



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



September 2010

Pine marten scat found in Northumberland!

The most exciting news of the last quarter (and probably the last few years!) was the discovery of a pine marten scat in Northumberland! The scat was discovered on top of a pine marten den box in Kidland Forest in the Cheviot Hills and collected by Kevin O'Hara from Northumberland Wildlife Trust. DNA analysis at the Waterford Institute of Technology confirmed that the scat was from a female pine marten, was of a British haplotype (hap a), and was the first unequivocal evidence of pine martens from Northumberland in 16 years!

Pine martens are known to leave piles of scats on the lids of den boxes when they are in use, and it is common to see large scat piles on top of boxes in Scotland. Although pine martens have taken readily to boxes in Scotland, this is the first evidence of them using one anywhere in England. Additionally, the fact that the scat was found in April and was from a female marten raised the possibility that the female may have been using the box to raise young. Kevin has subsequently returned to the box to collect hairs and other material from inside the box in the hope that we can determine, again by genetic analysis, whether more than one individual has used the box, which would be further suggestive of breeding activity.



Above right: The pine marten scat found in Kidland Forest.

Above and below left: Den boxes in Scotland with large scat piles on the lids.

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Although The VWT have received more than 50 reported sightings of pine martens in Northumberland since the mid-1990s, this is the first unequivocal (DNA) evidence for 16 years. Fantastic news for pine martens and pine marten enthusiasts in the north-east!

Mother and kits in a den box in Scotland. Could we see similar sights in Northumberland?



The VWT spent a couple of days in Kidland Forest recently on the Northumberland leg of the Great North Pine Marten Pursuit. With the help of Tom Dearnley and the Forestry Commission we set up 5 den boxes to provide resting and breeding sites for any martens in the forest. We also conducted a large-scale scat survey with the help of 15 volunteers and collected a whopping 64 scats that they couldn't confidently say were not from a marten, but one time and DNA analysis will tell...



Putting up a den box



The finished result

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The Great North Pine Marten Pursuit!

As we write this, we have just completed the Great North Pine Marten Pursuit; a great 15 days of scat surveys, checking and erecting den boxes and experimenting with camera traps, bait and sound lures. We were extremely fortunate to have the help of over 100 volunteers, many of whom went well above and beyond the call of duty to join us. We had Lizzie Warren and Grant Harknett who travelled all the way from Hertfordshire to join us on one of our surveys in the Lakes, Rob Davies did the same for the two North Yorkshire surveys, and Andrey Boytsov came all the way up from London to Hamsterley (carrying with him an interesting collection of scats from the New Forest); John Woods who cycled 27 miles each way to join us on surveys on 2 consecutive days; David Hardy who took part in 4 surveys on consecutive days; and Sarah Jupp who came all the way from Scotland to join us in Northumberland.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who came and helped us on 'The Pursuit' and all of us at the VWT were blown away by the support and commitment shown by everyone involved. If you weren't able to check in as we progressed across the north, you can look back on what we were up to on the pine marten blog site.

The survey team at Ennerdale



We would also like to thank Lakeland Land Rover for kindly sponsoring us and providing us with a brand new Landrover defender for the duration of the trip, which we used to access some of the more remote areas and to transport our bulging kit about the north. We couldn't have done it without them so a huge thanks to them for their generosity!

*Our Landrover, kindly sponsored
by LakeLand Landrover*

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We were also incredibly lucky with the weather during our trip. As the *'Pie chart of precipitation'* on the blog shows, we had 74% dry days, which must be a record for the north of England! We were certainly not expecting that as we planned the trip, but the dry weather made surveying much easier (and effective!) and made camping an overall more pleasant experience.

Glorious sunshine and views over Whinlatter Forest



In total 261 scats were collected during the Pursuit... a phenomenal number (!), but not only that there were some very interesting scats amongst them... They are currently being DNA tested at the Waterford Institute of Technology and we will publicise the results when we receive them.

It would be an incredibly lengthy e-zine if we relayed the outcome of every event during the Pursuit, but if you would like to hear more about how we got on and what we got up to, you can visit our blog - <http://www.pinemarten.info/newsite/blog/?cat=7> – which has a comprehensive write-up of each day (mostly!).

Sightings

We have had a flurry of sightings reported to us over the last couple of months, which is typical for the summer period. This usually happens because there are more people out and about in the countryside, often as a result of school holidays and better weather, and therefore more people are likely to encounter martens. Similarly, pine martens are more active in the summer, particularly mothers with kits earlier in the season, and then kits dispersing towards the end of the summer, but also males travelling greater distances in search of females. In one such instance, a person who keeps martens was surprised to see one of them on the roof of his cage apparently escaped. On attempting to retrieve the animal he was frustrated to see it bound away and up a nearby tree to freedom, only to be further surprised by the fact that his martens were still safely tucked up inside. Martens are certainly out there, but 'making contact' with them is quite a challenge.

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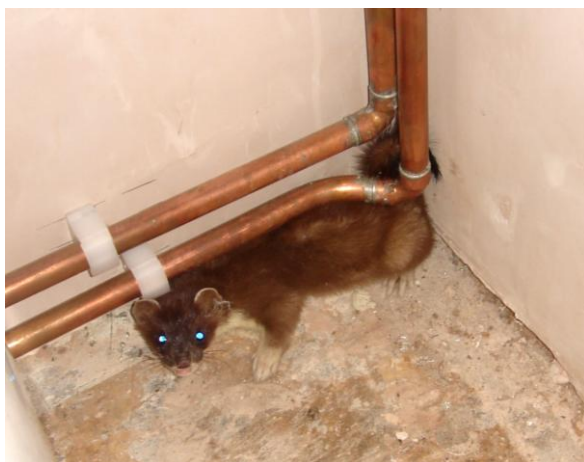
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We have had a great surge in publicity of late (see below), which has encouraged people to come forward and report their sightings to us. Recent good quality sightings reports have come from the Lake District, the Eden Valley, North Yorkshire, Montgomeryshire, Monmouthshire and Herefordshire.

We have also been delighted to receive some photographic evidence of possible pine martens from a lucky few who have had their cameras handy. Although these photos have got the heart racing, unfortunately they have all turned out to be 'faux marts'. Here are a few of the pictures we have received of marten-like mustelids...



Polecats snapped in Northumberland (left) and Oxfordshire (right)



A stoat hiding in a house in Yorkshire (left) and a weasel caught by a cat in Wales (right)

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Keep your cameras with you and you if you're lucky you might be the first to photograph a pine marten in England or Wales since 2004...



*A pine marten photographed in Staffordshire in 2004 by Adrian Shufflebotham.
If you look closely you can see the cream chest, pointed ears, long muzzle and bushy tail.*

Publicity

The project has had excellent publicity in the past couple of months, largely linked to the pine marten scat found in Northumberland and the Great North Pine Marten Pursuit. These events were covered in many local papers in the relevant areas. We've also had articles featured in The Guardian and the Western Mail. Neil was interviewed on BBC Radio Cumbria to promote the Great North Pine Marten Pursuit and appeal for volunteers and for people to report sightings of martens. Neil also spent a couple of days filming for ITV's 'The Lakes' programme, where the camera crew followed him on a typical day's fieldwork, looking for scats, checking hair-tubes and inspecting den boxes. Lizzie filmed with the BBC at a zoo with captive martens for a feature on pine martens for the One Show. This should be broadcast in the autumn, so keep your eyes peeled!

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The Great North Run!

On 19th September, Neil will be pitting himself against the stresses and strains of the Great North Run: a half marathon (13 miles) from Newcastle to Gateshead. Neil's aim (apart from getting to the finish!) is to raise enough money for a good number of pine marten den boxes to be put up in some of the areas surveyed during the Great North Pine Marten Pursuit. Den boxes are absolutely vital as there is a distinct lack of natural cavities available for pine martens to raise their young within, due to the scarcity of suitable very old trees which provide these sites. The recent discovery of the female pine marten scat on the den box in Northumberland is fantastic evidence that these boxes are used by martens and do provide shelter for them during harsh winters and a safe place for mothers to raise their kits. What better time to get more boxes up?

Neil has never run a race of any distance before, and so this is a huge challenge, but he is determined to do it in good time without stopping and the thought of pine marten kits tucked up in a cosy box might just be the incentive he needs!

If you are able to make a donation towards Neil's run, no matter how small, we would be extremely grateful. Please sponsor Neil and contribute towards our important den box scheme via <http://www.everyclick.com/vwtpinemartenconservation>. Many thanks in advance for your generosity.



Pine marten kits cosy up in a den box

Pine Marten Genetics Project

In the last e-zine we wrote about our genetics project, which aims determine the genetic haplotype (make-up) of historical and current pine marten populations, in order to assess the origins of existing populations in the British Isles. We are aiming to collect DNA from current populations through ongoing scat and hair collections, which many of you have been involved in. Collecting DNA from historical specimens have proved a lot easier, as the pine martens are preserved in museums and other collections and therefore a lot easier to track down! We have been working with museums and collections all over the country and taking hair and maxilloturbinate (bone material from the nasal cavity) samples, from which DNA can be extracted.

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So far we have sampled 26 marten specimens from England, Wales and Scotland. These specimens range from a specimen from Norfolk in 1864 to one from Brecon in 1927.

We are still looking to add more samples to the study to increase the geographical and time spread of the specimens and would love to hear from you if you know of any pine marten specimens. Do you know of any museums, collections, stately homes, schools or even pubs that have a stuffed pine marten, skin or skull? If so, please contact Lizzie by emailing elizabethcroose@vwt.org.uk or 'phoning 01531 636441, and we will try to sample it.

We hope to have the results of the research written up by early next year and, hopefully, published as a peer-reviewed paper in a scientific journal.

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.

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