

GOOD NATURED LARA SEMPLE



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NATURED**
A PODCAST SERIES FROM
CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: Hello and welcome to Good Natured, a podcast that shines a light on conservation successes and challenges. I'm Julia

Sofia: And I'm Sofia! We're thrilled to be back for a second season of the Good Natured Podcast.

Julia: This year, we are doing things slightly different and we are going to start with four weekly mini-episodes called Nature Notes, which feature nature related stories.

Sofia: And we will then release our normal length episodes from mid-August so make sure to check your feed, to find the latest episodes!

Sofia: This week's Nature Note was recorded by Lara Semple.

Julia: After completing her Master's in conservation, she wanted to gain experience by working with threatened British fauna.

Sofia: So what Lara did was that she applied to volunteer with the Scottish Wildcat Action winter survey in 2018 to systematically survey priority areas using camera traps.

Julia: This took place in the 4,000ha area of Strathpeffer north of Inverness in Scotland.

Sofia: And this story tells us about one of the major highlights of this work for her.

MINI-EPISODE

Lara: Here's a story about the most exciting text I've ever received. It's not a text asking me to be a bridesmaid or that guy finally asking me out on a date, but instead, a story about the fragility of nature.

I'd spent the winter in the Highlands north of Inverness. Working on a conservation project from Britain's largest and most threatened carnivore, the Scottish wildcat. It was long hours, 15,000 steps per day, checking camera traps in the dark, in the snow and in the ice, attempting to think like a cat.

On this particular day, I was finishing my evening fieldwork on the side of a mountain my phone beeps telling me I had to text. It was a text to say we'd possibly caught a Scottish wildcat in a smart trap. As the name suggests a smart trap sends you an alert when your trap door closes but I didn't want to get my hopes up.

It might have been a false alarm. We'd prepared for this exact scenario and knew that time was of the essence. I met with my project officer and a vet at the scene, which was a grassy area, surrounded by woodland, with large boulders scattered around us.

Our goal was to GPS collar a Scottish wildcat to learn more about this threatened species' ecology and behavior. It was a nerve-wracking moment, checking the trap for our target animal. The one we had been eagerly watching on camera traps for several weeks. But there it was, displaying all the attitude and charisma that Scottish wildcats are well-known for: an arched back and a deep rumbling ground.

We were walking by head torch as we had long lost the sun behind the mountain. The darkness seemed to further focus the importance of our mission, as there was no possible distraction. I didn't even seem to notice the bitter cold setting in.

Alice, our vet, confirmed she was a female of breeding age. She epitomized hope for her threatened population, but this fact was also incredibly sad. And so it's much more likely for her to encounter a domestic tom cat before she would encounter another wildcat to breed with. This is the main threat to the Scottish wildcat.

We took measurements and samples for the lab, and then spent a few seconds admiring her distinct markings. Wide dark stripes from the corners of her eyes like eyeliner, a thick bottle brush like tail with black rings, dark stripes down her flanks. I'd seen photos, drawings, and even a stuffed wildcat called Wallace but seeing the markings on a living animal is still incredibly special to me.

The species is now classed as extinct in the wild by the IUCN, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The Saving Wildcats Recovery Project was launched last year with the aim to prevent the extinction of wildcats in Scotland, by breeding and releasing them into the wild. So although they may be currently clinging on by the claw, hopefully they can be cherished for generations to come.

This GPS collaring work was led by Dr Kerry Kilshaw from Oxford's WildCRU and aided by Scottish Wildcat Action officers with a license from NatureScot.

OUTRO

Sofia: We hope you enjoyed listening to Lara's story. If you have any comments or you want to get in touch you can reach us on Twitter at ConservOptimism or on email at podcast@conservationoptimism.org.

Julia: The music for this episode is by Serat and is available on the Free Music Archive. This mini episode was produced and edited by Sofia Castelló y Tickell and myself Julia Migné.

Sofia: Thank you very much to the Conservation Optimism micro interns, Elizabeth Brown, and Emma Felin for their help with the music. Our theme song was composed and produced by Matthew Kemp.

Julia: This season of Good Natured was funded by Synchronicity Earth, the Whitley Fund for Nature and the University of Oxford Departmental Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund.