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The missing lynx

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 18/08/2007

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Europe's most exotic feline is on the brink of extinction. In an attempt to find out why, Richard Grant unravels a disturbing tale of artificially introduced diseases, bureaucratic incompetence, drunken pilgrims and roads that do not officially exist

The world's most endangered species of cat does not live in some disappearing rainforest or unravelling war zone, but here in western Europe, and supposedly under the protection of the European Union. With its slanting eyes, forked beard, leopard-spotted coat and exotic ear tufts, the Iberian lynx has a curiously oriental appearance, but it once lived all over Spain and Portugal and ranged into the south of France.

In 1996, when the first alarms were raised by international big-cat scientists, the Iberian lynx was down to a few hundred animals, living in 50 small, isolated, declining populations. The World Conservation Union declared it in critical danger of extinction and noted that the last feline species to become extinct was the sabre-toothed tiger 10,000 years ago. The EU and the Spanish and Portuguese governments granted it their maximum levels of official protection and instructed regional authorities to prepare recovery plans. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and other conservation groups started funding scientific studies, habitat improvement schemes, captive breeding programmes and public awareness campaigns.

Eleven years and many millions of euros later, 48 of those 50 lynx populations have died out and fewer than 40 breeding females remain in the wild. How did this happen? Why, when Europeans have done so much to help endangered cats in Africa and Asia, have we failed to protect our own?

'The two things are connected,' says Luis Suarez, the head of species conservation for the WWF in Spain, a fair-haired, sun-weathered man with a sharp, analytical mind and an unwavering determination to save the Iberian lynx. 'We got a very late start because the conservation movement was focused on tigers and whales and species like that and most people had never heard of the Iberian lynx. Spain and Portugal were coming out of dictatorships so our own conservation movements were slow in developing. By the time we got to the lynx, it was already in the final stage of extinction.'

The Iberian lynx, a relative of the Eurasian and North American lynx but different enough to be classified as its own species, has been in decline for two centuries. It has lost habitat to agriculture, forestry, dams, roads, expanding cities and towns. It has been hunted as a trophy animal, trapped as a pest and slaughtered in droves by motorists. What really sent it spiralling towards extinction, however, was the collapse of Spanish and Portuguese rabbit populations. The Iberian lynx is a specialist carnivore that subsists almost exclusively on rabbits. An adult male requires one rabbit a day; a female with cubs needs three to five. Until recently this made perfect evolutionary sense on the Iberian peninsula. Rabbits were so abundant that more than 30 species preyed on them. One linguistic theory holds that the word España is derived from an ancient Phoenician name meaning Land of Rabbits.

advertisement In 1952 the French paediatrician Dr Paul Armand-Delille, annoyed at the rabbits invading his vegetable garden near Chartres, sent to Australia for some live cultures of the virus that causes myxomatosis, a disease that causes horrible swellings, tumours and blindness in rabbits before killing them. The doctor injected the virus into a few wild rabbits on his estate, wrote a scientific paper on the success of his experiment, and soon became a figure of national disgrace. The disease wiped out nearly all the wild rabbits in France and then spread into neighbouring countries.

When myxomatosis spread through Spain and Portugal in the early 1960s, it killed about 90 per cent of the rabbits, and lynxes starved to death by the hundred. In



The Iberian lynx is losing its habitat to urbanisation, road-building, agriculture and forestry

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Britain, France and other parts of Europe, rabbit populations built up again after the first devastating wave of the disease, as they developed resistance and demonstrated their famous breeding capabilities. On the Iberian peninsula, with so many species preying on them, including avid human rabbit-hunters, populations recovered much more slowly. Then, in the early 1980s, another devastating disease was accidentally introduced: viral haemorrhagic pneumonia wiped out 90 per cent of the remaining rabbits.

'Both diseases are still killing many rabbits and this is a serious problem for the lynx,' Suarez says as he drives me south from Seville to Doñana National Park on the coast of Andalusia, where one of the two remaining

lynx populations clings to existence on a kind of artificial life support system. Most of the animals are radio-collared, monitored in their movements and given regular health checks. Rabbits are bred for them in a nearby facility, inoculated, then released into the park for the lynxes to hunt. More money and effort have been sunk into lynx recovery in Doñana than anywhere else but their numbers are still declining.

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The road we're driving along, despite its cautionary road signs and the tunnels dug underneath it for lynx crossings, has taken a heavy toll. So has another built recently, and illegally, right through the middle of the best lynx habitat. At the last count there were fewer than 40 lynxes living in and around the park, with only five to eight breeding females. The animals are seriously inbred, with low sperm and egg counts, poor immunity to disease, and poor survival and mothering skills. It is an inevitable part of every extinction. As the gene pool shrinks, the spiral quickens.

'Now we have a new crisis at Doñana that the authorities are trying to cover up,' Suarez says. 'Four males were found dead from feline leukaemia. They caught it from fighting with feral domestic cats in the park and then probably spread it among themselves. The males are always fighting with each other because there are so few females.'

A fifth male was found alive with the virus and brought in for treatment. The hope is to release him back into the wild, along with the animals in the captive breeding programme, but until then there are no appropriate males for the six breeding females. 'Well, there is one wandering male they could come into contact with, but he is very questionable,' Suarez adds. 'The rest of the lynxes are outside the national park in very poor habitat and at very high risk of catching this disease.'

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Opened in 1992, the captive breeding centre adjoins the visitor centre at El Acebuche. The lynxes are kept in enclosures away from human contact and under the constant vigil of 32 cameras. In a control room, scientists and volunteers monitor a wall of screens 24 hours a day, noting every change of behaviour in each individual lynx - scratching, eating, licking, sniffing, rolling over, stretching and so on - sometimes sprinting out to break up fights.

Right now, in the blazing hot summer afternoon, the lynxes are all in their artificial dens taking Iberian naps. Occasionally they change position, stretch a limb, twitch an ear tuft. There are six females, three males and 19 extremely cute-looking cubs, seven of them born this year. Before the centre was set up,

no one had ever bred Iberian lynxes in captivity. There were many problems, not least an initial lack of males. Then the females kept trying to kill their prospective mates. The staff had to put different combinations of males and females in adjoining enclosures, allowing them to mark their territory, then look for couples that seemed compatible before putting them together.

The first cubs were born in 2005. In the struggle to save the species, they represented a tiny piece of the puzzle, but it was a huge media event. Politicians, celebrities and film crews arrived. An adoring public watched the cubs grow up on television. Then, when they were 45 days old, a cub killed one of his sisters. The public was horrified, scientists were baffled. No one knew this was normal behaviour.

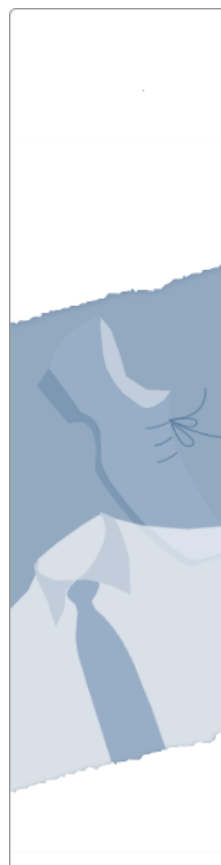
Anastasia Antonevich is a scientist visiting from Russia, where she was studying sibling aggression in Eurasian lynxes. 'It's fairly common among Eurasian lynx kittens but with the Iberian lynx kittens it seems to happen in every litter and the fighting is much more aggressive,' she says. 'There is a phase between 30 days and 65 days when brothers and sisters try to kill each other. People can't believe such sweet-looking kittens will fight to the death but they are so single-minded. It's a way to weed out the weakest cub,' she explains. 'The winner gets more nursing and solid food. We see the same thing in birds of prey. The mother will often try to separate the kittens but it's very difficult because they lock together in a ball. One mother was trying to break up a fight and she sat on her cub and killed it. She isn't a very good mother.'

But with the Iberian lynx population so low, nature cannot be allowed to take its course. When they see a sibling fight begin on the screens, team members run out and release a live rabbit in the hope that it will distract them. If this doesn't work, they use water guns, and then plexiglass shields which they wedge between the cubs.

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As they grow up, the young lynxes will be given the opportunity to hunt live rabbits, mark out their own territories and interact with other lynxes. The hope is to release them into the park but before that can happen the feral cats, the disease epidemic and a host of other problems need to be solved.

From El Acebuche, Suarez takes me to El Rocio, a small town of unpaved streets, hitching rails for horses, ancient olive trees and traditional Andalusian whitewashed houses. Its magnificent old church has swallows nesting in its bell tower, and a statue of the Virgin wearing a wide-brimmed hat piled up with flowers. 'This is a very strange but important part of the story,' Suarez says. 'Right now it is quiet in El Rocio but a week ago there were a million people here and most of them were drunk. They come every year in a big procession to ask favours from the Virgin and have a big party. They come on foot, on donkeys, in carts, drinking all the way, lighting campfires, singing, throwing trash everywhere, right through the middle of the lynx habitat in the national park, where visitation is normally strictly controlled.'

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The pilgrimage scares away the rabbits and disturbs the lynxes, and there are smaller processions along the same route nearly every weekend. There would be a massive outcry if the authorities tried to stop or redirect these processions so Suarez and the lynx defenders have started a campaign designed to minimise the disturbance. 'We say don't light fires, don't throw rubbish, because the Virgin doesn't want you to despoil this special and beautiful place. It works quite well until they get drunk.'

There are also hunting societies that use the park, causing further disruptions, and one lynx was killed last year in a snare left by a trapper. In some areas local people are allowed to graze their goats and cows on grass that rabbits could be eating. Just outside the national park but draining its watershed and drying up streams and springs are some 6,000 hectares of irrigated strawberry farms, half of them pumping water illegally. Again, there is no political will to stop the illegal pumping or to curtail the farming. In the Doñana area, the needs of wildlife have always come second to the desires of people, and this shows no sign of changing.

Leaving Doñana, Suarez takes the illegal paved road. 'Before, there was a rough track here with lots of potholes, used by local farmers and naturalists. Then in 2001, the local authorities paved it without getting any planning permission or doing an environmental assessment. It divided the Doñana lynx population in half and two lynxes were run over and killed in the first year and a half. The EU sent a warning letter to the local authorities to return the road to its original condition or come to court.'

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Neither of those things happened. Instead a compromise was found: roundabouts would be built every half kilometre to slow down the traffic. The first was built and soon afterwards a young man drove into it, drunk, and killed himself. There were howls of protest from the local people, insisting that roundabouts were death-traps, and no more were built. Instead the authorities painted round circles on the road surface and claimed this satisfied their legal obligations. 'Look at this,' Suarez says, driving over one of them. 'You should have seen the faces of the people from the EU who came here. "Is this a joke?" they asked me. "No," I said. "And they used EU money to paint them."'

Then I notice there are no speed limit signs. Why not just impose a low speed limit, I ask.

'Now it gets really crazy,' Suarez replies. 'The police can do nothing because officially this road doesn't exist. It never had planning permission and there is no record of it being built. The police have no jurisdiction over it so they can't make a speed limit for it.'

Why not give up on the Doñana lynxes, I ask. There are so many problems. It seems hopeless.

'To lose them would be absolutely unacceptable. In Spain, when you think of a national park, of a protected area, of wildlife, you think of Doñana. It is our national treasure and the lynx is the jewel in its crown. We will do whatever it takes.'

The other population of Iberian lynxes is in the Sierra Morena, a range of low forested mountains that appears as a blue smudge on the horizon from the road that doesn't exist. The land is all privately owned hunting estates, managed primarily for deer and wild boar, and also for wild rams, rabbits, partridges and ducks. During hunting season the owners collect enough fees from hunters to pay for the upkeep of the estates. For the rest of the year there is very little human disturbance. Forty wolves survive there and perhaps as many as 130 lynxes. Last year was a good one for them, with an estimated 40 cubs born and a slight increase in overall numbers.

Don Fernando de Andrada Vanderwilde is an elegant, sharp-tongued, silver-haired aristocrat with lynxes, wolves, imperial eagles, black vultures and other rare species on his 2,000-hectare estate in the northernmost part of the Sierra Morena. Most of the year he lives on the coast in Puerto Santa Maria, where I meet him for lunch at his golf club.

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He orders two glasses of fino, the exquisite dry white sherry of the region, which arrive with green olives, coarse bread and a shallow dish of olive oil. 'We used to hunt the lynxes for sport and because they ate too many rabbits,' he says. 'I have never killed one but my neighbour got two in the same day and I applauded his excellent shooting. That was many years ago. No one would shoot a lynx now. People are very proud to have them these days and some won't shut up about it.'

He and several other landowners are working with the WWF to make their estates more lynx-friendly. The WWF pays them for the exclusive rights to hunt their rabbits, but does not hunt them and instead releases more - 2,250 rabbits since the year 2000. They also plant trees to help lynxes get over fences, and build rabbit-breeding enclosures, fenced off from badgers, mongooses, foxes, wolves and other predators. The athletic lynxes can leap over the three-metre fences, help themselves to rabbits and leap out again.

Don Fernando is happy to take the WWF's money and rabbits but he harbours deep suspicions about the modern conservation movement and sees all its worst tendencies on display at Doñana. 'The money being spent there is ridiculous,' he says. 'All these sperm-counters, radio-collar operators, scientists, technicians. The blood samples, vaccinations, computers, cameras, this captive breeding centre... Next they will be artificially inseminating them and that won't work either. Why? Because the habitat is bad. There are too many people, too many cars, too many human activities. You can't stop this.'

'What is happening in Doñana makes no sense unless you see it as a business designed to keep all these people employed,' he says. 'They do everything to keep the lynx going, on the knife blade of extinction, because otherwise they would be out of a job.'

Don Fernando is the president of the Friends of the Imperial Eagle, a society of private landowners working to save the endangered bird. He has received an award from the king of Spain for his conservation work with lynxes on his estate. He values the endangered species of Spain as much as Suarez does; the two men share similar goals but have a profound disagreement about methods.

In Don Fernando's view, enlightened private landowners like himself and his neighbours are the only realistic hope for endangered species in an overcrowded place like western Europe. They have the best habitat and the power to make decisions on how to improve it. They do not have to raise money to fund the scientific studies, public awareness campaigns and legal challenges that are needed to pressure politicians into making decisions that favour wildlife over local human convenience and economic development.

One thing both men can agree on is the unhelpfulness of the EU. With one arm it has granted the Iberian lynx its top priority endangered species ranking. With another, it has financed and promoted dam-building, road-building and agricultural projects that have helped kill off some of the last lynx populations. Nor did any of the regional authorities prepare those recovery plans for the lynx. Andalusia still does not have one.

'The facts are undeniable,' Don Fernando says. 'The only places where rare species are doing well are in our hands. My father would ask his gamekeeper how many wolves were on the estate. If there were too many, he would have some killed. If not, he would leave them alone. That is how we have always done things. All we need is the freedom to continue our traditional practices.'

It is a profoundly undemocratic viewpoint, which accords the general public no possibility of seeing an Iberian lynx in the wild; but if you were a lynx, where would you rather be? Up in the pristine habitat of Don Fernando's estate, or down with the traffic and the drunken pilgrims and all the rest?

The captive breeding programme offends Don Fernando's sensibilities more than anything, especially now that lynxes from the Sierra Morena are being captured to participate in it. 'If these animals can't even f*** without our help, what is there left to save?' he says. 'The young will have no experience with parasites, diseases, other animals, heat and cold. They will not survive in the wild. They belong in a zoo. My prescription for the lynx is simple,' he smiles. 'More money for habitat improvement, no money for f***ing. They must do that for free.'

- To help WWF's work to conserve the Iberian lynx, contact 08705-668899; [wwf.org.uk/lynx](http://www.wwf.org.uk/lynx)

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