Appendix 8.3 - Wildcat Survey – Habitat, Trail Camera Evidence and Current Distribution

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Introduction

The Strath Tirry area of Dalchork Wood is an upland commercial plantation over gently undulating ground and peaty gleys. This site boundary has a road frontage to the west with regular traffic disturbance including that from commercial timber harvesting on the northern border. There is also the Dalnessie access that runs the whole length of the southern border used by private and commercial traffic, including timber haulage. The site is regularly visited by the deer manager, Paul Adkins, who has expertise in deer and wildlife management as a full-time professional. He is a self-employed contract stalker for Forestry and Land Scotland and also guides professionally while assessing Deer Management Qualifications and Lantra Deer & Wildlife course specifications.

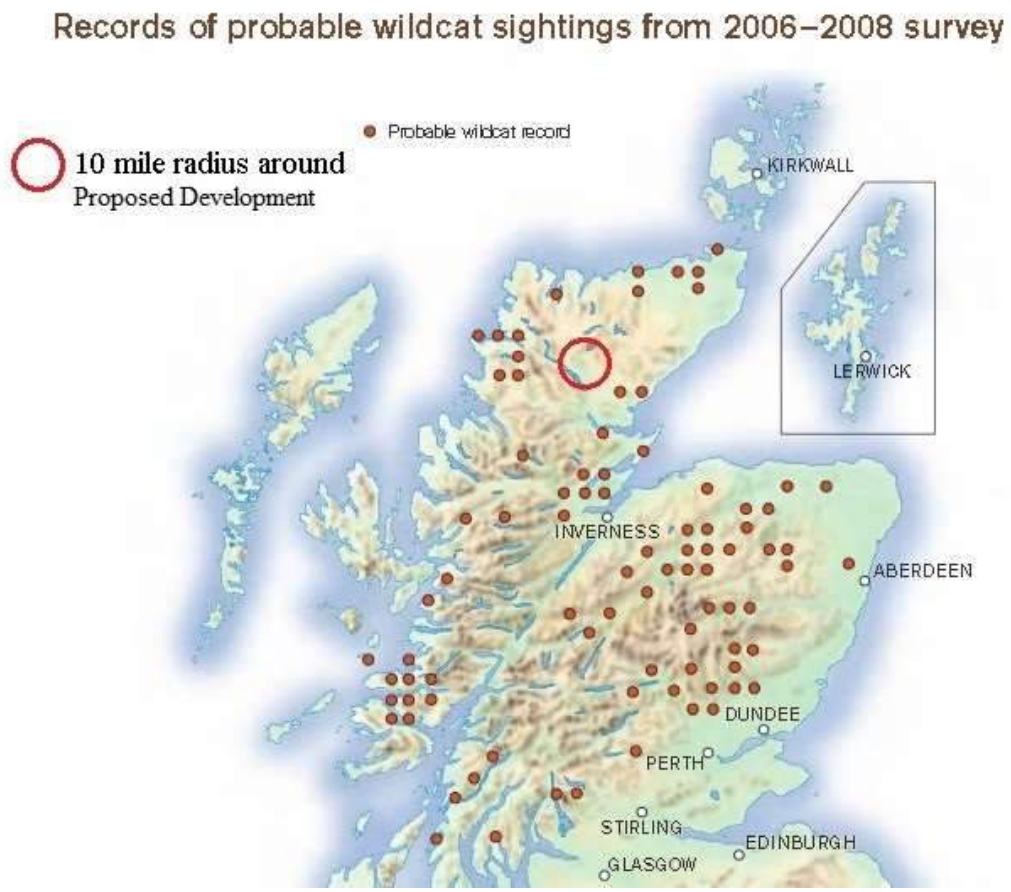
The peaty soil of the site is largely saturated for much of the year, which affects the progress of the growing timber crop at the site. The Proposed Development site suffers from poor drainage across much of its area and woodrush is abundant. There is only one small area of stone present, which may be from an abandoned small-scale quarry at BNG E:2574 N:9141 and it is incapable of supporting a wildcat (*Felis silvestris grampia*) den. This is 50 m from the A836 and has regular traffic passing by this point. No other rocky habit is present over the site that may be suitable for a den location during the wildcat breeding season. The woodland within the site has four wildlife trail cameras that have been in operation there since 2012 and are rotated around several locations, primarily to assess the deer population but do also record other wildlife capable of triggering the cameras. No wildcat has ever been captured on these trail cameras but occasional foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) have been sighted, indicating the cameras are fully capable of capturing an image of a wildcat if they were present. In addition, a high amount of commercial forestry activity has been on-going to the immediate north and south of the site boundary, with timber harvesting for some time. In summary, the Proposed Development site does not hold the basic elements to qualify as suitable habitat for wildcats or to encourage a wildcat to hold a territory at this location, as will be shown further.

Habitat Preferences and Current Distribution

Wildcats will only be able to live in habitats that meet their basic requirements to survive and must provide adequate shelter and food. Areas such as lowland woodlands with thick cover or areas with dense gorse (*Ulex sp.*) or juniper (*Juniperus sp.*) thickets are ideal to provide shelter and security. Forestry plantations that are isolated with a rich understory can be an important habitat for wildcats because they can support a high density of small mammal prey while being undisturbed by human activity. A rich understory is an important element of good forestry habitat. Terrain that has rocky areas with recesses is also essential to provide den shelters for female wildcats during the breeding season. The Proposed Development site does not provide these essential elements to sustain the presence of wildcats and has an immediate and regular presence of human disturbance. While the young forestry provides good shelter for deer, the understory is a simple mix of moss and grass, with some heather remaining. No rocky areas exist at this location that could represent a potential den site.

In order to survive, wildcats must have within their territory hunting areas such as open pastures, wetlands, and riverbanks with cover that allows them to effectively stalk small mammal prey. Areas that are prone to freezing conditions or prolonged snow may require wildcats to abandon such areas seasonally as they struggle to hunt effectively. Examples of their prey include small mammals such as rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*) and wood mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*). The Proposed Development site has the Feith Osdail crossing east to west, which could provide hunting potential along the banks of the river, but with a low capacity of small mammal prey.

The publication by Kilshaw (2011), while not providing a confirmed distribution of Scottish wildcats, does provide a ‘probable sightings’ distribution map on page 17. The following figure shows a 10-mile radius around the Proposed Development site, which has been replicated for reference.



While this survey is of 'probable sightings', the area of the Proposed Development is clearly not in a probable sighting area. The site has a mix of factors including human disturbance, poor habitat and no potential to provide a den site, making this area highly unlikely to support or encourage wildcat presence. As such, this species is highly unlikely to be in the immediate area or visit the location of the Proposed Development.

References

Kilshaw, K. (2011). *Scottish Wildcats: Naturally Scottish*. SNH, Perth.