

# Interview with Ailurophile Ian Anderson

(yes, that Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull!)

By Ramona D. Marek, MS ED.

While preparing for the article, "Lyrical Felines: the Cat in Music," I had the distinct pleasure of chatting with the venerable ailurophile, Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull about two of our favorite topics, cats and music. Mr. Anderson is a lifelong cat lover with a personal passion for raising awareness about the plight of the endangered 26 species of small wild cats.



photo clo Ian Anderson Group

In the music arena, he's currently touring with a new production, Jethro Tull, the Rock Opera, which tells the story of the original Jethro Tull's (1674-1741) life. Instead of being an agricultural pioneer and inventing the seed drill, the story is set in modern times with Tull as a biochemist and covers themes of genetic engineering and changes in the scientific balance. The production features virtual guests on video, some newly written material, and classic favorites with slightly rewritten lyrics to better tell the modern-day tale. Visit [www.jethrotull.com](http://www.jethrotull.com) for more information and tour dates.

For an enhanced reading experience, read Mr. Anderson's answers with what he describes as the "dulcet tones of my BBC English accent." Feel free to read my questions in a refreshing sweet tea Texas accent.

## Small wild cat conservation

**RM: Most people know you as the frontman from the band Jethro Tull, but you're also a passionate advocate for the conservation of small wild cats.**

**IA:** These are subjects close to my heart. Whilst I have nothing against lions, tigers or even snow leopards, they will attempt to bite my head off if I get too close. I'm

more interested in those wild felids who are the forerunners of the domestic cat. (Tambourine jingle in background.) In many countries of the world we have endangered species of small wild cats with relatively few people doing much about it. In most cases it's just you and your'n why should we be bothered?

I'm actually going to the Edinburgh Zoo [October 19, 2015] to give a talk to people on the conservation society about small wild cats in particular the Scottish wild cat, the *Felis sylvestris grampia*, as it is most authentically known, with a view to try and drum up some public awareness in our only surviving wild cat in the United Kingdom.

We don't know for sure there are any 100% pure Scottish Wild Cats left in the environment. We could be down to the last tens or hundreds of Scottish Wild Cat purebred, or maybe even none at all. And the main problem, once you take away the fact that many have been killed over the years by game keepers, the main problem is the relentless advancement of mankind across a wilderness landscape of Scottish Highlands and with that goes the dilution of the genetics through the crossbreeding with domestic cats or with feral *Felis catus*, the domestic cat. That has spelled almost certain doom for the Scottish Wild Cat.

## Crossbreeding and Bengals

**RM: Sometimes crossbreeding is used to save an endangered species and can be viewed as a positive benefit, for example, the Florida Panther crossed with the Texas Cougar.**

**IA:** Talking about the Texas Cougar or Florida so-called Panther, we're talking about the same ol' thing—a mountain lion, if you happen to be west of the Colorado River. We're talking about the same species here, we're just talking about geographically separate populations and it was a perfectly justifiable move. But if you're talking about crossbreeding, for instance, a Bengal, with its wild Asian Leopard Cat heritage, and an African Serval, I think we have to question is that really appropriate to be doing that for financial gain or aggrandizement of either you or your skill as a breeder, I think there are places where it becomes a little bit..(deep sigh). Well, I'm certainly very uncomfortable about it. When we start doing that kind of stuff just to have pretty, exotic cats to show off to other people, I think frankly, it's a bit distasteful.

**RM: You've had Bengal cats as pets before.**

**IA:** I think the origins of the Bengal are

different. Jean Mills didn't intend to make a ton of money out of doing something that produced a very pretty cat, did she? She was a professional scientist, a geneticist, working on a real issue that just happened to be the by-product of that, and I think that is a forgivable one.

Of course with the first two or three generations of the Bengals you wouldn't really want to advise people to keep as pets. But most people who have a Bengal today are buying it for the prettiness of it, being a spotted or marbled cat, that has a lot of charm and a lot of good traits once it's sufficiently removed from having too many of the pure Asian Leopard Cat genes. I've had F2 and F3 Bengals in the past, many years ago, but I wouldn't advise people to keep them as pets at all. I think you've got to be going to a reputable breeder and finding the animal that is going to suit your domestic environment. I can happily recommend most Bengals from most breeders but, of course, still there are a few around who continue to sell early generations that probably aren't really good domestic pets.

## Life with Cats

**RM: Have you always had cats in your life?**

**IA:** I have been close to cats since childhood; they're my favorite animal. I'm not really a doggie person. Primarily in my life, my cats over the years have been feral farm cats who've had to be tamed and nurtured back to accepting a relationship with humans and be part of the household. Ours always worked out really well after the first difficult week or two. Most of my cats have been plain moggies, just unfortunate pairings of virile toms visiting some poor bedraggled female at the back of the corn store. (Laughs.)

**RM: How many cats do you have?**

**IA:** Well, we have four cats but half of the year we have a fifth cat because he is my daughter's family cat and they spend about six months of the year in Atlanta where my son-in-law is one of the lead actors, or the lead actor, on the drama, *The Walking Dead*. [His daughter, Gael, is married to the actor, Andrew Lincoln.] So we get his cat for

about half the year in two or three different tranches of domestic stay with us. We're kind of his other home and he is a fifth cat. Five is the tops, we won't entertain any more than that. In fact, this last Christmas our most recent arrival was admitted to the household because another cat we'd had for 12 or 13 years finally passed away. There was a few months of void and after a suitable time, we decided we would have a kitten; a stripey, tabby one. We haven't had one of those since the last Bengal passed away; we've had black or black and white. We have what I think is called a Blotched Tabby, we're pretty sure that he has some marbled Bengal parentage because of his markings. I've never seen a regular domestic tabby that had such bold markings so I figure he has a bit of the marbled Bengal thing in the background there somewhere.

**RM: Do you have any photos of you and your cats you'd like to use for the article?**

**IA:** I have lots of pictures of my cats but I'm not in them because I'm the photographer. (Laughs). When you take pictures of cats, as I do quite often, they just look like any other cat. (Laughing). People say, "Oh wow, what a beautiful kitty!" And I say, "Well, yeah, he kind of looks

like all the (laughing), all the other little guys! He's just cute because I'm a good photographer, (laughing) when in reality he's a little bastard!" (Laughing)

**RM: Yet, the little darlings look so sweet!**

**IA:** (Laughing) Yeah, they make themselves look sweet but you've got to catch them in a sweet mood, and as a photographer, you will know how difficult it is to get that one shot of a cat because very often their eyes are closed, they're fast asleep, or they're in a bad mood with their ears flat. Or they turn their back to you and all you get from your beautiful kitty picture is an expensive porn shot of the rear end!

There were many more topics that we talked about including the importance of microchipping, collars and tags, being greeted by cats when coming home from a trip, the fascinating parallels of human DNA testing and genetics, and of course, music. Should you find yourself with the opportunity to listen to Ian Anderson speak about small wild cats or catch a show, you're sure to have an enchanting, educational and entertaining time.



Current members of Jethro Tull