

„Wildkatzen Tag/ Wilde kat dag“ - 23rd of June 2022, Aachen, Germany
European Wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) Symposium



Picture: *Felis silvestris*, by Karsten Reiniers (ARK Natuurontwikkeling)

Date: 23.06.2022

Location: DJH Aachen, Germany

Organization: ARK Nature by Lucy Dötig, Bram Houben, and Hettie Meertens

Background:

Bringing together Dutch and German stakeholders that work in the conservation for the European wildcat or are interested in this work field strengthens the contacts, allows for the exchange of (new) information, and stimulates future collaboration projects. If the wildcat's dispersal northwards from the Eifel region, Aachenerwald, and the South of the Netherlands should be made possible, transboundary conservation work is indispensable.



Program

Time	Duration	Program point	Speaker
10:00-11:15	10 min	Introduction	Bram Houben (ARK Natuurontwikkeling)
	45 min	Wild cat ecology, distribution, dispersal, future chances & problems	Dr. Christine Thiel-Bender (BUND NRW)
	15 min	Nature conservation and recreation development in "Aachenerwald"	Dr. Manfred Aletsee (NABU-Naturschutzstation Aachen)
11:15	10 min BREAK		
11:25-12:30	10 min	Wild cat telemetry study from 2014/15	René Janssen
	20 min	Wildcat camera trap monitoring in Southern Netherlands	Bram Schoufour (Intern at ARK Natuurontwikkeling)
	35min	Ending discussion session	Bram Houben
12:30	50 min LUNCH		
13:30 - 15:30	20 min	Going to the starting point for the walking tour (<u>Eupenerstraße 380</u>)	Dr. Manfred Aletsee
	80 min	Walk through Aachenerwald	
	5 min	End/Rounding off the Wild Cat Day	Bram Houben
15:30	20 min	<i>Returning to Jugendherberge Aachen (for those that need to go back)</i>	

Due to train traffic problems and delayed arrival of participants the order of the program had to be changed. This did not influence the content of the program.

Introduction (by Bram Houben) – “Wild cat in the Netherlands”

The European wildcat population in the Netherlands is increasing, especially in the region of the three countries' park. In the Euregio Meuse-Rhine is wildlife coming back, among which the wildcat that disperses mainly from the German population further north towards the Netherlands.

ARK Natuurontwikkeling has two projects to specifically improve corridors and nature areas. One project is financed by the province of Limburg and one by the province of Brabant. Both projects are complementary to each other. The concrete actions of these projects are the following:

- Realization of corridors
- Realization of suitable habitat
- Monitoring
- Communication
- Cross border cooperation

Presentation (by René Janssen) – “GPS telemetry 5 wildcats border region NL/B/D 2014-2015”

From the study in 2014-15 evolved that the European wildcat population in the Vijlenerbos and Aachenerwald one, instead of two separate, population is. The research questions covered habitat use, population structure, and conflict zones and were aimed to be answered with telemetry data. Specifically, the conflict zones – dangerous road crossings – were elaborated. Between Nijwiller and Bocholt is a roadkill hotspot for the European wildcat. The study tried to find solutions for these, but it is difficult to realize. One could be the installation of more badger tunnels, however, camera traps observed domestic cats using it, but no wildcat. Another possibility preventing roadkills in the Euregio is the fence presented by Klar et al. (2009), which works well for the wildcat but is less suitable for other species such as the badger and deer.

By today, there are plans of building an ecoduct at the roadkill hotspot between Nijwiller and Bocholt. Questions from the audience about the feral/domestic cat problem and what to do about it were answered with the following three measures, which were only presented and not assessed:

- Sterilization of domestic cats
- Keep domestic cats inside at home
- Kill domestic cats

Presentation (by Bram Schoufour) – “The wildcats of Limburg, a study on habitat and corridor usage”

The study covered the following research questions:

- 1) What is the current state of the population of the European wildcat in forests in Zuid-Limburg?
- 2) Which areas in Limburg are most suitable as potential wildcat habitat?
- 3) What are potential routes that wildcats can use to transition between current and potential habitats for wildcats in Limburg?

It was conducted using camera traps, which were set up to analyze the (potential) presence of the wildcat there. Individual wildcats were identified in Savelsbos, Eyserbos, Bovenste & Onderste bosch, and Vijlenerbos. In the latter forest, six wildcats were found. Using the habitat model by Klar et al. (2008) a habitat suitability analysis and least-cost-path analysis was conducted. Southern Limburg has a relatively low habitat quality for the wildcat, but if suitable areas in the north of Limburg would be connected with the South the dispersal of the wildcat further northwards would be facilitated. Collaboration with Germany and Belgium is also crucial as dispersal routes could lead over borders.

Dr. Christine Thiel-Bender points out to be careful with making conclusions about the residence of wildcats in the researched forests. Some are rather small and as research was conducted during the mating season especially the males can walk long distances and might not be resident to the specific forest patch in which it was seen on the camera.

Presentation (by Dr. Manfred Aletsee) – “Nature conservation and recreation development in the Forest of Aachen”

The Aachenerwald is between the Eifel and the Vijlenerbos and represents an important part of the dispersal route of the European wildcat. It covers 1400 ha, from which 10 ha are assigned as nature reserves. There are future plans to assign 350 ha of the forest as a nature reserve. However, in fact, this will not change a lot as the use of forest almost does not change and the forest usage, like wood harvesting, recreational practices, etc., stays the same. Recreation practices are embodied by a lot of walking paths, horse riding paths, and mountain bike trails. All together encompass 140 km of trails through the forest. The discussion of legalizing mountain bike trails is a problem for nature as the current illegal trails cover about 39 km in total. Breeding birds, wildcats, and other wildlife are being disturbed by it. The forest should be used more extensively and structures such as deadwood and shrubs should be placed/not removed. Wilderness areas such as those demanded by nature conservation institutions are urgently needed in the future as retreats for the wildcat.

Presentation (by Dr. Christine Thiel-Bender) – „Wildkatzen im Aachener Grenzgebiet“

Germany has a wildcat population of 5,000 to 8,000 animals. In NRW most wildcats are resident in the Eifel region. Their dispersal patterns mostly follow linear structures in the landscape such as rivers, creeks, and hedgerows as they provide enough shelter. Most dispersal events occur during mating season and when the young wildcats become independent in fall. A German study has found that a healthy population grows about 900 meters per year. Dispersing further north from Aachenerwald and Vijlenerbos seems to be difficult as north of Aachen only structure-poor agricultural land, thus unsuitable areas, are present.

Within and next to forests, especially windthrown areas are important for the wildcats to find prey. These areas are full of mice and in the past years, lots of storms occurred and created optimal habitat. The questions arise about how long these areas will be present as forest rejuvenation will take place (naturally or artificially). The use of pesticides seems to be a problem as mice could be infected by it, studies together with the University of Dresden are ongoing.

The BUND conducted the large-scale wildcat study “Wildkatzensprung” on the wildcat’s occurrence. In NRW, only a few hybridization observations have been made (3% of all observations/DNA research) and it seems as if domestic cats and European wildcats avoid each other and have different habitats. However, Baden-Württemberg has a higher percentage, which could in the future become a problem (10%). In the same state, a study found that the wildcat there uses more open land than previously thought or known from other areas. This species can adapt to different landscapes if there is no optimal habitat. If you talk about wildcat conservation you have to talk about the females. They are much more vulnerable with their cubs than males and need more options to hide and rest.

From camera traps in the Aachenerwald six years ago it is known that there is at least one individual, maybe two. In summer pictures were made, but in winter no wildcat came to the camera. Perhaps they leave the forest in winter due to a lack of coverage. This is to be examined in the future.

Excursion through the Aachenerwald (by Dr. Manfred Aletsee)

In the 20th century, the focus was especially set on recreation rather than a “wild” forest. The forest usage was intense until around 2005. Now, and partly due to the FSC certificate, more trees that fell can stay in the forest which brings more deadwood. This provides more shelter for the European wildcat. A problem in the forest (as stated in the presentation earlier in the day) are illegal mountain bike trails and the lack of control over it. The part of the excursion is, regarding wildcat habitat, similar to the Vijlenerbos and contains (probably) enough prey.

