre. I will show that the wildcat's own desire to be absent from our gaze as well as its ability to confound conservation efforts, can be conceptualized as a sort of haunting. Through what I am terming "likely absence," haunting can generate new ways of thinking beyond anthropocentric conservation practices that are wedded to documenting presence and success; it is by drawing attention to this that I urge conservation practices to make space for the slippery, the ghostly, and the pain of letting go.

Conservation and the Wild: Absence, Presence, and the In-Between

Wildcat conservation is a tricky business. Zoologists are generally in agreement that the Scottish wildcat—*Felis silvestris grampia*—is an isolated population of the European wildcat, rather than a separate taxonomical unit.⁸ Despite this much of the popular literature and conservation appeals focus on its imminent extinction; that the wildcat population across the English Channel is thriving and healthy is ignored in favor of a call to arms to save "Britain's last large mammalian predator."⁹ Conservation groups in Scotland are currently locked in a rivalry over the acceptable rate of its genetic hybridity—Wildcat Haven pushing for only 100 percent purity, the SNH team allowing for a more achievable 75 percent purity.¹⁰ The notion that there is something *more* that would be lost should the particularly Scottish wildcat cease to be necessitates an engagement with conservation beyond taxonomy and population counts—specifically, how the wildcat becomes intricately bound up with the Scottish landscape.

We can trace the origins of Scotland's wilderness ideal to broader constructions of landscape in Victorian times, with John Wylie tracking the dual emergence of phenomenology and landscape as rooted in romanticism.¹¹ This can certainly apply to Scotland; the Scottish naturalist John Muir, often dubbed "the wilderness prophet,"¹² claimed in 1901, "None of nature's landscape are ugly so long as they are wild."¹³ His opinion that "wilderness is a necessity"¹⁴ chimes with that of the John Muir Trust's promotional video *Essential Wildness*, in which sweeping shots of Scotland's majestic uplands are

8. Kitchener et al., "A Revised Taxonomy of the Felidae."

9. Main, "Scottish Wildcat is Disappearing."

10. This is a seemingly quite acrimonious rivalry, with unconfirmed reports of monitoring equipment being vandalized, people threatened with legal action, and mud-raking in the press. An overview of the situation can be found in Miller, "Efforts to Save Scottish Wildcat 'Threatened' by Infighting"; Keane, "Catty Rivalry."

11. Wylie, "Landscape and Phenomenology."

12. Anderson, *John Muir*.

13. Muir, *Our National Parks*, 6.

14. Muir, *Our National Parks*, 6.

overlain with pleas to cherish what we have left: “We can build roads . . . cities . . . technological giants,” the video proclaims. “But we can’t build wilderness.”¹⁵ Alongside the promotion of a wild land map from SNH which places limits on built infrastructure, notions of a declining wilderness and its resulting wild creature populations influence both the tourist board-promoted vision of Scotland and its conservation directives. Macdonald points to the ways in which Scottish conservation bodies reproduce the picturesque through a campaign of erasure—a political process that acts to define pristine nature in contrast with a separate human (urban) sphere, conveniently ignoring the centuries of human influence on the Highlands through crofting and other land management practices.¹⁶ If we understand how self and landscape can combine through what Wylie calls “a performative milieu,”¹⁷ the affective narration of an attainable wild identity is perfectly packaged through Scotland’s romanticized landscape. This is of course not the identity experienced by people who currently live in these wilderness areas but one that is constructed through a concentrated campaign of landed interests, commodified endeavors, and visual motifs¹⁸—it is the notion that this wildness can be embodied by visitors who then return to their urban lifestyles.

All this chimes with the relatively new conservation concept of rewilding, which aims to restore lost ecological processes and take a less-interventionist approach to landscape management.¹⁹ There are multiple approaches to rewilding,²⁰ and in the interest of remaining specific to the wildcat, this review will focus on what we might term “anthropocentric rewilding,” in which the valorization of wildness takes place within a distinctly human narrative. This is particularly found within popular literature such as George Monbiot’s *Feral*, where his advocating for the reintroduction of apex predators such as the wolf creates a narrative that impacts which creatures are favored for conservation, and which species are considered to embody this wild configuration.²¹ Rewilding of this sort promises more dynamic landscapes and authentic encounters of enchantment; it is in this vein that anthropocentric rewilding encompasses not only a situated practice but also an embodiment of entrenched romantic ideals of what wilderness constitutes.²² The connotations of this vision point to an untamed, unpeopled

15. DX Films, “Essential Wildness,” 2015.

16. Macdonald, “Viewing Highland Scotland.”

17. Wylie, “A Single Day’s Walking,” 235.

18. Lorimer, “Guns, Game, and the Grandee.”

19. Soulè and Noss, “Rewilding and Biodiversity”; Foreman, *Rewilding North America*; Navarro and Pereira, “Rewilding Abandoned Landscapes.”

20. Certain practices of rewilding are much less human-centered, consisting of an ecologically holistic approach which is future oriented rather than a practice of attempting to bring back lost landscapes, and is less rooted in romantic ideals. For a further interrogation see Lorimer and Driessen, “Wild Experiments at the Oostvaarderplassen”; Prior and Brady, “Environmental Aesthetics and Rewilding.”

21. Monbiot, *Feral*.

22. Bekoff, *Rewilding Our Hearts*; There has also been an explosion in popular nature writing such as Robert Macfarlane’s *Wild Places* that tend to rapturous exaltations of “the wild,” leading to poet Kathleen Jamie despairing of the sense of privilege found in “a lone enraptured male.”

landscape in which humans are visitors, not co-creators;²³ one that is gladly reinforced by both the tourist board and Scottish estate owners who require vast swathes of empty land for blood sports.²⁴ The need to rewild the human has popped up in popular debate as a way to immerse the self in wondrous natural splendor deemed missing from our increasingly urban lifestyles,²⁵ although it ends up reinforcing the notion that this sort of pure wilderness can only exist on the periphery of the human sphere.

What this has led to in conservation terms is a privileging of species deemed to embody this wild ideal, or what SNH are terming “the zeitgeist.” Scotland’s wilderness has already seen tentative rewilding initiatives in the form of tree planting and beaver reintroduction, alongside a proposed wolf rewilding scheme in the grounds of a private sporting estate²⁶. Where does this leave the wildcat? As the only British mammalian predator left that can embody this wild ideal, its rescue has come to symbolize both an alleviation of guilt (its decline, after all, is *our* fault) and an indication that wilderness is still attainable. However, to achieve these goals necessitates proof of success; in terms of practical measures, there is currently little appetite to introduce European wildcats into Scotland, and the SNH captive breeding scheme is a slow process due to a dearth of viable mates. It is therefore of paramount importance to wildcat conservation—and indeed, most endangered species’ conservation—to document presence as a marker of progress. However, conservation practices around such an elusive and slippery creature, entangled with the difficulty of hybridity and taxonomy, necessitate a more careful approach than is often utilized in official initiatives.

Steve Hinchliffe’s work on black redstarts is important here, as he follows attempts by local conservation initiatives in Birmingham to fend off the encroachment of housing development into a possible habitat for these difficult to spot birds.²⁷ He proffers the term “likely presence” as a way of circumventing the often awkward and difficult practice of affirming definite presence. He claims that this is not only a way of representation but also adds something else: “Representing . . . is, then, more than a matter of recording presence—it involves engaging with potentials, including likely presence as well as differentiated presences.”²⁸ In a further study he examines the problematic function of recording the presence of species who do not embody their biological expectations, drawing attention to the way presence is revealed and subsequently troubled by the uncertain agency of creatures.²⁹

23. Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”; Jorgensen, “Rethinking Rewilding.”

24. Lorimer, “Guns, Game, and the Grandee.”

25. Monbiot, *Feral*.

26. Paul Lister, millionaire landowner of the Alladale Estate, has made a name for himself by rebranding his sporting estate as a haven for wildlife. His latest scheme involves the (fenced) rewilding of a pack of wolves and an accompanying proposal for a safari-style holiday package that would begin at £20,000 a week (Weymouth, “The Place Where Wolves Could Soon Return.”).

27. Hinchliffe, “Towards a Careful Political Ecology.”

28. Hinchliffe, “Towards a Careful Political Ecology,” 94.

29. Hinchliffe et al., “Urban Wild Things.”

This I argue might not go far enough in regard to the wildcat. What happens when presence cannot be quantified even as likely? Hybridity muddies the waters of documenting presence,³⁰ and coupled with the elusive behavior of such a creature, to search for evidence of the wildcat's existence is to necessarily engage with its absence. Adams and McCorristine consider practical issues in documenting presence, stating, "wildlife managers do not respect these species' right to remain absent."³¹ The sharp nagging of absence within a landscape is, however, not just a lack of something; it is a generative and dynamic rupture in the fabric of what makes up a place.³² Some might conceptualize the wildcat's absence as a haunting, the creature a spectral beast that troubles the spaces where it is supposed to be. Parallels can be drawn with Whale and Ginn's study of absent sparrows in London's suburbia, where the sadness felt at such a loss infects the vacated historic spaces of sparrows.³³ These ghostly traces inflect landscape with an intangible quality—a sort of uncanniness that bleeds across temporalities.

John Wylie's work on memorial benches locates the haunting aspects of loss as a reconfiguration of landscape through time.³⁴ Acknowledging the key works of scholars who understand landscape as a complex and heterogeneous phenomenological process of becoming,³⁵ he talks of the spectral geographies generated by unsettling and intangible memories of place. This concept,³⁶ which works within the threshold of "the absence of presence, the presence of absence,"³⁷ draws heavily on Derrida's work in *Spectres of Marx*, which defines the supplement as embodying a space and temporality of neither absence nor presence.³⁸ Instead, the supplement is an extra to this dichotomy; an interruption, or *haunting* across timescales and landscapes. It might therefore be pertinent to talk of a likely absence—an inverse of Hinchliffe's likely presence—in which the possibility of wildcats in the landscape haunts the search process that ultimately comes up empty; a likely absence that is a constant nagging fear in the minds of conservationists desperate for a win.

This spectrality is confounded further when the hushed talk of extinction enters conservation schemes. Creatures on the cusp of extinction become categorized within what Yusoff terms "the aesthetics of loss"—represented as more than themselves through acts of "making present," and in doing so become spectral beings no longer part of their own future.³⁹ It may be that these creatures are already lost; it is very rare

30. Allendorf et al., "The Problem with Hybrids."

31. Adams and McCorristine, "Ghost Species."

32. Jones, "'Not Promising a Landfall . . .'" ; Adams and McCorristine, "Ghost Species."

33. Whale and Ginn, "In the Absence of Sparrows."

34. Wylie, "Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love" and "A Single Day's Walking."

35. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*; Lorimer, "Herding Memories."

36. Madder and Adey, "Spectro-Geographies."

37. Wylie, "Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love," 279.

38. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

39. Yusoff, "Aesthetics of Loss."

that humans know about the exact moment of extinction.⁴⁰ To be certain of the death of a species is to experience grief and guilt,⁴¹ which is precisely what conservation organizations want to avoid. Heise suggests that such grief renders the extinct species as “icons of regret for those dimensions of nature that are destroyed by modernization.”⁴² For a ghost species such as the wildcat, inextricably bound by both biopolitical taxonomic orderings and idealized notions of the wild, it is an almost impossible task to peel back these messy layers to find a wildcat that is surely more ephemeral and difficult to define. We must, however, try.

“Touch Not the Cat but a Glove”: Nostalgia and Love in Wildcat Conservation

In the 1970s the late author Mike Tomkies purchased a tumbledown cottage on the banks of Loch Shiel, christened it *Wildernesse*, and lived there for twenty years. The cottage had no road access, electricity, telephone, or postal service, with its only access being by boat. While there, he wrote down his experiences in what was to become his most famous book: *A Last Wild Place*.⁴³ Throughout the book he periodically talks of his madness at undertaking such a venture, away from the companionship of other humans. Yet it is clear from his grandiose prose that he feels he has found his true vocation: “I had become bewitched by a desire to try and also live a wilderness life. . . perhaps obeying some deep ancestral calling.”⁴⁴ Tomkies’s fundamental belief is that humanity’s lack of wildness and access to nature has caused a spiritual disconnect that must be bridged.

While living at *Wildernesse* Tomkies raised wildcats. After a neighbor gave him two abandoned female kittens he agreed to take on an old male Tom from a wildlife center and attempt to captive-breed new kittens once his females reached sexual maturity. In his book *Wildcat Haven* he describes the vicious stud *Sylvesturr* as his soulmate, stating, “For me, this fierce old wildcat became a symbol of independence. Unloved, unlovable, he would be a loner to the end. I . . . admired his cussed, prehistoric magnificence.”⁴⁵ Tomkies is often credited as founding the modern Scottish wildcat conservation movement; by being the first person to really study the creatures up close he was able to highlight their ecological function as well as debunk many of the myths surrounding such secretive animals.

Tomkies’s rapturous eulogizing cast a romanticized light on the wildcat, but the species’ history with humans has been a checkered one: a mixture of fear, persecution,

40. There are several poignant examples of humans being present at the death of the last of a species—Dolly Jorgensen has termed them “endlings” in her article “Endling.” The most famous of these is probably Martha, the last passenger pigeon (a once incredibly abundant bird, who died in the Cincinnati zoo in 1914.

41. van Dooren, “Mourning Crows.”

42. Heise, “Cultures of Extinction,” 62.

43. Tomkies, *A Last Wild Place*.

44. Tomkies, *A Last Wild Place*, 3.

45. Tomkies, *Wildcat Haven*, 28.

respect, and awe. Several Highland clans used wildcat imagery on their emblems and alluded to the beast in their mottos, including Clan MacIntosh, whose motto reads “Touch not the cat bot a glove” (Don’t touch a cat without a glove). The notion of the wildcat’s ferocity, particularly once the last Scottish wolf died in the seventeenth century, became the basis of a culture of fear. This continued well into the nineteenth century, as wildcats were persecuted by gamekeepers who were employed to protect the valuable red grouse on their employers’ sporting estates.⁴⁶ Wildcats were treated in much the same way as any other predator that threatened the lucrative shooting season and survived being wiped out by a whisker only because so many gamekeepers were drafted to fight in the First World War. Historic attitudes toward the wildcat range from pest to dangerous killer, with some legends detailing how the creature could hang by its tail to drop down onto humans and savage them.⁴⁷ How, then, have we reached a point where the wildcat’s likeness can be found on beer bottles, and a wildcat trail is a popular tourist destination?

We might consider this question through an almost cumulative haunting of the landscape by absent wildcats, fuelled by a nostalgic longing that sees even gamekeepers lamenting its plight and denying their role in the species’ decline. One such gamekeeper—Angus⁴⁸—took me fox lamping in the small hours of a very dark and rainy night⁴⁹ in the hope that we might spot a wildcat during its peak hunting window, and explained:

A lot of people will say it was gamekeepers that did it. Bollocks was it gamekeepers! I’ve never killed a wildcat here in my life, nor would I ever. And I think that goes for all of my peers. We all got an incredible buzz out of seeing them. So what happened, why did they disappear?

Angus’s denial of his profession’s role in the wildcat’s decline is served by his own memory. He has certainly never killed a wildcat himself and is immensely saddened at their potential extinction. To Angus the wildcat represents a lost way of life of the sort lamented by Tomkies. It’s one he can distinctly remember having as a child—he talks of spending all day fishing in the Spey and of shooting his first stag at thirteen—but is now lost in a nostalgic longing and the sort of cynicism that often comes with age. Says Angus,

46. Cairns and Hamblin, *Tooth and Claw*.

47. Cairns and Hamblin, *Tooth and Claw*.

48. Angus is a pseudonym.

49. Fox-lamping is a fox hunting practice that involves shining a very bright light directly into the eyes of a fox, which is temporarily blinded and shot. The fox shot that night had been killing lambs on a nearby farm. This was quite a distressing experience for me, but also highlighted the rather “unromantic” reality of countryside management.

It's a different Scotland today than the one we grew up in. Children were a lot more competent in those days at living in the environment, and I think the clash with the rewilding is people thinking that by some dramatic action, [we can] reengage the human being with an environment that they've lost contact with.

Memory can be a powerful tool within conservation. When memory and landscape combine, it can serve as a very tangible reminder that there is something now missing that was there before, and now exists only in the minds of those who remember.⁵⁰ To Angus, many of the people involved in Scottish rewilding are using the term as a quick fix to re-enchant humans with nature through the use of big predators, which he understands as “building the roof before the rest of the house.” His approach is very much tied up with the confidence in his own knowledge of the landscape: “We’re out here every bloody night,” he says. “We know what’s going on. We know that we haven’t seen wildcats around here for a few years now.”

This process of re-enchantment is rooted in nostalgia through an attempt to reclaim something many humans believe has been lost to the landscape⁵¹, and in doing so reifies the notion of nature as separate and “out there.” It may even manifest itself as a sort of collective nostalgia, constructed through the desire to reinstate something absent that perhaps never existed. Appadurai terms this “nostalgia without memory,”⁵² in which memories are constructed out of a desire for them to be real. The nostalgia rewilding draws on is a collective longing for a perceived lost way of life—a romantic ideal of wildness—that most people (including conservationists in some cases) have no memory of. The urban/wild dichotomy promoted by the likes of the John Muir Trust draws on this idealized vision of a wild Scotland, fuelling the desire of city dwelling folk to reconnect with something missing from their daily lives. Yet the nostalgia without memory that produces such a vision of rewilding falls foul of an imagined past—not a recreation of actual memories but instead a creation of a whole new (and bounded) nature.

When examining the wildcat in these terms it is important to consider the underlying absences and presences that exist in people’s minds. While memory is rooted in notions of presence (it is very rare that a nostalgic memory of a particular species is of its absence that has now been rectified through conservation methods⁵³), when combined with nostalgia, it can represent an almost imagined presence, or even an illusion. The overarching theme when unearthing people’s memories of wildcats was that of a wistful longing, most often accompanied by a pleasurable day in the Scottish hills, encapsulated by an interview participant named James:⁵⁴

50. Jones, “Not Promising a Landfall . . .”

51. Lasch, “The Politics of Nostalgia.”

52. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 30.

53. For a fascinating interrogation of a successful conservation strategy regarding ospreys in Scotland, see Garlick, “Cultural Geographies of Extinction.”

54. James is a pseudonym.

I was about twelve years old and going up the glen. This was around '58. Children were allowed out on their own in those days. I rounded a corner and there it was! I don't know who was more scared, him or me. I stared at it for about half a minute before it slunk off into the undergrowth. My heart was beating like mad!

Other interviewees described the experience of seeing a wildcat as thrilling and wonderful; always positive. There is no ambiguity to be found within this looking back, despite the wildcat's history being one of persecution and conflict with humans. These cats are always extremely present as the highlight of the day and at the forefront of the memory; a surprise to come across. It is here that memory becomes generative of a rupture within the current self-in-world: this unsettling sense of nostalgia highlights the absence felt in the present, and solidifies the notion that something is now missing from the landscape.⁵⁵

Svetlana Boym's assertion that "modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return" does not negate an attempt to recreate this enchanted world.⁵⁶ The affective power of this loss combines with notions of wildness that cling to the Scottish landscape: Victorian paintings and taxidermy, folklore of great cats that wandered the Highlands, and place names still present on maps (*Creag a' chait*—cat rock; *Caithness*—cat headland). These historic materialities of wildcats found within the landscape are productive of memory that both highlights their presence in the past, and reminds us of their absence in the present.⁵⁷ The wildcat's place within the collective memory of those searching for a lost time when encounters with the creature were, if not commonplace, at least *potentially* available, has rendered them a new conservation priority. It is here we might draw parallels with Hinchliffe's likely presence but with a twist: The likely presence is not so much borne from a realistic outlook but a desire to recreate the ghostly presence looming in such a nostalgic past. If the wildcat is allowed to slip away, the nostalgic, memory-laden world so important to wildcat lovers becomes impossible to recreate. It is in this space that the wildcat can be seen to be haunting the intangible boundaries of time.

John Wylie calls this sort of haunting love.⁵⁸ He identifies a separation or rupture that the absence of something leaves in its wake and where remembering is conducive to the act of loving, stating, "The absencing fracture of landscape is simultaneously a sort of openness, and can be thought anew in terms of love."⁵⁹ It is indeed a separation and fracture in the minds of people such as Angus and James. While the wildcat in each memory remains rooted in this temporal landscape indefinitely, each person recounting them to me continued aging, getting further and further away, the time gap

55. Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place."

56. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 8.

57. Jones, "'Not Promising a Landfall . . .'"

58. Wylie, "Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love," 277.

59. Wylie, "Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love," 280.

flooding with love. The separation from the wildcat felt so keenly in peoples' memories is much more urgent now conservation is aware of how precarious the situation is. For Angus and for Mike Tomkies, this represents an almost physical ache that affects what they do in the present: namely, to attempt to play some role in restoring what has been lost. It is an act of love that drives them to do this, yet it is distinctly one-sided and anthropocentric—of being lonely without the presence, or at least the 'likely presence' of wildcats in the future. Now that the threat of harm from the wildcat has dwindled precisely *because* of its absence, it has become a spectral being, fuelled by longing and collective nostalgia. It is therefore, paradoxically, the wildcat's very absence that implores its conservation; a desperation to hold on to something loved that may very well be slipping away.

Highland Tiger: From Forgotten Cat to Wilderness Icon

The Nadurra Centre in Glen More offers a chance to "enter the wildcat's den—if you dare." Crawling on your hands and knees through a dark fiberglass tunnel, you are suddenly thrust face-to-face with a disembodied and stuffed wildcat head, yowling and hissing through means of a tape recording (fig. 2).

The owner, Darren, tells me that he thinks there is a wildcat in the woods next to the center:

I haven't seen him, but it's definitely the right sort of habitat—old growth forest, not these plantations—and they've [conservationists] found what they think is a den. I'd love to get a camera on it and beam it into the center.

A short while later I wander down to the same woods, pausing for a moment at the information board that proudly displays a picture of a wildcat. Besides the extreme unlikelihood of meeting a wildcat during daylight hours, the fact that a suggested ramble along a National Trust maintained path would yield an easy encounter with a creature so unpredictable and secretive seems contradictory. As I walk the trail I'm alert to every twig-crack, every leaf-rustle. I scan the undergrowth for signs of the den Darren had mentioned, but I find nothing. By the end of the walk I emerge disappointed. While I had known the chances of meeting a wildcat were almost nonexistent, the prevalence of a potential encounter promoted by the photos and anecdotes had fostered an expectation that I now wished to be met.

A corresponding effect of the privileging of supposed wilderness landscapes is the desire for more authentic encounters with wildlife—encounters that occur naturally while in the environment itself, rather than in zoos or parks.⁶⁰ This requires the creature in question to be present *somewhere*, for the potential encounter to be feasible, and for this to happen, there also needs to be proof it actually exists. For an elusive species

60. Bullbeck, *Facing the Wild*.



Figure 2. The Nadurra Centre wildcat exhibit.

like the wildcat, this can prove difficult. Given how long conservationists ignored its dwindling numbers, it has earned the dubious honor of being dubbed the forgotten cat.

Angus replies to my asking why he thinks this is:

I think the wildcat lost its position because he's not so out there. Because he walks about in the dark, he's incredibly secretive, and it's not like an eagle where you can go "Phwoar, look at that!" as it flies past. We take people coming on to wildlife tours who go "oh, I never saw a fucking thing!" You want to bang your head against a brick wall!

As well as being the estate gamekeeper, Angus has a side business running wildlife tours in partnership with the Nadurra Centre. He finds it difficult to deal with those people who have seen the wildcat on nature programs or photographed up close in magazines and then come on his tours demanding to see one. This manifests itself as encounter value, in which the meeting of an animal—whether through touch, sound, or sight—becomes commodified.⁶¹ We might draw attention here to the categorizations of value assigned to endangered species as identified by Irus Braverman, namely, rarity, threat, and trends.⁶² When potential encounter is combined with these conservation values, which the wildcat of course also embodies, this makes for a prized and thrilling potential spot.

61. Collard and Dempsey, "Life for Sale?"

62. Braverman, "Anticipating Endangerment" and "Regulatory Life."

For an encounter to be valuable, presence is necessary—certainly not something readily available from the wildcat. Instead, expounding likely presence takes the form of a concentrated PR campaign through literature, photography, art, and other commodities. The wildcat's photo can now be found plastered on all manner of leaflets, websites, and postcards aiming to raise awareness of its situation. However, more often than not, these photos are sourced from only a few batches, often years old; they are consistently reused due to the dearth of images of a creature so rarely seen. By inflating the wildcat's presence in this way, potential encounter—or, perhaps, likely presence—is used as a tool to highlight the plight of the wildcat. Ironically, this process has the unintended effect of promising encounter and obscuring likely absence.

Peter Cairns, one of Scotland's most prominent wildlife photographers, acknowledges this in the gray car park of the museum warehouse. His wildcat photographs are ubiquitous, having graced many books and magazines, but they are over five years old and of a cat that was hand-reared and soft-released. He hasn't seen a wildcat since. As he notes,

If visual media can convince us to buy a certain type of car for example, then equally it should be able to convince us to care about X species and Y issue. My logic is that it can and it should. It's got to be seen and it's got to be seen in the right context. The human condition is receptive to storytelling . . . we like to be told compelling and enduring stories, and that's kind of what I'm trying to do, is tell stories using photography. With the wildcat, you've got a very iconic mammal, in trouble, let's do something about it. From a PR point of view it's a no brainer, it's an easy sell.

The story told by the photography of the wildcat is simple: here is a charismatic species, wild and free. Its decline is due to human factors. It is a representation of our guilt. If we don't do something to save it, it will exist forever as a testament to the anthropogenic destruction of nature and our failure to care. The wildcat in the photograph tells this story, but it is a story that obscures, that masks the wildcat's actual situation. Far removed from the grainy camera trap images used by conservationists to identify wildcats as pure or hybrid, the photographs found adorned on postcards, key chains and other gift-shop-style purchasables deny the wildcat a chance to be anything but a wild and majestic beast.⁶³ We are not permitted to know whether the wildcat in the pictures is a hybrid; whether it is or not does not matter to the story. Rather it is the creature's representative power, in which it takes on something more through powerful visual imagery, that comes to the fore here: a representation of the wildness now considered missing within humans.

The Scottish landscape is key to understanding how the wildcat has come to be commodified in this way; by constructing the Highlands as a wilderness replete with potential encounter, the landscape is reconfigured as an anthropocentric utopia that

63. Reinert, "The Care of Migrants."

conversely ends up ring-fencing "the wild." Reinert defines this type of wild as "a space of asymmetrical transparency that seems familiar: figuratively speaking, the space of a human presence, joyfully contemplating its own absence—a trope familiar from centuries of romantic literature and ecological fantasy" (Reinert 2013: 21). It is clear that this asymmetry is what frustrates Angus, yet it is simultaneously what frustrates some of his customers. He cannot magically produce a wildcat for them to look upon, and they return from the tour disappointed, just as I did after my walk through the woods. While rewilding can comfortably claim to promote the opposite of zoos offering static encounters with enclosed animals, it still packages and sells the idea of a wild space that humans may enter for entertainment.⁶⁴ The thrill of potential encounter with a charismatic creature is what is coveted here—the very idea that something wild and alien to us may be out there for us to meet face to face.⁶⁵ While the human may erase itself from such a constructed space by being the observer of the wild, what cannot be allowed to be absent is the wild object: in this case, the wildcat.

Romanticizing the wildcat as an icon of wildness means humans move even further away from understanding the creature itself and its desire to remain absent from our gaze.⁶⁶ Yet attempting to replicate an encounter with a wildcat through camera traps or the exhibit at the Nadurra Centre does not redress the balance, but merely fuels the desire for "authentic" encounter; here is a creature for which a sighting is coveted precisely because of its rarity. While the proliferation of wildcat imagery in the media serves as a way of drawing attention to its existence and subsequent conservation, it is the coveted "wild encounter" that is sought by the rewilding human. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the people who take Angus's tours are drawn to the most elusive of creatures. In doing this they are requesting a sort of wild package trip that removes any agency from the creature they wish to view in its natural habitat, and instead demands its presence. Of course there are many reasons to take one of Angus's tours and visit the Nadurra Centre, but the ultimate goal of the rewilding human is surely to become rewilded.

Yet it is in large part the wildcat's agency that troubles this goal, as it refuses to show up on camera traps, confounds wildlife spotters, and happily mates with domestic and feral cats. The wildcat's lack of presence in records and sightings deems it a failure in conservation terms, but this is not the whole picture. Despite the inflated presence found in myriad forms from photography to interactive exhibits, conservationists cannot deliver on this, nor even safely promise likely presence. These unruly cats, refusing to correspond with their taxonomic orderings or mapped territories, help unsettle these very anthropocentric visions of the wild as an unpeopled space of authentic encounter. What might be encountered, however, are wildcat ghosts; spectral ruptures that reconfigure wildness through landscape.

64. Koninx, "Ecotourism and Rewilding."

65. Lorimer, "Nonhuman Charisma."

66. Adams and McCorristine, "Ghost Species."

The wildcat's position in the ecological niche termed "ghost species" means it is a relic of a past landscape of wildwood, plentiful prey, and lack of human contact, but is now flirting with the jaws of extinction.⁶⁷ An anomalous form in rewilding trends, it embodies neither the enlarged, majestic presence of the wolf, nor its ecological function as an apex predator. Conversely, it actively eschews human presence, hunting during the dead of night, and denning in the depths of woods. It is here that the spectral wildcat rears its head once again. Instead of taking the wild as it is promoted through inflated presence of wild beasts,⁶⁸ we might consider a more nuanced wildness that is configured in precisely the opposite terms: the wildcat's absence. Perhaps, then, it is the creature's spectrality, as its absence haunts the fringes of a landscape generated by both human and cat across time, that produces a generative and entangled notion of wildness that shakes free from the notion of a static wilderness.

A Symbol of Survivorship?: Ghosts, Myths, and Extinction

I meet Gordon in the railway station café at Stirling, a world away from Ardnamurchan's quiet forests and unforgiving coastline. He's a wildlife artist and has brought along a selection of his wildcat paintings to show me. Together with people from all over the world, his work forms part of the Scottish Wildcat Gallery set up by an artist in Oxfordshire to raise funds for wildcat conservation initiatives. Most of the artists featured have likely never even seen a Scottish wildcat, yet are brought together through a shared interest in saving it. As Gordon expresses his desire to become Scotland's foremost wildcat artist, I am drawn to one painting in particular: a close-up of a wildcat's face, fearsome and furious, fangs bared and yellow eyes narrowed. It is titled *The Last Stand* (fig. 3), a name alluding to the difficult and often violent relationship between wildcats and humans. I am reminded of a quote by Tomkies: "They will fight for their freedom with a passion we can only dream of."⁷⁰

Something I'm struck by is the almost larger-than-life element to the paintings. *The Last Stand* in particular offers a face-to-face meeting with a wildcat of greater size (the canvas covers the coffee table) and proximity than one would ever encounter in the wild. And unlike a photograph the paintings seem to allow a glimpse into the otherwise secret world of these elusive creatures. I feel that I am closer to meeting a wildcat than ever before, intruding on a private moment or about to enter into a fight to the death. Yet Gordon has never seen a wildcat. His reference material comes from a wildlife center in the south of England, and the real-life subject of his paintings is an obvious hybrid. To get around this he ignores the hybrid features such as white patches of fur and instead creates a fully pure-blooded wildcat from his imagination.

I find myself thinking about the cat skins from the museum. As the best reference point available for assigning genetic purity, they represent the baseline from which all

67. Macfarlane, "Ghost Species."

68. Garlick, "Cultural Geographies of Extinction."

70. Tomkies, *Last of the Scottish Wildcats*.

Figure 3. Gordon Corriins's
The Last Stand, 2015.



wildcats are now judged. Yet these cats are long dead, and I'm told by the SNH team that every Scottish wildcat in captivity is a hybrid to some degree. It appears that Gordon's work, and the work of the other artists in the gallery, is currently the only contemporary representation of pure wildcats in existence. In the absence of any real wildcats in the landscape today, Gordon is shaping the way humans see wildcats now and into the future.

Beginning to talk about absence through the lens of the spectral is an important step in considering species extinction, and offers an opportunity to bring the less-than-present into conservation debates. Yet should it be that conservation initiatives embrace these ways of seeing absence as a way of reconciling difficult decisions and possible extinctions? When every survey and count and trapping hinges on the presence of a creature, conservation lacks a way of acknowledging the absence, or even the ambiguous potential presence within records. This renders these absent ones as abstract representations and spectral beings, which Yusoff terms "a kind of haunting configured around a profoundly human sensibility."⁷¹

For the wildcat, this is particularly pertinent. As a creature that recoils from encounter, its physical presence within the human sphere is entirely accidental. By relying on notions of nostalgia to bring past presence into the present, alongside current strategies using photography and interactive exhibits, the opportunity to recognize

71. Yusoff, "Aesthetics of Loss," 585.

spectral beings as part of the conservation narrative is lost. Conversely, this creates an “othering” of the nonhuman ghost species as they are rendered even less present—and consequently *more* spectral and unsettling—as they become anthropocentric representations of something almost intangible. It is here that we begin to see a romanticization of those no longer known, as these ghosts move into the vacant role left behind by a perceived loss of wildness.

It is important to acknowledge the role of those that elect to be missing, and in a sense, this is what Gordon is striving toward. He exists in a completely different sphere to hands-on conservationists, and to him the wildcat represents an almost otherworldly ghostlike creature that should remain independent of humans. He talks of longing to see one, but it is clear that the mere knowledge that they are out there in their natural environment is the main drive for him.

That’s the whole thing, this whole mysterious thing. If you ever see one, it’s probably not real. Have you read Mike Tomkies’s books? I found them actually quite disturbing because he’s living with them! I think that’s wrong—it’s wrong! Taming? Why? Just leave it alone to be what it wants to be. Let it rewild itself and become pure again. It’s more like a reborn thing rather than trying to save the existing wildcat.

The notion of a wildcat becoming something other than it wants to be is completely unacceptable to Gordon, and he would rather it go extinct than see what he deems its essential nature removed by human-interventionist methods. Yet it is difficult to know how much of that view has been influenced by human ideals of lost wildness, applying an anthropomorphic lens to the wildcat that, in his mind, freely roams the Highlands. It might be suggested that through his art, Gordon is cultivating a myth, spectrally rearranging the wildcat’s potential extinction so it can never truly be gone.

It’s [my art] a good way of highlighting an idea, you know—you can ham up this mythical creature, you know, does it exist or doesn’t it? The more you think about it, do we really want to see one? Because if we knew it was real, would that dispel the myth?

The wildcat resides in the minds of many, particularly those not involved directly in its conservation, as a sort of mythical creature. It is both an ecological ghost species and a spectral being. It exists on the fringes of recognition as a candidate for conservation, yet it clings to life by a thread. It transcends temporalities as a nostalgic reminder of a time when encounter was possible, yet it exists in the present as a species that may become extinct in the future.

The death of a species creates a much less ambiguous response than its potential loss. Whereas conservation initiatives are galvanized into action at a species’ decline, spurred on by quantitative accounts of clinging (if abating) presence, when all hope is lost there can only be one course of action: mourning. Extinction can be mobilized as a shot in the arm for the conservation of *other* species, but this means acknowledging the

reasons behind the extinct species' demise. Particularly if there had been a concentrated effort to halt this extinction, the loss is felt keenly in the admittance of failure.

This admittance of failure does not come easily. Ursula Heise tells the tale of Hokkaido wolves, which went extinct in Japan in 1905, yet sightings were consistently reported after that date.⁷² Monbiot describes a similar phenomenon in Britain, where instances of reported big cat sightings have risen in recent years. He ventures an explanation: "As our lives have become tamer and more predictable . . . could these imaginary creatures have brought us something we miss?"⁷³ The fact that humans are inventing encounters with wild creatures and lost species speaks of a deep sense of loss for something almost intangible, and echoes notions of nostalgic longings for something that has never been experienced.

As long as conservation and rewilding do not recognize absence as a legitimate tool for their work, it seems unlikely that there will ever be a coming to terms with anthropogenic extinctions. The rendering of the wildcat as more present through nostalgia, photography, and art means that facing up to the prospect of absence and extinction is ignored, or at least shelved. In humanity's attempt to reconnect with the natural world through presence and encounter, species that elect to be absent or are likely extinct are not allowed to remain so.

Incorporating spectral beings into the narrative through the process of stories may help humans come to terms with this loss or absence as a way of accepting the blame for the current high rates of species extinction. How might we go about this? Thom van Dooren's "storied mourning" offers a way of facing up to extinction by acknowledging a meaningfully shared world.⁷⁴ Yet in the context of the wildcat this is not quite right. Wildcats do not willingly share the same spaces as humanity, whether extinct or not. Storied mourning can be conceived of as a way of bringing absence and the spectral to light, but as a way of bridging the gap between humans and nonhumans, particularly with a secretive species such as the wildcat, it falls short. If what is being mourned is a missing human connection to a sense of wildness that involves authentic encounter with nonhumans, this is a profoundly exceptionalist vision; it involves not respecting the wildcat's right to remain absent. It is in this sense that we must acknowledge the spectral, but not cling to it.

It is important that conservation debates address the complexities of absence and spectrality through stories and memorials, but in the case of the wildcat, to accept it in its own terms is to respect its secrecy—in essence, to forget it. The wildcat's extinction would render it irretrievable, and it would exist largely as a monument to human failure. This is perhaps necessary in an age of anthropogenic mass extinctions, but the

72. Heise, "Lost Dogs," 63.

73. Monbiot, *Feral*, 60.

74. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 129.

lens this narrative is funneled through is essentially a human one. We can tell the story of the wildcat, but we must be aware that it is not just the wildcat's story we are telling; it is also our own.

Conclusion: The Right to Remain Absent

Delving into the messy, difficult, and often frustrating world of Scottish wildcat conservation, I began by knowing very little about the cats themselves. I know very little still. The wildcat identification master class taught me how to spot genetic purity in the species, should I ever encounter one, but I can't even be sure of that. The cats eluded me at every turn, present only in the rustle of undergrowth, in a tape-recorded yowl, in the brushstrokes of a painter.

I believe the Scottish wildcat is already extinct. In 2018, a major study on wildcat hybridity advised that the species be labeled functionally extinct due to the absence of any evidence suggesting otherwise.⁷⁵ Any certainty about this has been muddied by debates on acceptable hybridity, and what intrinsic value might be found in a truly wild wildcat. By using the creature as a symbol for humanity's lost wildness it has become impossible to admit it may have slipped away, and so the parameters for what makes a true wildcat become blurred. Harnessing strategies of likely presence result in denying the wildcat's right to be absent; commodifying encounter value sees presence inflated artificially through wildlife tours, films, and keepsakes (fig. 4).

I have attempted to document the intersecting views on wildness and the wildcat by taking the reader on a chronological journey, beginning in the past, moving through into the present, and looking beyond into the future. In attempting to understand what a wildcat is unearthed an intricately complex entanglement of history, landscape, memory, and myth. The wildcats proved themselves to be, in all their manifestations of absence and presence, slippery creatures who haunt the boundaries of time and place—through material traces, nostalgic longing, visual media, and storied mourning. They trouble the practices of traditional conservation; they elude markers of presence and genetic purity at every step. As the Scottish landscape takes on new resonance with the valorization of a perceived untouched wilderness, promoting a pure and spiritual cleanse that allows humans to reconnect with a particular kind of wild nature, the wildcat becomes representative for something we perceive ourselves to have lost. By commodifying this ideal through inflated presence and encounter value, we, conversely, get further away from knowing the creature on its own terms.

Yet the spectral wildcat—its absence-presence—endures. Donna Haraway's now widely accepted notion of "becoming with" highlights the mutual and co-constitutive process of multispecies world-making.⁷⁶ Might we apply this also to the wildcat but instead consider the ways in which self and world are drawn together spectrally through

75. Senn et al., "Distinguishing the Victim."

76. Haraway, *When Species Meet*.



Figure 4. Scottish Natural Heritage's wildcat mascot.

a “becoming without” through its likely absence? The absence of the wildcat in the landscape does not represent a lack; indeed, the yearning for what the wildcat represents—wildness—unearths a disconnect across memory and myth, troubled by the very present and unsettling ghosts of cats past, present, and future. As extinctions become more and more commonplace as we move deeper into the Anthropocene,⁷⁷ we must find ways to respond ethically to the patchiness of animal absences and presences, both ghostly or otherwise, heterogeneous and unsettling. Similarly, conservation measures that are wedded to documenting presence must acknowledge these ghosts, and accept that many of the drivers of conservation come from a place of anthropocentrism—of holding onto something that *we* may lose. There is a specific politics of extinction at stake here that demands further attention. By recognizing the wildcats’ right to remain absent from human encounter, to practice agency and hybridize themselves, we might shrug off such romanticized ideals of lost wildness and take a step closer to knowing these misunderstood creatures almost through a process of *unknowing*. To put it simply, we need to let them die.

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77. Ceballos at al., “Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction.”

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