

# The Pine Marten in Ireland

**Ruth Hanniffy** from the Vincent Wildlife Trust on the latest research into a conservation success story.

**M**ammals are highly charismatic and inspiring to watch – imagine a grey wolf padding across a snowy Scandinavian hillside or an orangutan swinging through a Bornean forest. Closer to home our mammals are just as elusive and a glimpse can be equally exhilarating; an otter smoothly gliding along a river's edge or an encounter with a stoat – feisty and steeped in folklore.

On occasion, however, charisma and folklore are not the terms that spring to mind when mammals are depicted by the Irish media, as has been the case recently for the pine marten. Reading newspaper headlines one would be forgiven for incorrectly envisioning large animals who roam the countryside in large numbers, wilfully causing damage in their wake. Sadly, it reflects a lack of appreciation of Ireland's natural history, making it important to present the facts that don't make the headlines.

The pine marten is a cat-sized animal with dark-brown fur and a bushy tail. Originally found in every county, its population declined due to persecution, strychnine poisoning and the act of being hunted for its



▲ Pine marten. Photo: Paul Lalor



mink-like fur. It is protected by both national and European legislation and this, along with afforestation, has facilitated a slow recovery from isolated populations in the west and south east. Earlier this year the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) commissioned a pine marten population assessment to produce an updated national abundance for the Republic of Ireland. The study was led by Dr Declan O'Mahony from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Northern Ireland along with Dr Catherine O'Reilly and Dr Peter Turner from Waterford Institute of Technology. The results of this national study will be used to assess the conservation status, management requirements and future monitoring of the pine marten in Ireland. Previous studies placed the population

in the low thousands. The new estimate will be derived using accepted methodology and analysis, as opposed to anecdotal reports of abundance.

In nature, the pine marten is a solitary, territorial creature, with the males and females only coming together to breed. Sightings of a group will typically comprise of a female with two to three kits, which remain with her for up to six months after birth. They are predators, but their diet is extremely varied and includes wood mice, bank voles, rabbits, squirrels, birds, frogs, carrion, eggs, insects and fruit. Remarkably, in Ireland, pine martens are being blamed for the killing of both sheep and lambs. The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) has discussed these claims with a range of veterinary practitioners

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▲ Pine marten. Photo: Paul Lalor



▲ Pine marten. Photo: Andrew Kelly [akellyphoto.com]

throughout the island and Britain, and all of them have questioned the basis for these claims, stressing that dogs and foxes continue to be the main sources of predation when post mortem analysis is carried out on carcasses submitted to regional laboratories.

While there is no doubt that good animal husbandry is required to protect domestic poultry and game fowl from an animal as agile as a pine marten, householders also need to ensure their premises are well maintained so female martens are not able to access and use loft spaces to rear their young. The VWT, in partnership with the NPWS, has produced two information leaflets on the pine marten and is currently working with a gun club to test the efficacy of using electric poultry netting at a pheasant release pen – so far the results are very encouraging.

Not too far away, Scottish pine martens are proving to be a major tourist attraction. The ecotourism industry, established

in the 1980s, is now worth £65 million to Scotland's economy, creating over 2,700 jobs.

Ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education".

The silver lining is a greater awareness and appreciation of our natural environment, which strengthens our connection with nature and benefits mental and physical health. Each year 1.12 million trips are made to Scotland for the primary purpose of viewing wildlife. As Irish tourism is on the rise, with over 41 per cent of our overseas tourists coming from Britain, this potential is untapped.

The pine marten is a natural part of our landscape, one of our few predators. Living in harmony with it is not just important for the survival of this species, it is symbolic of how we choose to safeguard the landscapes and wildlife we still have. 🐾