

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# The Cat That Isn't a Cat

by Guy Belleranti

What animal has "cat" in its name but isn't a cat? The polecat.

Polecats are small weasel-like mammals. In addition to weasels, relatives include minks, otters, badgers, and ferrets. In fact, the common pet ferret is believed to be the domesticated form of one or more type of polecat.

Polecats have long slender bodies with short legs, claws, and a tail. Their bodies are so flexible they can turn around in tight spaces such as narrow underground burrows. Some polecats live in burrows they've dug for themselves. Others live in burrows they find.

There are several species of polecats. One type, the European polecat, lives in parts of Europe. The marbled polecat and steppe polecat lives in Europe and Asia. Another polecat, the striped polecat, lives in Africa.

All polecats are carnivores, or meat-eaters. They are solitary animals, and are most active at night. However, polecats do occasionally hunt during the day, as well. Using their great sense of smell they feed on many kinds of small prey including rodents, rabbits, snakes, lizards, amphibians, fish, birds and eggs. When prey is hard to find polecats will eat insects and fruit.

The name polecat comes from the French word poule-chat, meaning chicken cat, or killer of chickens. And for years farmers hunted them for just this reason. They were also hunted for their fur. Today, however, more people are coming to realize that polecats are a valuable predator that help keep rat, mice, and rabbit populations under control.

Polecats are well known for their ability to excrete a foul smell to mark territory and to ward off predators. Some people refer to skunks as polecats. While both can be quite smelly, skunks aren't true polecats.



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1. A polecat is...
- a. a type of cat
  - b. an animal closely related to badgers
  - c. an animal closely related to skunks
  - d. a type of small dog

2. List two reasons why people have hunted polecats, according to the article.

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3. According to the article, how are polecats and skunks similar?

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4. Tell whether each sentence is a true or false. Write *T* or *F* on each line.

\_\_\_\_\_ Polecats usually hunt in groups.

\_\_\_\_\_ Wild polecats live in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

\_\_\_\_\_ Polecats always dig their own burrows.

\_\_\_\_\_ Polecats mostly eat insects.

5. Explain how polecats can help people.

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Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. domesticated

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. slender

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Europe

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Asia

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Africa

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. solitary

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. valuable

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. foul

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. populations

a. useful

b. spending a lot of time alone

c. tame; not wild

d. nasty; not pleasurable

e. thin

f. numbers of animal species in an area

g. continent that borders the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans

h. continent that borders the Northern Atlantic Ocean

i. continent that borders the Northern Pacific Ocean

# ANSWER KEY

## The Cat That Isn't a Cat

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1. A polecat is... **b**
- a. a type of cat
  - b. an animal closely related to badgers**
  - c. an animal closely related to skunks
  - d. a type of small dog
2. List two reasons why people have hunted polecats, according to the article.

**Farmers would hunt polecats because they would eat their chickens.**  
**Polecats were also hunted for their fur.**

3. According to the article, how are polecats and skunks similar?

**Polecats and skunks both excrete a foul smell to mark their territory and to ward off predators.**

4. Tell whether each sentence is a true or false. Write *T* or *F* on each line.

**F** Polecats usually hunt in groups.

**T** Wild polecats live in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

**F** Polecats always dig their own burrows.

**F** Polecats mostly eat insects.

5. Explain how polecats can help people.

**Polecats can keep mice, rats, and rabbit populations under control.**

# ANSWER KEY

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