

Cameras capture 'Highland tiger'

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A new research project in the Highlands has provided a rare insight into the secret world of one of Britain's most endangered and elusive species.

Scottish wildcats are notoriously secretive, but conservationists are hoping to gain a more detailed understanding of their behaviour.

They have attached specialist camera equipment, known as photo-traps, to trees in the Cairngorms National Park.

The cameras have already provided images of wildcats and other animals.

Motion detectors and infra-red technology allow the devices to capture images of passing animals over a period of days, weeks or even months.

The project is still in its early stages but the cameras have already provided images of Scottish wildcat - popularly known as the Highland tiger - and other animals, including golden eagles.

'Major threat'

The research is being led by Dr David Hetherington of the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

He told BBC Scotland: "Wildcats are very shy, secretive animals. They are active mainly at night and it's really difficult for people to get close enough to watch them properly.

"These camera traps are an excellent way of us getting a much better insight into where wildcats live, when they're active, and what habitat they're using.

"We can also get an idea of where they don't live and, of course, that's also really important information."



The project has already captured some stunning images of wildcats

Experts believe the Scottish wildcat population has fallen to about 400, and work is under way to prevent the species becoming extinct.

That involves encouraging cat owners in the Highlands to ensure their animals are neutered.

Dr Hetherington explained: "The major threat to wildcats these days is hybridisation, or inter-breeding, with domestic cats.



Other animals, including this golden eagle, have also been photographed

"Although they are quite different and have a completely different temperament, they are actually quite closely related genetically to domestic cats so they can produce fertile hybrids.

"If that continues we are going to lose our pure Scottish wildcat."

Conservationists believe the work could help prevent another iconic species joining a long list of large predators which have been wiped out in Scotland over the last few centuries.

Douglas Richardson, of the Highland Wildlife Park at Kincaig near Aviemore, said: "We are dealing with an animal that's the last of its kind in the British Isles.

"We formerly had lynx and other big, dangerous and interesting animals. But this is our last feline predator and I think we are duty bound to protect it.

"There are many representatives from Scotland and the UK who are involved in conservation efforts with tigers in Asia or giant pandas in China.

"If we allow the Scottish wildcat to disappear, then the Indians, the Russians, the Chinese could quite rightly turn round and say 'Why should we bother? You didn't.'"

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