

The return of the polecat



Lizzie Croose charts the course of this once widespread mammal - now making a comeback...

The polecat, one of our lesser-known mammals, was once on the brink of extinction in Britain and Herefordshire was one of a few counties where it survived. Thankfully, the polecat's fortunes have changed and the species has made a comeback in recent years. The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT), a Herefordshire-based mammal research and conservation charity, has been monitoring the recovery and changing distribution of polecats.

The polecat is a native British mammal, a member of the weasel (mustelid) family and related to the stoat, weasel, otter and pine marten. The polecat is a similar size to a ferret, with a long slim body, dark fur and a 'bandit-like' mask of dark and light fur on its face. Polecats will live in a variety of habitats, from farmland to woodlands to coastal sand dunes, and den in rabbit burrows, log piles, hay stacks and sometimes farm buildings. The

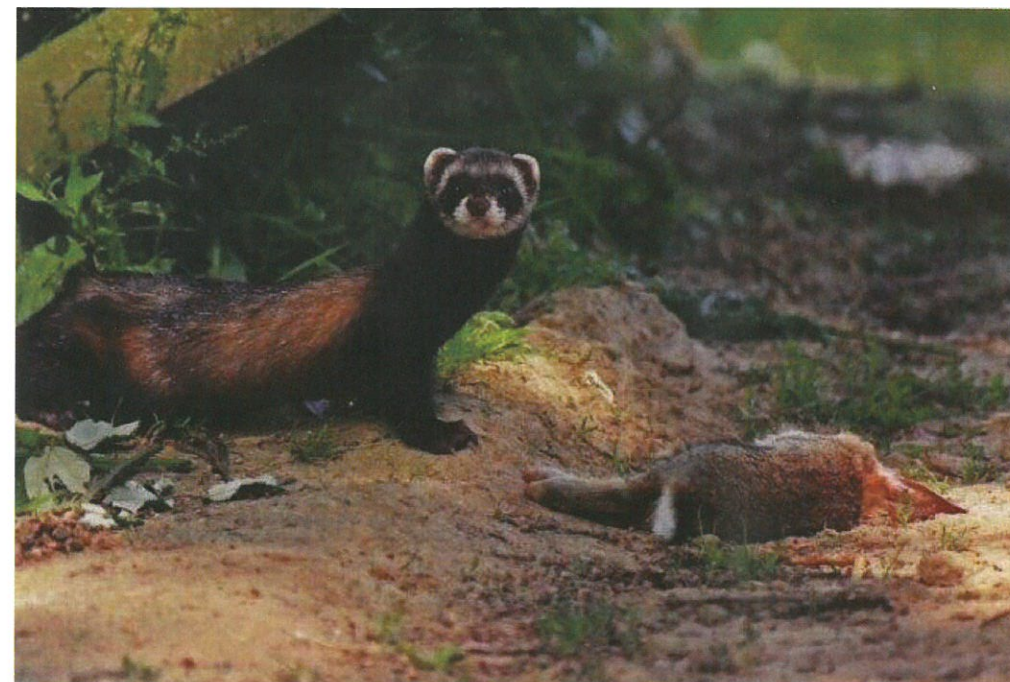
species is mostly nocturnal and solitary and has a diet that largely consists of rabbits and rats. Polecats mate during early spring and give birth to an average of four to six young, known as kits, during May or June.

The polecat was once widespread in Britain and was probably the third most common carnivore in Britain during the Mesolithic period, with an estimated population of 110,000 polecats. Historically, the polecat suffered from a troubled relationship with humans. The name 'polecat' is probably derived from the French expression 'poule-chat' meaning 'chicken-cat', which is likely to be a reference to the polecat's liking of chicken. The term polecat was also used as an insult, famously in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with the lines: 'Out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you poulcat, you runnion! Out, out!' To add to its woes,

the polecat's reputation for being foul smelling, as a result of the strong smell emitted from its anal gland as a defence when a polecat is frightened or injured, is reflected in the polecat's Latin name *Mustela putorius*, which translates as 'foul-smelling musk bearer'. The polecat population underwent a severe decline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the animals being killed in high numbers in order to protect poultry and game birds.

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By the early twentieth century, the polecat was on the brink of extinction,



having been wiped out across most of Britain and confined to a small area of mid Wales, with Herefordshire and Shropshire being the only English counties where polecats clung on. Thankfully, the polecat's fortunes improved and due to a reduction in persecution, the polecat population began to recover during the 1930s and had become widespread again in Wales by the 1960s and in Herefordshire by the 1980s.

On a national scale, the polecat is more widespread today than it has been in over 150 years and has re-occupied much of its former range. Once polecats had become widespread again in Wales, they re-colonised parts of the English Midlands during the latter part of the twentieth century. During the 1970s and 1980s, polecats were reintroduced to Cumbria, Hertfordshire and parts of Scotland, which further helped to spread their range. The VWT's most recent national survey carried out during 2014-2015 confirmed that polecats are still expanding their range and have now re-colonised much of central, southern and parts of eastern England and today are found as far east as Suffolk and Norfolk and as far south as Devon and Cornwall. During this survey, 78 records were received from Herefordshire with polecats recorded throughout the county. The majority of records originated from road casualties, but we did receive reports of sightings of live polecats and a few cases

where polecats were seen in gardens. Today, for the most part, the polecat has an improved relationship with humans, compared with times gone by. The polecat is legally protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which prohibits certain methods of killing or taking polecats.

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However, although its conservation status is favourable, there are several threats on the horizon which may

hamper the ongoing recovery of the polecat. Firstly, polecats are vulnerable to poisoning from second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides, which occurs when they eat contaminated prey, such as rats. Research by the VWT in the 1990s revealed that one-third of polecats had been contaminated by rodenticides. It is possible that as polecats spread into parts of the country with higher human populations and more intensive agriculture, exposure to rodenticides will increase, possibly hampering their recovery in some areas. Secondly, polecats are vulnerable to being injured or killed in traps set for other species, such as rats, stoats or weasels. On occasions where polecats have the opportunity to take chickens or game birds,

this brings polecats into direct contact with humans. In a survey carried out in the 1990s, most gamekeepers classed the polecat as a minor pest due to predation of game and wildlife, although these negative attitudes are countered by the belief among many farmers that polecats control rabbits and rodents and thus provide valuable 'pest control.'

Overall, the picture looks positive for polecats as they continue their comeback across the country. The polecat can be seen as a real conservation success story and the return of a native species that was once on the brink of extinction is cause for celebration.

To find out more about The Vincent Wildlife Trust's work on polecats, visit: <http://www.vwt.org.uk/species/polecat-2/>

