



Polecats & Ferrets

How to tell them apart



Introduction

The polecat (*Mustela putorius*) is expanding its range in Britain, and in many areas across Britain, ferrets (*Mustela furo*) occur either as individuals recently lost from captivity or as feral populations. Polecats and ferrets interbreed to produce fertile offspring.

The polecat is the ancestor of the domestic ferret but exactly where and when ferrets were domesticated is still uncertain. Given their close relationship, it is not surprising that it may be very difficult to distinguish them in the field. The only reliable ways of telling polecats and ferrets apart is from close examination of the pelage and skull of a specimen and analysis of mitochondrial DNA.

This leaflet gives the key distinguishing characters, identified by Birks and Kitchener (1999), that separate polecats, ferrets and their hybrids. The images are mainly skins supplied by the National Museums of Scotland.

Photo (top): Polecat © Anne Newton
Photo (bottom): Polecat-ferret showing a mix of pelage characters of the two species

Skulls

In the past it was believed that the post-orbital breadth of polecats was always 15mm or greater in both male and female polecats, whereas in feral ferrets post-orbital breadth was always less than 15mm.

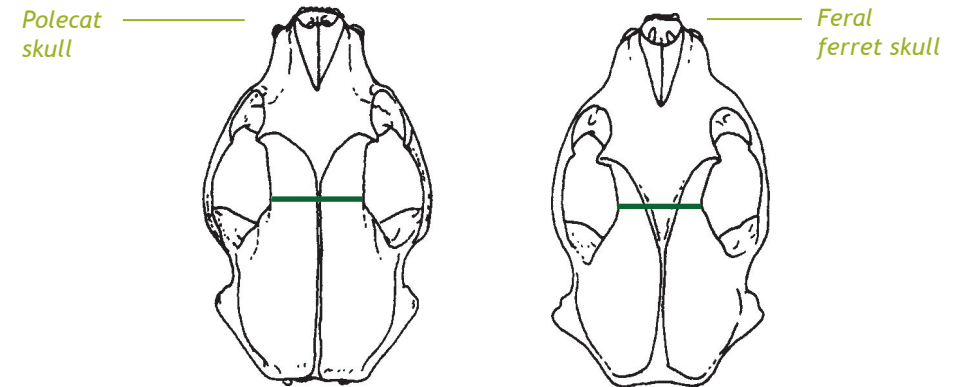
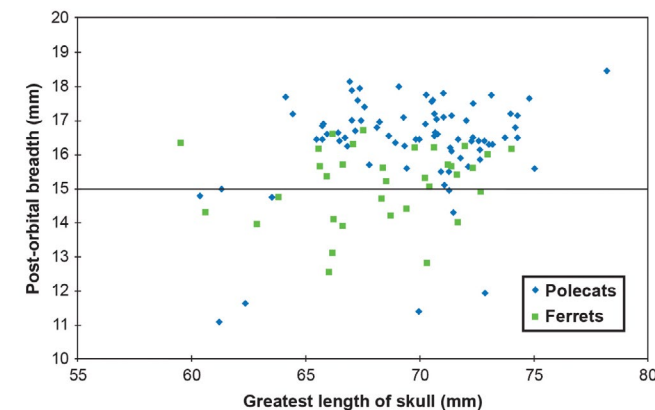


Diagram: Dorsal views of skulls (dark green line represents post-orbital breadth measurement)

However Birks & Kitchener (1999) have shown that this 15mm rule does not hold. Although polecats have greater post-orbital breadths and cranial volumes than ferrets, there is a great deal of overlap between the two species. So caution is needed when interpreting skull measurements.



Graph: The relationship between post-orbital breadth and greatest length of skull in male polecats and ferrets. The horizontal line shows the 15mm rule.

Pelage characters

Ferrets may vary considerably in coloration (see [Individual Variation](#)), but some are as dark as polecats and may be very difficult to distinguish from polecats in the field. However, there are several distinguishing characters that may be used to tell them apart.

Note that not all ferret pelage characters shown here are present in every ferret. Any animal with a mixture of polecat and ferret characters is usually by definition a hybrid. These are often bred deliberately in captivity and are often known as polecat-ferrets.

Polecat pelage characters

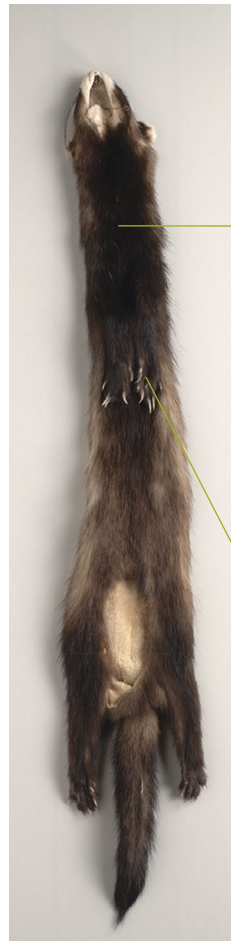
Dorsal

Ventral

Dark fur on face extends to nose

Pale cheek patches and possible frontal band contrast with dark facial mask

No scattered white guard hairs over body



No throat patch or less than 50mm long

Dark fur on paws

Ferret pelage characters

Dorsal

Ventral

Dark fur on face does not reach nose

Pale cheek patches and frontal band often very extensive and contrast poorly with darker facial mask

Scattered white guard hairs over body, especially on hindquarters and tail



Throat patch 50mm or more long

One or more white paws

Seasonal Variation

Polecats and ferrets moult twice a year, once in the spring and again in the autumn. Summer polecats and ferrets have a darker and shorter pelage than winter animals. In winter, the pale underfur on the flanks and back shows through more to give a paler appearance. The frontal band and cheek patches may also be more extensive in winter, but always are highly contrasting with the facial mask in polecats.



Photo: Polecat in summer pelage
© Lynne Lomax



Photo: Polecat in winter pelage
© Craig Shuttleworth

Erythristic Polecats

There is a reddish coat colour mutation, known as erythrism, which has been occasionally recorded in polecats in Wales and Oxfordshire, but which could potentially occur anywhere.



Erythristic polecat



Colour variation in feral ferrets from Shetland



Individual Variation

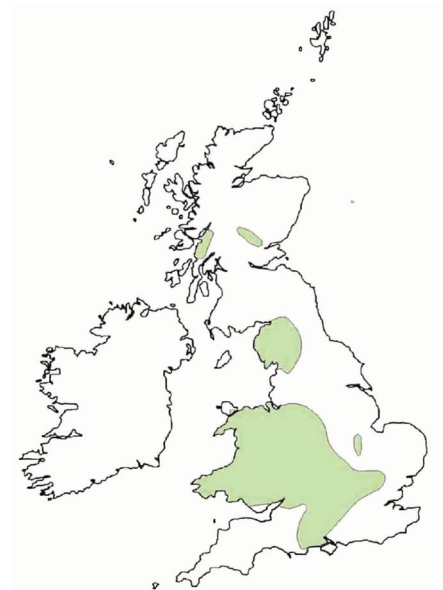
Ferrets vary in coloration from creamy white to very dark brown just like a polecat (see [Pelage Characters](#)).

Distribution of the polecat

Polecats are currently found throughout Wales and much of central and southern England.

Beyond this main range, reintroductions since 1970 have led to the establishment of isolated populations in parts of highland Scotland (Argyll and Perthshire), the north-west of England (Cumbria, with recent expansion into adjacent counties), central and eastern England (mainly Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire) and central southern England (mainly Hampshire and Wiltshire).

The picture is ever-changing because all these populations are believed to be expanding, and new populations arising from reintroductions may yet be discovered.



Map: The main areas of polecat distribution in 2006

Further information

The Vincent Wildlife Trust has produced a free leaflet entitled *The Polecat* and two reports on polecats, published in 1999 and 2008. These can be ordered from the VWT's head office.

References

Birks, J.D.S. & Kitchener, A.C. (1999). The distribution and status of the polecat *Mustela putorius* in Britain in the 1990s. London: The Vincent Wildlife Trust. (Available from the VWT, price £8.00.)



The Vincent Wildlife Trust

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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Back cover photo: Polecat © Anne Newton