

# YOUR KITTY'S WILD ANCESTOR

## LOUISE HOLTON

Did you know that our domestic housecats who sit on our laps and sleep on our beds come from a wild ancestor? This wild ancestor is the African wildcat, *Felis lybica lybica*. How many are there left in the wild? It's difficult to estimate the numbers as the cats are nocturnal, very elusive, usually live alone, and are well camouflaged.

For the definition of African wildcats, we turned to Dr. Jim Sanderson, the Founder and Director of Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation. Dr. Sanderson told us:

*Felis lybica* is a separate species with three subspecies.

In Eastern and Southern Africa, the subspecies is *Felis lybica cafra*.

*Felis lybica lybica* is the ancestor of the domestic cat.

*Felis lybica ornata* is the wildcat of Asia.

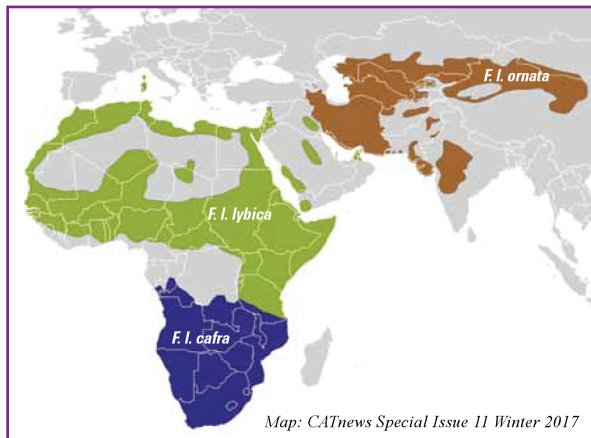
The domestic cat is now *Felis catus*, a separate species that was domesticated mostly from a lineage of *Felis lybica lybica* from Mesopotamia (Driscoll et al. 2007).

One third of U.S. households have housecats, and more than 600 million cats live among humans in the world. And probably 600 million more live on streets and in alleyways. We have this wildcat to thank for our beloved companion animals!

Over the years the origin of the domestic cat, *Felis catus*, has been elusive. For many years, researchers believed that it was the Egyptians who first domesticated the cat. This is because around 3,500 years ago, Egyptian artists depicted cats in their art on wall paintings and on mosaics. Statues and paintings showed cats sitting under chairs and being worshiped as deities. The cat goddess Bastet, who rose to prominence around 1,000 B.C., was the Goddess of love and joy. Also at that time, the penalty for killing a cat was death. Pet cats who died were mummified and eventually buried with their dead owners. What made it easier to think the Egyptians domesticated *Felis lybica lybica* was that this wildcat also lived in Egypt and is easier to tame than other small wildcats like the Scottish and European wildcat.

Just in the last few years, genetic and archaeological discoveries changed this. Genetic findings showed that cat domestication began in the Fertile Crescent around 10,000 years ago, coinciding with the beginning of agriculture. The wildcats living here took advantage of the mice and

rats found around grain storages, and eventually humans started putting out food scraps for them. The cat most likely domesticated herself, as she saw an easy way to find food. The farmers liked having these wildcats around since they took care of the rodents, and continued to find ways to encourage them to stay. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement that still plays out today, as domestic cats are welcome to live in barns to keep rodents in check, and keep food storage relatively free from rodents.



To some extent, domestication of wildcats continues to this very day, as it does in parts of Africa, where wildcats often come in contact with villagers. Southern African wildcats living around the Satara Camp in Kruger Park have found that at night they can easily find scraps of meat left in camps around the areas where people barbeque.

Last year I visited Satara Camp and late one night we found a southern African wildcat next door to our bungalow. She was under a car cleaning herself like any Moggie would after a meal. She was not afraid of us but also wouldn't let us get too close! Even with only a flashlight on her, I could see her distinctive black feet, and the striped tail, plus the orange tinge to the backs of her ears, all so characteristic of the wildcat.

Alley Cat Rescue has been at the forefront of working to keep



African wildcat in South Africa  
[www.willievanschalkwyk.co.za/](http://www.willievanschalkwyk.co.za/)

the southern African wildcat pure. Habitat loss, hunting, and cars all take a toll on the southern African wildcat, but hybridization has a significant effect as well. Because the cats are so similar in DNA, they interbreed very easily, and hybrids can still give birth to litters of kittens.

## Conservation Status

The southern African wildcat is listed as “Least Concern” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), but they do say the species is declining. Wildcats are listed on Appendix 11 by CITES, which means the cat is not immediately threatened but does need trade sanctions to ensure their survival.



*Domestic Tabbies*

Sadly there is an imbalance of funding for the 33 species of small wildcats in the world. There is a tendency to support conservation efforts for big cats but not smaller cats. With only 1.2% of ALL funding for wildcats directed towards ALL cat species, there is an increased need for additional funding. The other 98.8% of wildcat donations goes towards

funding tigers, panthers, and other large cats. While Alley Cat Rescue loves ALL cats, we would like to see more funding put towards the small wildcats and of course support our project in South Africa: [Saving Your Kitty's Heritage](#).

Alley Cat Rescue is the first and only group in the world with an Action Plan to save this iconic species. There are groups in Scotland with a similar plan to save the Scottish wildcat.

## Appearance

While southern African wildcats bear many physical similarities to the modern-day domesticated cats, there are some distinct differences. Southern African wildcats have unusually long front legs, which results in a gait similar to the cheetah. These longer front legs are seen in ancient bronze Egyptian statues. It gives the cat a very upright sitting

position which is completely absent in domestic cats and in hybrids.

Depending on where they live, their coat colors range from light, sandy stripes in the deserts to dark gray/brown stripes in forested areas. They have stripes around their face that range in color from dark ochre to black. The two larger stripes run horizontally on the cheek, from the outer corner of the eye to the jaw. A smaller stripe runs from the inner corner of the eye to the tip of the nose, and there are four to six stripes across the throat. Their hind legs are also striped, and they have two dark rings that circle the front legs. African wildcats have a dark stripe that runs along their back, while their flanks are lighter in color. They have vertical pale stripes on their sides, which often fade into spots. The end of their tail has two to three rings and a black tip, and their feet are usually black underneath. In terms of size and weight they are closely comparable to the domestic cat.

## References and Further Reading:

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Dr. Jim Sanderson, PhD., Founder and Director of Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation (SWCCF); <https://smallcats.org/>

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Since launching the project in 2018, we have made tremendous progress in sterilizing feral cats in the Kruger Park area. By consulting with local experts, ACR has been able to establish best practices and raise awareness throughout communities regarding the threat of hybridization facing the African wildcat. Our work, in

conjunction with feral cat advocates, scientists, SPCAs, and state veterinarians, has made this on-going project successful and effective. Through our efforts, the genetic purity of the African wildcat is actively being preserved for generations to come!