

CHAPTER 11

WILDCAT (*Felis silvestris* Schr.)

Introduction

Despite an extensive, but rather disparate, body of literature from Quaternary, archaeological, topographical, local history and folklore studies, little is known of the history of the wildcat (*Felis silvestris* Schr.) in Yorkshire (Howes 1984, 1985e, 2002b). Excavations at the Mesolithic seasonal hunting camp at Star Carr in the Vale of Pickering, North Yorkshire produced evidence that most of the 'Thatcham' fauna was already established in Yorkshire by 9500 b.p. (Fraser & King 1954). Although no cat remains were identified, the faunal composition and habitat evidence at Starr Carr strongly suggested that wild cat could have been part of the local fauna. In undated post-glacial deposits in Teesdale Cave on the Durham side of Teesdale (Backhouse 1881), the remains of wildcat were found in association with wolf, pine marten, polecat, otter, badger, red and roe deer, all of which, apart from polecat and otter, were present in the Thatcham and Star Carr faunas. So by implication, despite the absence of direct proof, the wildcat may well have been established in the Yorkshire area by the Mesolithic period.

At Pifflehead Wood, Newtondale (SE/8395) further undated circumstantial evidence was a shelter identified by Simms (1972) as 'possibly being a wildcat den', containing amongst other prey remains the bones of a small beaver (*Castor fiber*). Beaver is known to have been present in Yorkshire from 9,600 b.p. at Star Carr (Fraser & King 1954). There is a single beaver metatarsal bone from undated stratigraphy in a rock shelter at Stone, Roche Abbey (SK/5589) (Dolby 2001), and place-name evidence suggests its presence into historic times, possibly up to the 10th century, so the den could have been occupied at any time between those dates. The earliest positively dated wildcat evidence is a single bone from an early Iron Age village site dated 2500-2400 bp on Castle Hill, Scarborough (TA/0489) (Rowntree 1931, Rutter 1956). An atlas, a phalanx and part of an immature lower jaw were excavated from the Iron Age village on the northern escarpment of the Wolds at Staple How (SE/8974) dated 2560-2450 bp (King 1963) and a femur and humerus were found at an Iron Age lakeside site on the northern shore of Lake Pickering at Thornton-le-Dale (SE/8382), a site thought to have been under human occupation up to Roman times (Bate 1931).

From the Roman occupation the identification of wildcat from skeletal evidence

becomes increasingly difficult due to the introduction into Britain during the 1st or 2nd century of the domesticated cat, a form considered to have been derived by selective breeding from the north African race of the wildcat *Felis s. lybica* (Kolb 1977). To the difficulties implicit in identifying incomplete skeletal remains from archaeological sites are added the potential effects of hybridisation and evolutionary trends towards a smaller size (Kolb 1977).

Archaeologists have been understandably reluctant to differentiate cat material on the basis of structure and comparative measurements. Thus Bate (1931) judged Iron Age material from Thornton-le-Dale to be of wildcat solely on the grounds that the domestic form was not known in Britain at such an early date, and remains from Roman and later sites are generally recorded as domestic cat purely because of association with human occupation.

Cats are recorded in relatively few archaeological excavation reports; this may reflect the former primary interest of the archaeologist in mammals of economic importance, such as cattle and sheep, may suggest infrequent occurrence. Indeed, where cat evidence is recorded, numbers are lower than species of economic value. Howes's (2002b) Table 1 gives examples from the 2nd to the 17th century of cat skeletal remains in Yorkshire. As all the sites are of human occupation, these remains are likely by inference to be of *Felis catus*, although there is a possibility that hunted or trapped wildcats may be represented since remains of other wild species, e.g. roe deer, have also been found in association with human occupation sites. Since Kitchener (1995) has identified reliable structural features in cat skull and jaws to enable differentiation between *F. silvestris* and *F. catus*, it would be opportune to re-examine skeletal material from excavations in order to confirm late dates for *F. silvestris* and early dates for *F. catus*.

Place name evidence

The term 'cat' often forms the first element in the names of many topographical features and associated place names (see Howes 1984, 2002b Appendix 1). Research into the origins of such names shows that some originate from the Old English 'catt' in the sense of 'wildcat' and therefore probably allude to the former association between the animal and the locality, while some may refer to a topographical structure which in some respect resembles a cat. Other etymological roots may bear a coincidental phonetic similarity to 'cat'; by examining the 15 (7th series) 1 inch to 1 mile Ordnance Survey

maps which cover the Yorkshire area and the ten volumes of the English Place Name Society dealing with the three Yorkshire Ridings (Smith 1937, 1961-1963, 1969), 81 examples of place names containing the element 'cat' have been found (Howes 2002b Appendix 1). Analysis of the above sources showed that 24 relate to personal names, five showed phonetic similarity to 'cat', but 29 are judged to allude to wildcat; the names associated with wildcats are exclusively distributed along the Pennines or Pennine foothills, mainly at altitudes above the 400ft contour (Howes 2002b, Figure 1). Figure 11.1 refines and updates this analysis.

Wildcat place names and parishes making bounty payments for wildcats

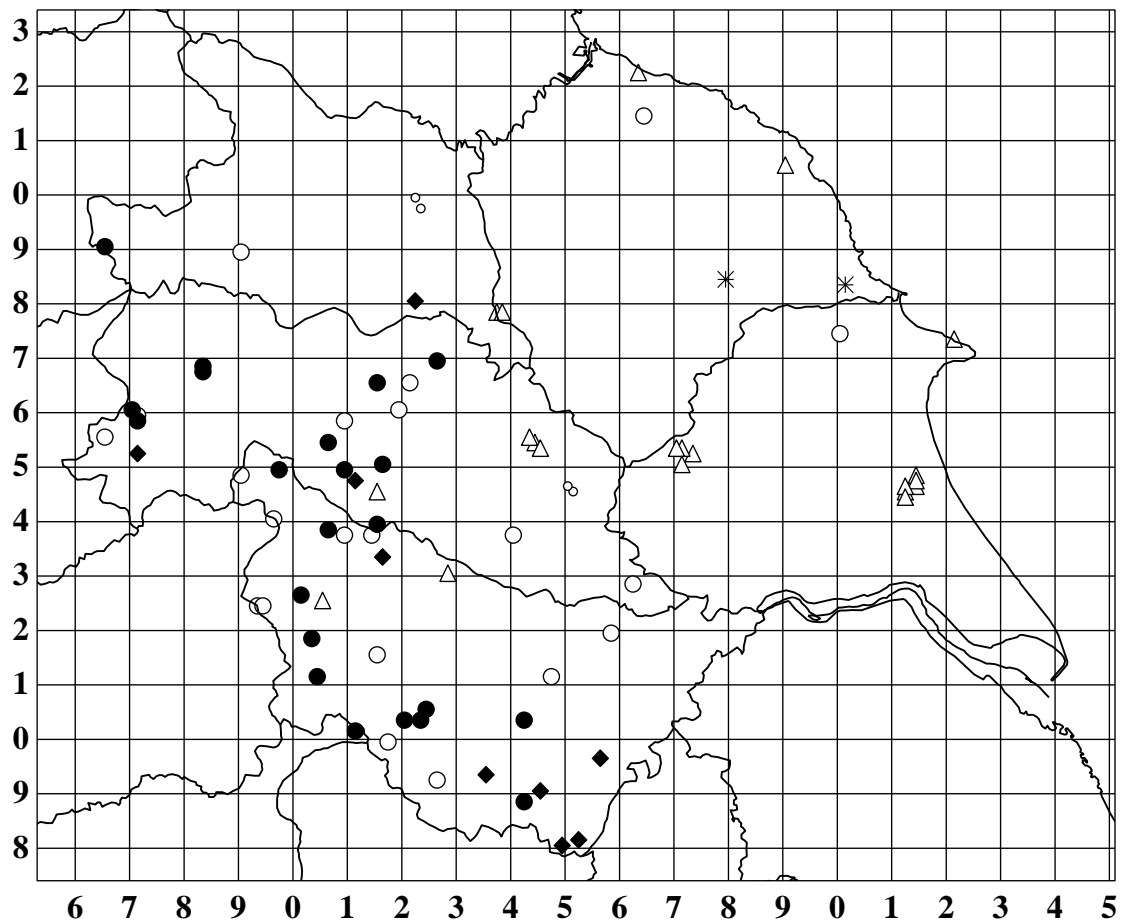


Figure 11.1. Distribution 'cat' place names in Yorkshire with locations of parishes making bounty payments for wildcats.

Place names attributed to wildcat = ●; uncertain origin = ○; Norse personal name = △;
 phonetic resemblance = ◊; parishes making bounty payments for wildcats = ◆;
 13th and 14th century hunting forests with license to hunt wildcat = *

Tantalisingly, the distribution of 17 of the 21 sites for which the etymological derivation is uncertain also shows a close correlation with the upland Pennine wildcat sites. This may provide the possibility of further circumstantial evidence of early wild

cat occurrence.

Places associated with personal name roots are chiefly connected with phases of Scandinavian settlement and are thus distributed along the east coast and in the rich lowland agricultural areas of Holderness and the Vale of York. The date at which a place or geographical feature is first named after the local occurrence of a wildcat, if indeed this was the reason for it being so named, potentially gives a clue as to when the species occurred in the district concerned. The earliest dates when these names appeared on manuscripts, maps etc. have been obtained where available from the relevant English Place Name Society volumes and are included in Howes (2002b Appendix 1). Earliest documentary dates range from 1086 (Domesday Book) to 1866; that 63% of these fall in the mid-19th century probably reflects the fact that detailed maps giving minor place names (tithes, estate and Ordnance Survey maps) became more readily available during this period.

Licenses to hunt wildcat from the 12th – 17th centuries

The granting of Royal licenses to hunt certain beasts of the chase, or to exterminate certain species regarded as vermin, frequently included the wildcat as potential quarry, thus providing indirect evidence of its past occurrence in certain counties, forests and manors. Examples of claimed rights to hunt various specifically identified quarry animals provide circumstantial evidence of these species occurring in forests of Galtres and Pickering and the manor of Seamer during the 13th century (Gill 1852, Anon. 1906, Rimington 1956, English 1996, Howes 2002b). Since these sites are within north-east Yorkshire, they may help to give authenticity to cat place names of in this region which are otherwise of uncertain origin.

Fur trade

Miller (1804), followed by Hunter (1828) and Gill (1852), showed that in addition to being hunted for sport and as vermin, ‘cats’ were killed for their fur. The pelts of ‘cats’, along with those of rabbit, fox and lamb, were all locally obtainable but held a relatively low prestige value, as evidenced in both ecclesiastical and civil laws of the medieval period (Veals 1966, Howes 2002b). In the absence of statistical or anecdotal evidence, this low prestige value may be indicative of the abundance and accessibility of ‘cats’ in the wild during this period. Howes (2002b), quoting Raine (1943) shows evidence of ‘cats’ being used for fur in Yorkshire, where the Ordinances of the Skinners of the City

of York of 1500, stipulated a price for the preparation of 'catte skins'. It is not possible to determine whether these were domestic or wild animals or both, and as beaver (*Castor fiber*) and [European] mink (*Mustela lutreola*) were also mentioned in the Ordinances, neither is it possible to establish firmly whether they were collected locally, traded from other parts of Britain, or indeed imported from elsewhere in Europe.

Bounty payments for wildcats in churchwardens' accounts of the 16th – 18th centuries

There are at least 11 literature references to wildcats in Yorkshire parish records (*viz.* Eastwood 1851, 1862, Hatton & Fox 1880, Clarke & Roebuck 1881, Roberts 1882, Harting 1890, Wroot 1895, Grabham 1907, Denny 1910, Taylor 1956, Howes 1973), but these oft-repeated references relate to only two parishes, Ecclesfield, where bounties were paid for wildcats in 1589 and 1626 and Shipley, where payments were made for two cats in 1676, one in 1678 and two in 1679 (Hatton & Fox 1880, Roberts 1882, Wroot 1895, Taylor 1956).

Howes (1984) located wildcat bounty payments in three out of 40 sets of parish records. Howes (2002b) increased the search to 105 sets, locating wildcat bounty payments in 7 parishes (see Howes 2002b Appendix 2). Out of 10,582 bounty payments for carnivores, 70 (0.66%) related to animals deemed to be wildcats. Lovegrove (2007) examined accounts from 52 additional Yorkshire parishes, two of which, Ilkely and Slaidburn, contained evidence of bounties paid for wildcats, but since specific dates and bounty numbers are not provided, only his parish locations have been used in this study for mapping purposes (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

With regard to frequency relative to other targeted carnivores, bounty payments for wildcat have only been located in the accounts of 9 (8.8%) parishes out of 102 for which bounty payments were made. This indicates their scarcity relative to polecat 73 (71.5%), fox 68 (66.6%), badger 27 (26.4%), otter 20 (19.6%) and weasel 16 (15.6%). Only pine marten in 4 (3.9%) and stoat in 2 (1.9%) were scarcer. To achieve a more refined comparison, Howes (2002b) compared the specific number of wildcat bounties with all other carnivora bounty payments from Yorkshire parish records, showing that during 1550-1599 wildcats constituted 3% of bounties; this level fell to 0.3% in 1600-1649, 1% in 1650-1699 and 1% in 1700-1749, falling to 0.1% in 1750-1799 and was unrepresented during the 19th century (Howes 2002b Figure 2).

Although usually referred to as wildcats, there is no entirely certain way of

distinguishing between wild and domestic animals from this archival source, although presumably churchwardens only knowingly paid for what they considered to be the former; with significant financial inducement to defraud the system by substituting domestic cats, it could be said that the authenticity of the Yorkshire examples may rest on their early dates and infrequent occurrence.

Whereas the larger carnivores like badger, fox and otter generally commanded a bounty of 1 s., particularly through the 18th and early 19th centuries, this was only occasionally the case with wildcats during the 18th century (see Howes 2002b Appendix 2). When wildcat bounties appear, they are generally higher than for the smaller mustelids, so the relative scales of the bounty tariff therefore gives a useful indication that the 'wildcat' is genuine.

In order to show the Yorkshire bounties and place name data in a national context, bounty data in Howes (2002b Figure 1) and Lovegrove (2007 Appendix 1) have been amalgamated to provide Figure 11.2, showing a 10 x 10 km distribution and ranked frequency map of wildcat in parishes across England and Wales. This shows a generally very sparse but marked westerly distribution with concentrations in Cornwall, Wales, Cumbria, and along the Pennine uplands, terminating in the south in the Sherwood Forest region on the Nottinghamshire-Yorkshire border. Emphasising the westerly bias, Lovegrove (2007) asserts that the Welsh component was artificially reduced by the non-survival of many of the Welsh ecclesiastical records. The absence of bounty evidence from the east and northeast Yorkshire would seem to be representative of most east coast counties and may represent a genuine scarcity or absence in that region from the late 16th to the early 19th century. It could also indicate that records of so called 'wildcats' being shot or trapped in eastern counties during the 19th century may indeed relate to large domestic animals.

Gamekeepers' records

From the 18th century, and probably up to the Second World War, cats which strayed into game preserves were regarded by game-keeping staff as vermin and killed, often in large numbers. These were probably all wandering domestic and feral animals, though occasionally particularly large specimens were claimed to be wildcats, e.g.

Wildcat bounty payments in English and Welsh parish records

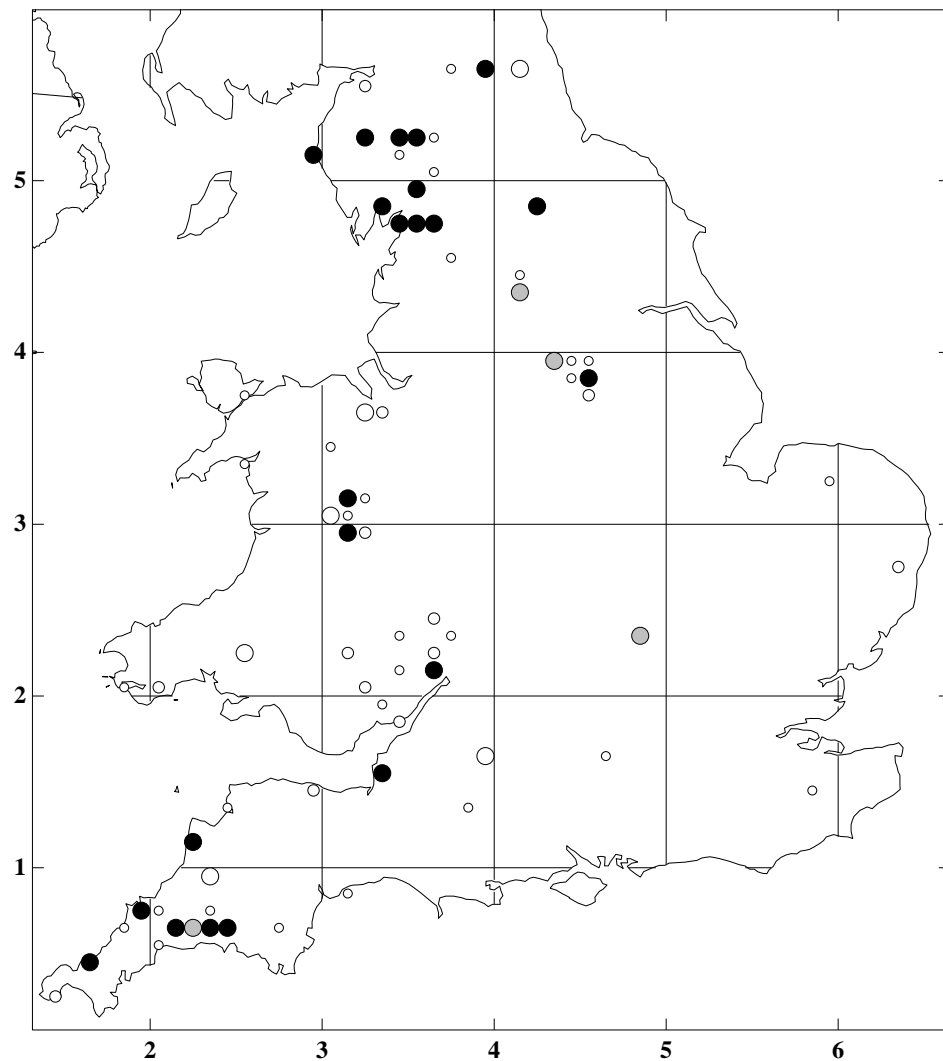


Figure 11.2. 10 km distribution and relative frequency of wildcat bounty payments in English and Welsh Parishes from the late 16th to early 19th centuries, based on data from Lovegrove (2007), Howes (1984, 2002b) and this study.

Symbols relate to relative frequency codes 5 = ● reducing to 1 = ○

one at Northowram in 1830 (Johnson 1965). Some estate archives contain reports of vermin killed on specific game preserves, though information on species and numbers is more frequently obtained by examining gamekeepers' gibbets or lines (for examples, see Howes 2002b Table 2). Although a small and variable sample, cats, as a percentage of the total vermin, appear to increase during this period. The only clear finding is that around the turn of the 19th century cats were relatively abundant on gamekeepers' gibbets, while today they are generally absent.

19th century topographical accounts

During the 19th century there were several published allusions, both historical and contemporary, to wildcats occurring in Yorkshire, some merely used by authors attempting to illustrate the ‘wild and untamed’ nature of certain remote parts of the Yorkshire landscape in the past.

Clarke and Roebuck (1881), later quoted by Denny (1910) and Fortune (1916), give what is regarded as the last record of wildcat in Yorkshire, one trapped by John Harrison on his farm at Murton (SE/5388) near Hawnby, one winter around 1840. They also claim that other testimony (not stated) confirms the opinion that the Hambleton Hills were the wildcat’s ‘latest’ haunt. It is strange that no contemporary report of such a noteworthy record was published, even in the Yorkshire literature and despite Clarke and Roebuck both serving as editors of *The Naturalist* and being prolific contributors of notes and papers, the record was never published by them in its pages. Indeed, Barker (1854) alluded to wildcats as being ‘still occasionally found in the woods of Wensleydale’, thereby post-dating the 1840 Murton record. Clarke and Roebuck (1881) also conceded that in all probability wildcats once existed in the fells of the north-west.

Distribution, status and decline

The preferred habitat of upland woodland, the borders of forest and open hilly ground where they hold territories of 60-70ha (Kolb 1977) would, even by medieval times, have been restricted and fragmentary in much of Yorkshire due to agricultural development. This suggests that conditions may not in historic times have been suitable for them in the Vales and lowland of central and eastern Yorkshire, despite the various permissions of the 13th and 14th centuries to hunt wildcats in these areas. The Pennine distribution pattern which persuasively emerges from place name studies (Howes 2002b, Figure 1) seems to have survived into the 18th century according to ecclesiastical records, and allusions of former occurrence are still weakly echoed in 19th century topographical sources. Parish bounty records of the 16th to the 18th centuries provide robust evidence of a previously undocumented distribution along the wooded parishes on or adjacent to the Permian ridge from Masham in the north to Thorpe Salvin in the south, and on into the Sherwood Forest region of north Nottinghamshire.

On the information available, it is difficult to plot precisely the wildcat’s decline in Yorkshire. Figure 2 in Howes (2002b) shows the period during which bounty

payments were made, with numbers peaking in the 1660s and 1670s and again in the 1720s and 1730s. Even during these periods, cats only represented 1% of total carnivore bounties, tailing off to 0.1% by the last half of the 18th century and vanishing altogether by the 19th century, a demise somewhat earlier than the claimed date of 1840 for the death of the 'last' wildcat in Yorkshire (Clarke & Roebuck 1881). This is confirmed by Lovegrove (2007) who from parishes across England and Wales traced 670 wildcat bounties for the 17th century, 322 from 1701-1750, 109 for 1751-1800, and only 4 for the 19th century. Even if a residual population had persisted after this time, wildcats would surely have featured, as did polecat, pine marten and otter, in the north regional natural history journals which proliferated during the mid- to late 19th century. Although plausibly argued by Langley and Yalden (1977) that the demise of the wildcat and the other rare carnivores in England came about by intensification of persecution through the 19th century boom in game-keeping, it would seem likely from evidence presented here that in Yorkshire, at least, it had been largely absent from eastern and lowland regions since the 14th century. Its decline and ultimately the eradication of viable populations in the Pennine, Permian ridge and Sherwood areas had realistically taken place by the mid 18th century.

The wildcat's fate in Yorkshire probably followed the fate of its preferred habitat, though its final extermination could possibly have been brought about by persecution, isolation of populations and hybridisation with domestic (house) cats. That cats were killed by gamekeepers during the 19th and early 20th centuries is not in dispute, though with the relative frequency of culled cats increasing through this period (see Howes 2002b Table 2), it is likely that keepers were trapping wandering farm and feral domestic cats rather than wildcats.