



The Vincent Wildlife Trust's
Prospects for Pine Martens
e-zine



February 2010

On the pursuit of the pine marten in mid Wales...

In December, the pursuit for the pine marten gathered momentum in the Rheidol Valley in mid-west Wales. The Rheidol valley has produced many pine marten sightings over the years and a scat survey in 2007 led to the discovery of a pine marten scat, confirmed by DNA analysis. The area has some fantastic habitat, with undisturbed mature woodland, diverse undergrowth and craggy steep-sided valleys perfect for pine martens.

Following 2 recent reliable pine marten sightings during the autumn, one only 5km from the pine marten scat found in 2007 and just 500 metres from a previous high-scoring sighting, we decided that the Rheidol was definitely the place to be and organised a 'hot pursuit' survey!

The idea of a 'hot pursuit' survey is to survey the area as quickly as possible following a reliable sighting of a pine marten. It was this approach that led to the discovery of the marten scat in the Rheidol valley in 2007 and it means that there is a high likelihood that the animal(s) will still be in the area, leaving plenty of scats!

We had 22 surveyors help us with the scat survey and despite the previous weeks of heavy rain, there were surprisingly quite a few scats on the ground and we collected nearly 50 in total. Unfortunately, following DNA testing, none of the scats were shown to be pine marten.

We have also set up 10 hair-tubes and 4 camera stations. We baited the hair-tubes with chicken wings to encourage a pine marten to enter them and we also used a variety of rather smelly lures, including sardines, cod liver oil and the infamous 'marten lure,' to entice any passing pine martens to the hair-tubes and cameras.

At the most recent check, 7 out of the 10 hair-tubes had been visited and the culprits had left behind some fur on the sticky patches inside the tubes. We are currently awaiting the DNA results of the hair from the lab, so watch this space...!



The steep-sided, wooded Rheidol valley



Siting a hair-tube

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An update from our Pine Marten Project Manager...

By Neil Jordan

Fieldwork

While the pine martens 'relax' into their winter routine, with the resultant reduction in sightings, the pine marten project forges on relentlessly! The dumping of snow not only provided some tantalising tracking opportunities, but the frozen ground also restricted the availability of natural food and we hoped to take advantage of this by encouraging animals to our baited tubes and platforms.

Although my general approach to winter has been a scaling back of field trips and focusing on a narrower geographic range, I've intensified the number of baited platforms and hair-tubes within sites, and I've also made more frequent visits to restock and check this equipment. Although, like me, pine martens apparently reduce their ranging over winter, it's also likely that they'll be hungrier due to the scarce resources available, and so winter might in fact be the time when they're most likely to visit artificial food sources piled on platforms and bundled into hair-tubes. Or so the theory goes...!

Well, it's certainly the case that we've had more animals on the platforms in the last few months than the whole rest of the project put together, but on almost every occasion the culprit has been a jay, with a great tit providing a brief interlude amongst a deluge of images of these colourful and raucous corvids! Close to one such raided platform a hair-tube had also been raided, which is rather rare in these parts. Unfortunately though, the culprit had figured out that it could access the bait not by paying in DNA, but by ripping the top off and 'reaching in' from above instead. Clearly this resourceful visitor has prompted a quick redesign of the tube, which will now be longer, have the bait in the middle and sticky pads guarding both entrances. Hopefully he'll be back soon and share his identity with us.



Jay(s) on a baited platform



A raided hair-tube

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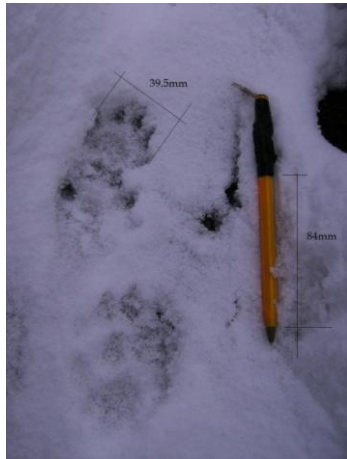
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Further up, at the second camera station, I stumbled across a set of prints in the snow that stopped me in my own! Could they have been left by a pine marten? My heart skipped several beats and I scoured the ground in a rather frenzied manner before taking some pictures for reference.

Following the tracks in and out of the crags I got a shock as they reached the corner of two rough dry stone walls and then just stopped. I relocated the trail again on the top of the wall, where it continued for a few metres before doubling back and then dropping down on the other side. Surely it must have been a marten! What else could it be?



Mustelid tracks



Gait (taken from the top of a wall)

Having emailed pictures of the prints to several experts (thanks folks!), the general consensus could probably be described as 'cautiously optimistic', most lamenting the difficulties of identifying snow tracks but saying that although it's possible that they were from a big male mink we couldn't rule out a female marten either. That's as good as it gets for now.

Of course unidentified tracks in the snow are not definitive evidence, and they don't help us directly to achieve our conservation objectives, but they can provide an important step towards this. Collecting current DNA is, and remains, our principal aim, and such clues can help us to focus resources and detection devices in these areas. And this week I've done just that, peppering the area with (modified!) hair-tubes... Now I just need some more snow to keep them hungry!

Sightings

Aside from the exciting Rheidol chase, sightings have been few and far between over the winter. And this rather fits with previous years, there being a peak from June –September, when people are more active in the countryside and martens are less nocturnal... We've also had a few older records coming through in dribs and drabs, but we're looking forward to these picking up again in the spring and going on hot pursuit again. This has to be our best chance of success, and so we hope that many of you will be available at short notice to help in this quest.

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Publicity

Lately, I've been writing short articles for various mammal group and county wildlife trust newsletters so look out for these, and also doing the odd local radio piece, particularly in Cumbria where the pine marten work features next week on their 'Little Cumbria' slot. The producer tells me I was invited back after my statement in the first series that "not everyone is excited to receive faeces in the post, but I was genuinely delighted". What more can I say...?

The publicity highlight of the last few months though has probably been the two conferences I've been able to attend. The first in Lisbon was on Mustelids in general, and it was good to see a number of talks on pine martens. I also gave a talk in Staffordshire which was an excellent conference focusing on the BAP species of the county. As pine martens are a distinguished member of this select club I was invited to give a talk, and it was good to do so in a place where local surveyors Derek Crawley and Adrian Shufflebotham had collected definitive evidence in recent times, in the form of a scat and photographs respectively. Many thanks to Derek and the Staffordshire Mammal Group for inviting me and for organising such a great conference.



Funding

Some good news.... We've recently received funding from the Cumbria Community Foundation which we're using to buy and erect 6 den boxes in the County, and implement their long-term monitoring by local groups here. We've also received financial support from the Chapman Charitable Trust. Many thanks to them!



We are still searching for funding for the second year of the project and would be very grateful to anyone who could make a donation towards our work, no matter how small. Please visit www.pinemarten.info to donate. You could also raise money by doing a sponsored walk or run in aid of the project! We can provide you with necessary publicity materials to help. Or, do you know of a company or funding body who might be interested in supporting the project? Any information would be gratefully received!

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Upcoming highlights

The VWT pine marten report!

Johnny Birks' and John Messenger's seminal work on pine marten sightings in England and Wales over the last 15 years is due to be published in April. It is a great synthesis of this long-term pine marten work, and contains various analyses, a county by county breakdown of the evidence, and a fascinating discussion. It's a must have!!



There is a **special pre-order price of £9.95** available for the first 100 orders. To pre-order a copy and take advantage of this £5 discount, please email enquiries@vwt.org.uk or 'phone 01531 636441. The standard price after this time will be £14.95 for a paper copy, or £9.95 for a copy on CD.

Pine Marten Training Workshops

We have now finalised the dates and locations of four pine marten training workshops. The two workshops that we are running in Wales at the end of February are now fully booked.

There are still places available on the workshops that we are running in **Cumbria** and **North Yorkshire**.

The workshop in Cumbria will be held on **Sunday 14th March** at **Water Yeat Village Hall**, at the southern end of Coniston Water.

The workshop in North Yorkshire will be held **Saturday 15th May** at **Ingleby Greenhow Village Hall**.

The workshops are free of charge and suitable for anyone who would like to learn more about pine martens and become involved in surveying for pine martens in their local area. The programme will include talks on pine marten ecology and distribution; survey and detection methods for pine martens; and practical field- based demonstrations on surveying for pine martens.

If you haven't already done so, please contact Lizzie to reserve a place by emailing elizabethcroose@vwt.org.uk or 'phoning 01531 636441.



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Den box days

We have just received a delivery of 16 VWT-design den boxes. Six of these were funded by the Cumbria Community Foundation, and so will find their home there, and 10 by Environment Wales. Siting these boxes is planned for March/April, in yet-to-be-finalised areas.

Watch this space for ways to get involved and volunteering opportunities!

Pine marten kits in a den box



Call for notes

Do you have your own story or experience of pine martens? Do you have any insights into the trials and tribulations of pine marten survey work? Why not share your story with everyone and submit a small piece for the next e-zine? Submissions can be as formal or informal, or long or short as you like!

If you are interested in submitting a piece, please contact Lizzie by emailing elizabethcroose@vwt.org.uk or by 'phoning 01531 636441, before the end of April.

Keep up-to-date...

You can keep up-to-date on any news and progress with the project by following the blog on our website. Go to <http://www.pinemarten.info/newsite/blog/?cat=7> and enter the password **martes25**.

Contact us...

To find out more about the project or how you can help us with pine marten work, please visit www.pinemarten.info or contact Neil directly: neiljordan@vwt.org.uk or 07799847740.

The Vincent Wildlife Trust's 'Prospects for Pine Martens' Project is kindly funded by Natural England, Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Wales, Cumbria Community Foundation and The Chapman Charitable Trust.



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