



Living with Pine Martens

A guide to the pine marten in Scotland



About the pine marten

The pine marten is a native British mammal and a member of the mustelid family, which includes otter, stoat, weasel and polecat.

The pine marten is the size of a small domestic cat, with rich brown fur, a creamy-yellow chest 'bib', prominent rounded ears and a long bushy tail.

Pine martens favour woodland habitats and prefer to use tree cavities as breeding and resting sites. They are largely nocturnal but are frequently active during the day, especially in the summer months.

Despite being classified as carnivores, martens are highly opportunistic animals with a varied diet which includes small mammals (mainly voles), fruit (notably rowan berries and blaeberrries), small birds, insects and carrion.

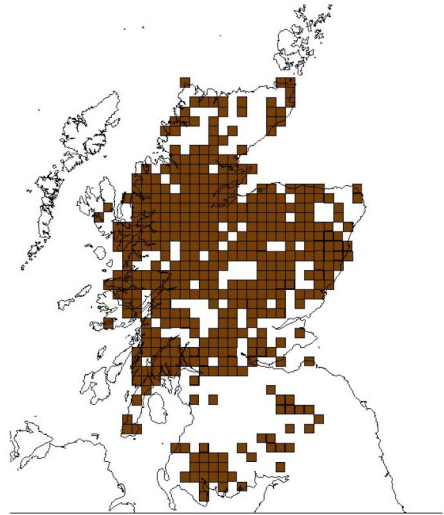
As predators, pine martens are a vital part of a healthy ecosystem.

Photo: Pine marten © James A Moore

Pine martens in Scotland

Pine martens were once widespread throughout Britain but populations suffered a dramatic decline during the 19th century as a result of persecution and deforestation. By the early 20th century, the pine marten had become extinct across most of Britain and the Scottish population was restricted to the north-west Highlands.

Populations began to recover in Scotland since the introduction of legal protection and pine martens have slowly re-colonised many parts of their former range, with the core population now occurring as far south as the Central Belt. A pine marten population is also established in south-west Scotland, following a reintroduction in the 1980s, and pine martens also occur in parts of the Scottish borders (see map).



Map: Pine marten distribution in Scotland

Despite the welcome recovery in Scotland, pine martens are still absent from most of England and Wales and are considered to be Britain's second rarest carnivore.

The species has been afforded legal protection since 1988 and it is illegal to recklessly kill, injure or take a wild pine marten. It is also illegal to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a marten den site, except when this is within a dwelling house. A licence is required from Scottish Natural Heritage to trap pine martens (in any situation).

Predation of poultry and game birds

Pine martens are excellent climbers and because of this they may gain access to poultry and game pens, but predation can be prevented using simple and effective husbandry techniques.

Preventing predation on domestic fowl

Pine martens can squeeze through a hole of about 45mm in diameter and may access hen houses by enlarging a hole in rotten wood. Therefore, rotten wood should be replaced and there should be no holes in the hen house greater than 40mm in diameter.

Hen house doors should be closed during the hours of darkness and the door should be secured to prevent it being lifted by a marten. Devices are commercially available that are sensitive to light levels and automatically open and shut hen house entrances accordingly.

Preventing predation on penned game birds

The most effective way to deter martens from entering game bird pens is the use of electric fencing. In order to exclude martens effectively, line wire electric fencing is recommended at the top of the enclosure, along with overhang electric fencing.

A pen should have no gaps greater than 40mm to prevent martens squeezing through gaps in fencing. Mesh at the bottom of the fence should be well-pegged down or dug into the ground.

'Pop-holes' used by birds for access at ground level should be closed at night. Martens are excellent climbers and can jump a horizontal distance of about 2m. Therefore, a gap in tree canopy cover of at least 3m around the pen is recommended.

More information on these adaptations is available in a leaflet from The Vincent Wildlife Trust see <http://www.vwt.org.uk/resources>, click on "pine marten" and see "How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens".



Pine martens in gardens

Pine martens will visit gardens and may take food left out for birds or red squirrels. Many people enjoy watching pine martens and tempt them into their gardens with food such as nuts, peanut butter and jam sandwiches!

Pine martens may be attracted to soft fruit growing in gardens; methods are available to exclude them, such as fruit cages or electric fencing.

Photo: Pine marten on a squirrel feeder © Vernon Mackie

Denning in buildings

As a result of the scarcity of natural den sites, pine martens may use both inhabited and uninhabited buildings as dens.

This is most common when a breeding female may use the roof-space of a building to give birth to her young ('kits'). If this takes place, kits may be present from March to July, with most births taking place in early April.

Problems with martens are most acute when breeding is taking place. Initially, there may be very little evidence, but as the young grow and become mobile, they can be very noisy throughout the night.



*Photo: Pine marten kit in roof space
© Hugh Brown*



There are also likely to be issues with smell and hygiene, due to the droppings, urine and the remains of prey that the mother has brought into the den (see photo). Structural damage to the property can also occur, e.g. when a marten enlarges an existing small gap to gain access to the building. Adult martens do not live in pairs, so if more than one animal is present, it will almost certainly be a female with young.

Photo: Prey remains and droppings in roof

If it is not possible to tolerate the martens, it may be possible to move humanely the whole family out of the building where the young will be taken to an alternative den by the mother. However, this should only be attempted by an experienced person and is only practical when the young are small and immobile (i.e. up to about six weeks old). This is because excessive disturbance may cause the female to abandon her kits. It is illegal to attempt this without an appropriate licence from SNH, therefore you are strongly advised to seek advice from SNH.

More information is available online: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/species-licensing/mammal-licensing/pine-martens/>

Excluding a non-breeding pine marten from a house

Individual pine martens may use buildings at any time of year. These animals can be humanely deterred and/or excluded from a **dwelling house** without a licence¹, often without the need for specialist assistance.

In a domestic dwelling house, the procedure on the following pages can be done without a licence, although you may wish to seek specialist advice from SNH before taking any action.

Note that during March to May (inclusive) a single animal may only be visible, but immobile (and often very quiet) young could be hidden away in the roof void, so don't assume that breeding is not taking place. **If in any doubt about this, contact SNH for further advice.** If you are not comfortable working at height on a ladder you are likely to need to employ a specialist for the exclusion procedure.

¹ Note that exclusion from other buildings such as commercial premises, garages, sheds and other out-buildings does require a licence.

Procedure for excluding a non-breeding pine marten from a house:

1. Watch out for pine marten movements around the house and garden as this often helps to build up a picture of what is going on. Does the marten have regular patterns of behaviour? Sometimes this can be influenced by the movements of pets, e.g. if you have a dog and it is always let out into the garden last thing at 11pm; the marten will regulate its movements accordingly.
2. It is advisable to stop putting bird food out in the garden that is suitable for martens until the marten has been excluded for a week or two.
3. Block all the potential access holes (45mm diameter or greater) with newspaper to establish which holes are being used by the marten. **Do not attempt to permanently seal any potential access holes at this point.** Blocking actual or potential entrance holes is needed in order to establish a plan to block all holes except the one used most frequently by the marten.
4. Ideally the blocking up of holes with newspaper should be done over several days to get an accurate record of which holes are being used. Often it is only one hole, but it could be two holes out of several possibilities that are being used. Sometimes the newspaper is pulled into the building and sometimes it is pushed out by the pine marten.
5. Decide which hole is to be left for the marten to use and permanently block all others with a durable material such as mortar and/or strong steel mesh (if required) so it is impossible for the marten to get in by any of these. Put newspaper into the one remaining hole to monitor usage. Once this has been done and the marten is restricted to this one entrance to the house, it is a case of watching the animal's movements.

6. Sometimes it is possible to see the entrance/exit hole from the house but if not, you can sit in a vehicle strategically parked in the garden or driveway. You must not be out in the open, as the marten may be put off by human scent. Pets must be kept in the house at this time. Occasionally a dog in the house can confirm the presence of a marten in the loft as it can hear the marten move about. It is best if the marten can be seen leaving the house, but this is not always possible so the only way of knowing if it has left is by the removal of the newspaper.



Photo: A potential access hole for a marten © Hugh Brown

7. When the marten is out of the house, i.e. the newspaper has been removed (or you have actually seen the animal leave) this final hole can be blocked. However, this should be done in such a way that it can be unblocked just in case an animal is inadvertently shut in the house with no way out. Cement is not recommended at this stage but the use of wood and screws (not nails) so the hole can be quickly and easily opened up again should this be necessary. It is best to start this procedure at least two hours before sunset on the assumption that the marten will be coming out as it gets dark outside.
8. With the hole now blocked (with wood), for the next two to three hours you need to listen out for noises in the attic (with the TV and audio equipment turned off). If all is quiet **and it is during the evening** it can be concluded that the marten is out. (It is a waste of time trying this during the day). If a marten has been inadvertently shut in there will be a lot of scratching noises as it looks for a way out. If so, unscrew the piece of wood and try again.



Providing alternative accommodation

If you would like to continue to have martens around in your garden, but not in your house, you can construct a pine marten den box and mount it on a suitable tree nearby. It is recommended that you put wood shavings (not saw dust) in the central chamber 5 to 10 cm deep. Do not use old rags/cloth as the kits get their non-retractable claws snagged on them.

Photo: A pine marten den box

Details can be found at: <http://www.vwt.org.uk/resources>, click on "pine marten" and see "Constructing, erecting and monitoring den boxes".

Prevention is better than cure!

Our advice is, that while martens are thrilling animals to see, they do not make good house guests! So, unless you are happy for martens to take up residence in your property, you can help prevent any problems by:

1. Not putting out food for martens. It is not uncommon for pine martens to occupy houses after they have been encouraged into the garden by putting out food, e.g. on the bird table. So, unless your property is very well maintained and you are certain there are no possible access points, you might want to think twice about putting food out for them

2. Ensuring good house maintenance. Many cases of martens occupying houses (or other buildings) could easily have been prevented if the building fabric had been properly maintained. Pine martens are expert climbers and can climb up walls with no difficulty whatsoever. A favourite access point is through enlarged gaps in rotten soffits (see photo). Smaller gaps than 50mm can often be enlarged.



Photo: A potential access hole for a marten in a rotten soffit © Hugh Brown

Economic benefits/tourism

Pine martens are a good tourist attraction and many people visit Scotland in the hope of seeing one.

Pine martens are often attracted to wildlife hides or gardens of guesthouses and holiday cottages by people who leave food out for them. Pine martens can, therefore, offer the potential for economic benefits by bringing revenue to local hoteliers and businesses from visitors keen to see martens.

*Suggestions for places to watch pine martens are available online:
<http://www.wild-scotland.org.uk/species/72/pine-marten/>*

Further information

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

The Vincent Wildlife Trust is a mammal conservation charity that has spent more than 35 years carrying out research and practical conservation, with a focus on the bats and mustelids. The Trust is interested in recording reports of pine martens in buildings and cases where martens are being attracted to gardens. For more information on pine martens please contact us using the details below.

Contact: 3 & 4 Bronsil Courtyard, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1EP
Tel: 01531 636441, *Email:* enquiries@vwt.org.uk, www.vwt.org.uk

Scottish Natural Heritage

Scottish Natural Heritage is funded by the Scottish Government. Our purpose is to promote care for and improvement of the natural heritage; help people enjoy it responsibly; enable greater understanding and awareness of it; and promote its sustainable use, now and for future generations. Where pine martens are present in domestic properties we can provide practical advice on solutions.

Contact: Great Glen House, Leachkin Road, Inverness, IV3 8NW
Tel: 01463 725000, *Email:* enquiries@snh.gov.uk, www.snh.gov.uk



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*Back cover photo: Pine marten in garden © Marion Affleck
Front cover photo: Pine marten © James A Moore*