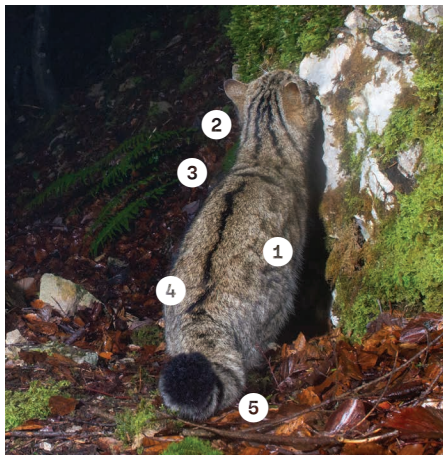


Hybridisation Between Wild- and Domestic Cats

The European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) and the domestic cat (*Felis catus*) are closely related and can produce fertile offspring. This hybridisation poses a potential threat to the European wildcat, as genetic admixture between domestic cats and wildcats can compromise the species' genetic distinctiveness in the long term. For this reason, Foundation KORA is investigating the consequences of hybridisation as part of its wildcat project, carried out in cooperation with the Institute for Fish and Wildlife Health (FIWI).



Identifying European Wildcats

The following features are particularly helpful for distinguishing the European wildcat from the domestic cat:

- ❶ Coat overall rather washed-out, with indistinct stripes
- ❷ Four to five neck stripes
- ❸ Two shoulder stripes
- ❹ Dorsal stripe ends at the base of the tail
- ❺ Fluffy tail with clearly defined rings and a black, blunt tip

Where Do European Wildcats Live?

Today, the European wildcat is once again widespread across large parts of Europe and is part of the native fauna. Its range is expanding, and population numbers are rising in various regions. The species primarily inhabits forests but is increasingly being found in open landscapes as well. In Switzerland, it is mainly distributed across the Jura Mountains but is now also expanding its range onto the Swiss Plateau.

Isn't That Just a Domestic Tabby Cat?

No. Our domestic cat descends from the Afro-Asiatic wildcat (*Felis lybica*). This species is widespread across large parts of Africa and from south-western to central Asia. It was domesticated several thousand years ago in the Middle East and is the ancestor of all modern domestic cats.



Afro-Asiatic Wildcat

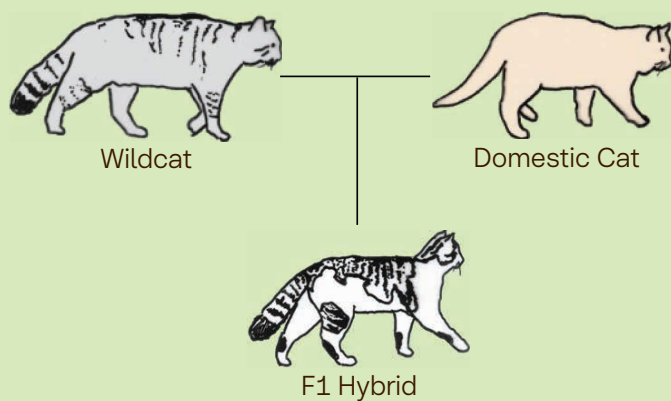


Distribution Area of the European Wildcat



Hybridisation with Domestic Cats

When European wildcats mate with domestic cats, they can produce so-called hybrids. The offspring of the first cross are referred to as F1 hybrids. F1 individuals can breed with each other to produce an F2 generation, or mate with European wildcats or domestic cats, resulting in so-called backcrosses. Animals are considered hybrids when genetic admixture can be reliably detected up to the second backcross. According to Article 86 of the Swiss Animal Protection Ordinance (TSchV), such animals are classified as wild animals up to this point and may only be kept with the appropriate permit.

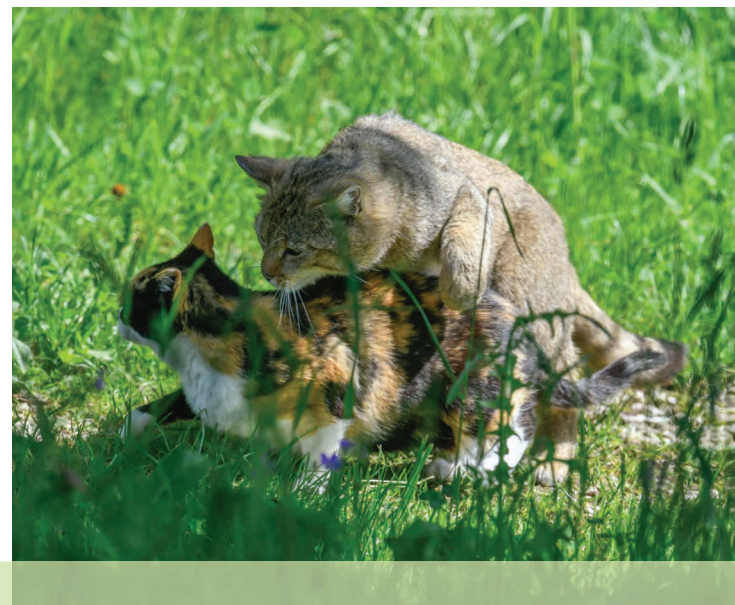


Challenges of Hybridisation

-  Mixing of the gene pool of wild and domestic cats, with potential loss of wildcat-specific genetic adaptations
-  Potential threat to local wildcat populations
-  Hybrids are difficult to identify: detection is usually only possible through genetic analysis
-  Transmission of diseases between domestic cats and wildcats

What Can Cat Owners Do?

More than 1.5 million domestic cats live in Switzerland, while the European wildcat population was estimated at around 1,100 animals in 2020. Encounters between domestic cats and wildcats are therefore inevitable. Cat owners can play an important role in protecting the European wildcat: neutering outdoor cats inhibits hybridisation, while good preventive healthcare reduces the risk of disease transmission between domestic cats and wildcats.



Images

Page 1, top right & page 2, bottom right: Mating between an European wildcat and a domestic cat © Laurent Geslin
Page 1, top left: European wildcat © Daniel Zuppinger
Page 1, bottom: European wildcat © Laurent Geslin, Afro-asiatic wildcat © Kalyan Varma
Page 2, top right: F1 hybrid of European wildcat and domestic cat © KORA
Icons created with ChatGPT

References

Map: IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group
Numbers: VHN – Verband für Heimtierhaltung, Wildtier Schweiz, Identitas



More on wolf, lynx, bear, wildcat & golden jackal: www.kora.ch

