

EXPERT BRIEFING

BEHAVIOUR IN FOCUS

POLECAT

Britain's rabbits need to look out – a swift, svelte rabbiter *par excellence* is gaining ground. The polecat is the perfect size for chasing them into their burrows (the species also targets rats and other small mammals). Yet while most of us have heard about the recovery of the otter and pine marten, the quiet comeback of their bandit-masked relative is one of our least-known conservation success stories.

Solitary, highly elusive and mainly nocturnal, this mustelid is easily missed and its scats can be hard to find. But records are nevertheless on the up. From a low point in the early 1900s, when the species was confined

to a small area of mid-Wales and the English borders, it has crept east to recolonise central and southern England. Its spread has been tracked by The Vincent Wildlife Trust for 20 years, most recently with the third national survey during 2014–15.

Polecats fare best in lowlands, where they den in rabbit burrows, hay bales and farm buildings. They are increasingly spotted on trailcams and in car headlights, and even visit gardens where they raise families under sheds and decking and in piles of compost.



● **Lizzie Croose** is mustelid conservation officer for The Vincent Wildlife Trust: www.vwt.org.uk

EXPERT GUIDE TO THE POLECAT

1 Defensive strategy

An old country term for the polecat is 'foul mart', while its scientific name *Mustela putorius* means 'foul-smelling musk bearer'. These are references to the stink the animal releases when it feels threatened.

2 Hybridisation

The polecat is the wild ancestor of the domestic ferret, and the two species can interbreed. Hybrids are most frequently found towards the edge of the polecat's core range, outside of Wales and central England, as well as in reintroduced populations.

3 Unmarked territory

Unlike many other terrestrial carnivores, such as the fox, badger and pine marten, the polecat does not deposit scats on tracks and paths to mark

territory. Instead it mostly leaves droppings at den sites, making surveying relatively difficult.

4 Roadkill records

Recording roadkill is sadly the main method of monitoring polecats. Casualties peak in March, during the mating season, and in September and October, when juveniles disperse from their mother's territory. In 2006 the UK population was estimated at almost 47,000.

5 Reduced threats

The polecat was once killed in higher numbers than any other mammal apart from the mole. There is much less persecution these days but conflict with the game-rearing industry is still an issue, as well as exposure to anticoagulant rodenticides through eating poisoned prey.



A polecat on a smallholding bordering woodland in North Wales. The carnivore is more widespread in Britain than at any time in the past 100 years, having spread east and south as far as East Anglia and south-west England.