

Galway's stoats

In 2010, The Heritage Council and Galway County Council supported a pilot study by The Vincent Wildlife Trust to look for the Irish stoat throughout the county.

Six hundred small plastic tubes baited with rabbit meat were laid along hedgerows and stone walls from April to October by fifty volunteers. These were left in place for up to a fortnight. The tubes were then checked for the presence of hairs that may have adhered to small patches of glue within the tube. Any hairs were carefully removed and safely stored in sterile containers.

Location & 10km² Grid References for Positive Results of Stoat DNA

Recess	L 80 50	Dunmore	M 50 60
Carna	L 80 30	Barnaderg	M 50 50
Cornamona	M 00 50	Craughwell	M 50 20
Clonbur	M 10 50	Laban	M 50 10
Gorumna Island	L 80 20	Kilbeacanty	M 50 00
Caherlistrane	M 30 50	Ballymoe	M 70 70
Annaghdown	M 30 40	Creggs	M 70 60
Menlough	M 30 30	Kilreekill	M 70 20
Belclare	M 40 50	Woodford	M 70 00
Clarinbridge	M 40 20	Killimor	M 80 10

The DNA of the hair was subsequently tested in Waterford Institute of Technology and this revealed that of the fifty areas surveyed, 20 of these were positive for stoat: 15 in East Galway and 5 in West Galway. The results indicated that stoats were active in a variety of hedgerows, both along roads and within fields, as well as along stone walls. This was the first hair tube study undertaken on the Irish stoat.



More stoat facts

- Life expectancy is four years in the wild
- Scent is the most important sense
- Protected species under Irish law
- Exceptionally curious
- Highly intelligent
- Black tail tip bristles when excited
- Produces a range of sounds including trills, hisses, barks and shrieks
- Often stands up on its hind legs (periscopes) when on the move

For more information:

www.mammals-in-ireland.ie

Contact:

The Vincent Wildlife Trust, Donaghpatrick, Headford, County Galway. Tel: 093 35304. Email: katemcaney@vwt.org.uk

We gratefully acknowledge the support of:

The Heritage Council; Galway County Council (Marie Mannion, Bridin Feeney & Grainne Smyth); People and Nature Project (Elaine O'Riordan); National University of Ireland (Dr Colin Lawton) and all volunteers and landowners.



© The Vincent Wildlife Trust 2013

Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered with Revenue Commissioners No. DCHY00019
Charity No.1112100 Company Registered in England No.05598716

Cover photo by Mike Brown
Other stoat photographs by Carrie Crowley (Crossing the Line Films)



The Irish Stoat

in Galway

Irish stoat

Mustela erminea hibernica

Introduction

There are no weasels in County Galway! In fact, there are no weasels in Ireland, but we have a type of weasel, the small animal known as the Irish stoat. However, it is known by another name in Connemara, Beanín uasal, which translated means 'noble little woman', reflecting the belief that the stoat was really a witch in animal form.

The most recent study of this elusive mammal was conducted in County Galway three years ago. This short leaflet presents the results of this survey, as well as some additional information on one of Ireland's oldest residents.

How to recognise an Irish stoat

The Irish stoat is a subspecies different to stoats in the rest of Europe, with the exception of the Isle of Man where it also occurs. It does not turn white in winter and the line dividing the chestnut-coloured upper fur and the creamy-coloured fur on its belly is usually irregular. However, like all stoats, it has a distinctive black tip to its tail, a long sinuous body, short legs and a flattened head. There is a marked difference in body weight and size between the sexes: males weigh 138-442g and the head and body measure 242-355mm, while females weigh 72-232g and measure 195-269mm.



History

The Irish stoat has been present on the island of Ireland for a very long time, although possibly not continuously. Fossil bones of the animal have been found in two caves in County Cork: one set dates back to between 27,000 - 35,000 years ago and a second set of bones that date back to 10,680 years. So, the stoat was here before the last Ice Age, no doubt eating the lemmings that also occurred at that time, and then here again as the last of the ice retreated, but before Mesolithic man appeared.

Genetic studies of this species reveal very high diversity, suggesting the animal arrived here naturally and then underwent widespread expansion.

Historical account of Irish stoats

This is a description of the Irish stoat by the famous Welsh traveller Giraldus Cambrensis during his visits to Ireland in the 12th century.

'This little animal has more spirit than body, and its courage supplying the deficiency of its strength, with a great heart actuating a slender frame, it is vindictive and relentless in its wrath.'

Diet

The Irish stoat is found wherever there is sufficient cover and food. It is a good swimmer, surefooted climber and perfectly adapted for squeezing into small holes and burrows.

It is capable of killing prey several times its own size and its varied diet includes rabbits, rats, pygmy shrews, mice, bank voles, fish, invertebrates, birds and birds' eggs. It avoids open areas, where it runs the risk of being eaten by foxes, cats, pine martens and raptors, so uses features such as hedgerows and stone walls to move within the landscape.

Life cycle

The stoat is a solitary and territorial animal and often uses the nests or burrows of prey as its own denning sites, lining the den with prey fur or feathers. The young, called kits, are usually born in April and will remain with their mother for around twelve weeks. Male stoats are sexually mature at one year old but, amazingly, female kits are mated while still in the nest. However, due to delayed implantation, there is no further development of the embryos until the following spring.

