The Pine Marten
What is a pine marten?

The pine marten *Martes martes* is a member of the weasel family and related to the stoat, weasel, mink, polecat, otter and badger. It is a native British mammal and is widespread in Europe.

The pine marten has a slim body and a long tail that is thick and bushy in its winter coat. Rich brown fur contrasts with a creamy-yellow ‘bib’ on the throat and chest and pale fur within the prominent, rounded ears. The main body colour of the pine marten varies seasonally: its thick, mid-brown winter coat becomes shorter and darker in summer.

Compared with most of its close relatives in Britain, the pine marten has a more pronounced snout and relatively long legs. Adult pine martens are similar in size to a small to medium-sized domestic cat with males approximately one third larger than females. The pine marten is extraordinarily agile and is a very confident climber.

History in Britain

The pine marten probably arrived in Britain soon after the end of the last glaciation about 9,500 years ago, having migrated north from a southern European refuge. Being a largely woodland-dependent animal, the pine marten would have been most abundant when Britain’s tree cover was complete during the Mesolithic period. Loss of woodland and persecution for both protection of game birds and poultry and for harvesting of pelts led to a severe decline during the 19th century. By the early 1900s, pine martens were mainly restricted to the rockiest parts of Britain, including the north-west Highlands of Scotland, the Lake District and Snowdonia. Here pine martens survived in largely treeless landscapes where mountains and crags provided alternative three-dimensional refuges to their preferred woodland habitat.

In response to declining persecution and increasing woodland cover, pine martens began to recover slowly in the Scotland in the mid-20th century. In the early 1980s, small numbers were reintroduced to forests in south-west Scotland. Further south small relict populations in northern England and Wales survived through the 20th century but showed no sign of recovery.

The current situation

The pine marten population is recovering in Scotland and has re-colonised many parts of its former range in the south and east of the country. In England and Wales, the situation is markedly different and there is no evidence that pine martens have recovered from their historical decline south of the Scottish border. Occasional records suggest that pine martens persist in very low numbers in parts of northern England such as the Lake District, Cheviots and North York Moors, and parts of Wales such as the Cambrian Mountains, Snowdonia and the uplands of central southern Wales, but the long-term viability of these populations is highly vulnerable.

Map: The current distribution of the pine marten in Britain
Pine martens are solitary for most of the year. Each adult occupies a home range that varies in size between 20 and 3,000+ hectares according to the quality of the habitat and particularly the areas of woodland available.

Although mainly nocturnal, pine martens are commonly active in daylight, especially in summer. Activity levels are greatly reduced in winter. Mating occurs in July and August and up to five young (known as ‘kits’) are born the following spring. They disperse in the autumn following their birth to establish home ranges of their own. Females do not usually give birth for the first time until they are three years old. Pine martens may live for over ten years.

**Habitat**

The pine marten prefers three-dimensional habitats in which it can use its climbing skills to find food and avoid predators such as foxes. Woodland is usually favoured, but where this is scarce or unsuitable pine martens occupy cliffs, crags and rocky mountainsides. Pine martens prefer to sleep and breed off the ground.

Conditions for pine martens are typically best in extensive, diverse woodland with many old trees and where cavities associated with deadwood are available as dens. Such tree cavities are preferred as breeding sites, though in their absence rock crevices may be used if available. Large bird boxes, purpose built den boxes and the roofs of buildings may be used for breeding where natural sites are scarce.

**Behaviour and breeding**

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**Diet**

Pine martens eat a wide range of food, including small mammals, particularly field voles, fruits, invertebrates, birds, carrion, reptiles and amphibians. Most foraging is done on the ground.

Martens may visit gardens and take food left out for birds and red squirrels and may scavenge from dustbins.

**Mortality**

Road traffic is probably a major cause of death. Pine martens may also be killed in traps set for other species such as mink, stoat and weasel. Foxes and golden eagles can kill pine martens but little is known about the occurrence of this in Britain.
Pine martens deposit droppings (called scats) at den sites and on tracks and paths, where they may play a social communication role. Scats vary in both size and morphology depending upon their contents. Typically they are 8-12cm long, cylindrical and often coiled or twisted with a sweet, musky odour. Marten scats can easily be confused with scats from other species, such as fox and polecat, and genetic analysis is usually required to confirm the species origin of scats.

Footprints of pine martens are variable in size and shape and overlap with those of polecat and mink. Although the feet have five toes, often only four of these are visible in prints. Because the claws are semi-retractile these too may not register on firm ground, making some marten prints appear catlike.

Pine martens are not easy to see in the wild, and most sightings are made by chance, for example, by car drivers as martens cross roads. Pine martens are attracted to wildlife hides or gardens of guest houses and holiday cottages by people who leave food out for them. Suggestions for places to watch pine martens are available online: http://www.wild-scotland.org.uk/species/72/pine-marten/

Pine martens and the law
The pine marten is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is an offence to take, injure, kill or possess wild pine martens intentionally without a licence. They are also protected from intentional or reckless disturbance, and damage to and destruction or obstruction of their places of shelter or protection.

Pine martens, livestock and game
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. Further details of these measures are available in a leaflet published by The Vincent Wildlife Trust. Please contact the Trust for further information.

Recent work by The Vincent Wildlife Trust
The Vincent Wildlife Trust has been engaged in pine marten research and conservation in Britain since the 1980s. The focus of this work has been on the distribution and status of pine martens in England and Wales. This has included genetic comparisons of current and historical marten populations.

Recently, the Trust has undertaken surveys in Scotland to provide up-to-date information on the pine marten’s distribution and range expansion. The Trust is currently researching the feasibility of reinforcing pine martens populations in Wales and England, in order to restore viable self-sustaining populations to southern Britain.
The Vincent Wildlife Trust is a registered charity and has been involved in wildlife research and conservation since 1975. It has focused particularly on the needs of British mammals and has concentrated on species such as the otter, pine marten, polecat, stoat, weasel, water vole, dormouse and the bats. Currently the VWT’s work is centred on the bats, polecat and pine marten.

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