

Lizzie Croose of The Vincent Wildlife Trust invites us to celebrate one of Pembrokeshire's lesser-known mammals

Pembrokeshire's elusive 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 and woodlands to coastal sand dunes, and make a 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-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 poulcats, 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 18th and 19th centuries, with the animals being killed in high numbers in order to protect poultry and game birds.

By the early 20th 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 and the English border counties.

Polecats survived in northern Pembrokeshire but were considered very scarce during the early-mid 20th century. Thankfully, the polecat's fortunes improved and, due to a reduction in persecution, the polecat population began to recover during the 1930s and it had become widespread again in Wales by the 1960s.

The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) has carried out three national distribution surveys to document the polecat's recovery and range expansion.

Today, polecats are considered to be well-established and



Polecat photograph by Frank Greenaway

widespread in Pembrokeshire, from the beaches of St Bride's to the rolling hills of Rosebush.

However, there are several 10km squares (used in biological recording) in Pembrokeshire and most other counties in Wales, which generated no polecat records during the Trust's two most recent surveys.

Polecats are probably under-recorded as they are elusive and therefore difficult to spot. Most sightings of polecats tend to be of animals killed on roads or fleeting glimpses of live polecats as they cross roads at night.

Human population, road and traffic density are lower in Wales than in much of central and southern England, so polecats are less likely to become road casualties, and when they do, there may be fewer people driving on the roads who are likely to see them.

There is also a possibility that because the polecat never completely disappeared from Wales, many naturalists are so accustomed to seeing them that they don't feel the need to report a sighting.

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 20th 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.

AS POLECATS have spread from Wales, they have bred with ferrets – either escaped or released domestic ferrets or feral ferrets. When polecats and ferrets breed, they produce hybrids known as polecat-ferrets.

Distinguishing between true polecats and polecat-ferrets can be difficult, which can prove challenging when recording the species, but animals can generally be identified based on pelage/fur characteristics.

The significance of the Welsh polecat population in a British context has recently become apparent from research at Cardiff University.

Genetic analysis found that polecat-ferret hybrids most commonly occur outside Wales and on the edges of the polecat's range, thus highlighting the importance of the Welsh polecat population for the conservation and restoration of the genetic identity of the British polecat.

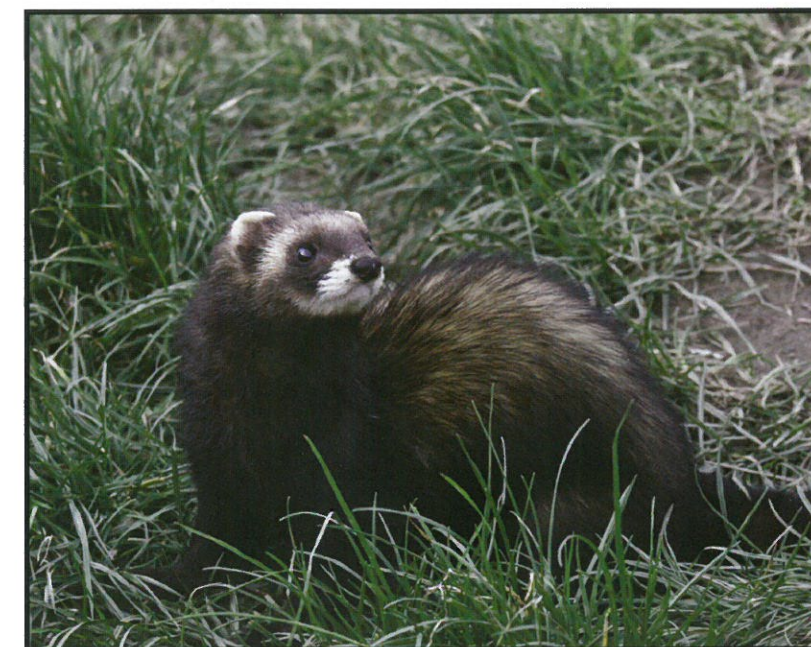
Today, for the most part, the polecat has an improved relationship with humans, compared with 100-200 years ago.

The polecat is legally protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which prohibits certain methods of killing or taking polecats, so fewer polecats are intentionally killed than they were historically.

Continued



Nick Hulme captured this image of a polecat with its 'bandit mask'.



Polecat photograph by Anne Newton

Polecat hunting

CAPTAIN John Owen Tucker Edwardes, squire of Sealyham in the mid nineteenth century, was an inveterate hunter of foxes, otters and polecats.

In his *Treasury of Historic Pembrokeshire*, Francis Jones noted of the latter:

He used to catch them in large numbers and all dog polecats he turned off at midnight and hunted them the following morning.

One which he turned off at Letterston Common ran as far as Pentypark and was marked under the garden wall, fully eight miles and straight as the crow flies.

Another he turned off on a Saturday night, forgetting all about the fact that the following day was Sunday.

The pack ran him to Beulah and marked under a chapel wall. The congregation was either at its prayers or singing when twelve couple hounds appeared, notes that could be heard miles away.

Mr Edwardes once commanded a company of the Pembrokeshire Militia which was called out to suppress a lawless set of Rebecca Rioters about 1840.

While helping to suppress them he found that it seriously interfered with his sport, whereupon he asked the leader of the rioters for a truce so that he could get in a day's hunting.

To this the rebel – who must have been something of a sportsman himself – agreed.

Pembrokeshire's elusive polecats

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 second-generation anticoagulant 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 them 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 in Pembrokeshire and 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.

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

THE Vincent Wildlife Trust is a national charity engaged in innovative and independent mammal research and conservation.

For 40 years, the Trust has made major contributions to the conservation of many of our rarer mammals, including the pine marten, otter, dormouse, water vole, polecat and the various species of bat.

The Trust continues to concentrate on the needs of British and Irish mammals of conservation interest, with current work centred on the pine marten, polecat, stoat and bats.

It also manages nearly 40 nature reserves in England, Wales and Ireland, most of which are horseshoe bat roosts.

Read more at: www.vwt.org.uk.

Book review by David Saunders

On the comeback trail

POLECATS

By Johnny Birks, Whittet Books £14.99

A CENTURY ago the formerly widespread polecat had been brought almost to extinction in Great Britain, largely the result of trapping and shooting by gamekeepers, the polecats' last stand taking place within a forty-four mile radius of Aberdovey – an area with few gamekeepers.

The cessation of rabbit catching following the arrival of Myxomatosis in the mid-1950s and shortly afterwards the banning of the 'gin-trap' resulted in a striking reduction in persecution from which the polecat certainly benefited.

Writing in *Nature in Wales* regarding enquiries made between 1959 and 1962 Ken Walton reported three hundred and twelve records from Wales and the borders, only one of which was in Pembrokeshire, from near Mynachlog-ddu.

Fast forward twenty years, a distribution map produced by Bernard Davies revealed the polecat was now widely distributed across the county. As Lizzie Croose's article reveals, from its Welsh strongholds polecats have re-colonised much of southern England to reach both Essex and Surrey – one of the least celebrated wildlife success stories of recent times.

Most intriguing is the origin of the polecat, an animal not mentioned in Anglo-Saxon or Welsh literature prior to the

Norman Conquest. Indeed the first reference in the Welsh language was not until *Llyfr Coch Hergest* – the *Red Book of Hergest*, the 14th century collection of prose and poetry.

Likewise two other introduced mammals, the fallow deer and the rabbit lack Welsh names of Celtic origin.

One of the great sights is of a polecat safely scurrying across a road, especially when a whole family with perhaps up to ten juveniles in a sinewy line make their way across.

Such an event is only likely in summer when female polecats rear their litters, for otherwise they live mainly solitary lives.

How many polecats in Great Britain? In 1997 there were estimated to be about 38,000, with an expanding range numbers had increased to almost 47,000 in 2006.

The results of the Vincent Wildlife Trust survey completed last year will be freely available some time next month from the Trust website (see panel above).

In Pembrokeshire there are now more records of polecats than in the past, and fortunately as many alive as road casualties.

Annie Poole, the county recorder for mammals, will be delighted to hear of your sighting by e mail to annie@rushmoorphotos.co.uk – alive hopefully, or even dead.

Meanwhile enjoy this most readable book, well illustrated with colour photographs, while the line drawings are a delight.

