

Pilot pine marten reinforcement in Wales

Mitigation Plan



This Pine Marten Recovery Project Mitigation Plan has been prepared by The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) as part of its project to restore self-sustaining populations of pine martens to England and Wales. The purpose of the Mitigation Plan is to provide information about the relationship between pine martens and people. It describes and explains:

- the Pine Marten Recovery Project
- the legal protection that pine martens have
- the steps that should be taken if pine martens are found in buildings
- how to manage tree felling in areas where pine martens may be present
- land management measures regarding traps, livestock and pets
- how to protect poultry and game birds from the risk of predation
- what to do if loss is attributed to pine martens.

Further information about this ground-breaking project can be found on the dedicated project website: <http://www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk/>

The return of a healthy pine marten population will result in the potential for people to come into contact with a species that has been extremely uncommon in Wales for over one hundred years. It is important for the VWT to uphold its commitment to both our conservation objectives and the needs of people and communities in which we work. This mitigation strategy has been developed to deliver information and advice, and to lay out actions to be undertaken by the public and the VWT in response to issues that may arise between human activity and pine martens.

The Pine Marten in Wales and the Pine Marten Recovery Project (PMRP)

The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) in consultation with, and support from, various conservation bodies launched a Pine Marten Recovery Project in 2014 to restore self-sustaining populations of pine martens to England and Wales. In autumn 2015, 20 pine martens were translocated from Scotland to mid-Wales. A further 19 pine martens were translocated in autumn 2016.

Pine martens used to be widespread and relatively common in wooded regions of Wales, but have experienced a prolonged decline over the last two centuries, due to habitat loss and fragmentation, hunting and intensive predator control. Two decades of work by the VWT has highlighted that the pine marten is currently extremely rare in Wales, existing at vanishingly low density, and in danger of extinction. The pine marten is an attractive, charismatic member of Wales' native fauna and has a firm place in Wales' cultural and environmental heritage. As a woodland predator the pine marten also plays an important role in the natural dynamics of woodland ecosystems. For this reason the VWT has embarked on a pilot study to reinforce the Welsh population by translocating animals from healthy populations in Scotland to a suitable region in Wales. We hope this course of action, if successful, will ultimately restore a viable, self-sustaining population of pine martens in Wales.

North Ceredigion has been chosen as the most favourable area for the reinforcement pilot study, because of its low road density, availability of suitable habitat and the potential to benefit the local economy. The pilot is taking place over two to three years, with up to 20 animals being released each year. If considered beneficial to the project, a further release may take place in the third year. The animals are being released over a forested

region of approx. 40km². Pine martens generally occupy large territories (anything between 2 and 30km² depending on the quality of the habitat) and can roam widely after the initial release searching for a suitable territory. They may leave the release region in this time and, in the long-term pine martens should naturally recolonise their former range beyond the initial release sites. Their movements will be closely monitored and what we learn from the early stages will be used to inform subsequent releases.

All pine martens are screened and health checked by an experienced wildlife vet before translocation. Each translocated animal has a radio collar fitted, the majority of which include a GPS transmitter. These collars are kept on the pine martens for the first year after their release to enable the VWT to keep track of the animals, providing valuable information about the species and the project. Pine martens are elusive animals and seldom seen. Even where they are well established in parts of Scotland and Ireland, people are often unaware of their presence. After the initial pilot period, a further two years of research and monitoring will take place.

Pine Marten Diet and Behaviour

Pine martens are omnivorous carnivores with a seasonal diet. Their main food source is small mammals which make up approximately 40% of their diet, dominated by the field vole (*Microtus agrestis*) which in peak years can be incredibly numerous. Martens will also predate rabbits, birds, reptiles and amphibians. In the warmer summer months a large proportion of their diet is made up of invertebrates, particularly large ground beetles and dung beetles. In the summer and autumn, fruit and berries are important, constituting approx. 30% of their diet and mainly comprising of blackberries, bilberries and rowan berries. Carrion is scavenged all year round.

Pine martens are adept climbers, and it is in cavities in trees that they preferentially rest and raise their young (kits). They are slow breeders, averaging two to three kits per litter, and might only breed every other year. The young are born in March to April and stay with their mother until their first winter. Pine martens are solitary, territorial and hold relatively large home ranges which they defend against members of the same sex. Males hold larger territories than females. Martens are themselves preyed on by foxes and large raptors, but the greatest threat comes from road traffic and accidental or illegal trapping, which can make the difference between a thriving and a declining population.

Legal protection

Pine martens are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Section 9 and Schedules 5 & 6. It is an offence to:

- intentionally kill, injure or take a pine marten;
- intentionally or recklessly damage or destroy any structure or place which a pine marten uses for shelter or protection;
- intentionally or recklessly disturb a pine marten while it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for shelter or protection; or
- intentionally or recklessly obstruct access to any structure or place which a pine marten uses for shelter or protection.

This Mitigation Plan describes the most common circumstances in which people may come into contact with pine marten and explains how to minimise the risk of committing an offence.

Pine martens in buildings

If there is a scarcity of natural sites, pine martens may use both inhabited and uninhabited buildings as dens. This is most common in the spring when a female may use the roof-space of a building to give birth to her young. Although pine martens in buildings may create problems for the householders, it is preferable that they are tolerated until they choose to leave of their own accord in mid-summer (when the females have weaned their kits). This is because excessive disturbance may cause the female to abandon her kits.

Pine martens may be of particular concern when breeding is taking place. Initially, there may be very little evidence of the presence of a pine marten in a building. However, if a den is established then their presence may become apparent as the young grow and become mobile. The animals can become noisy throughout the night and cause smell and hygiene concerns as a result of droppings, urine and the remains of prey that the mother has brought into the den. Structural damage to property can occur, for example if a pine marten enlarges an existing small gap to gain access to a building.

Excluding a breeding pine marten from a building

In some cases a breeding female marten may choose to occupy an attic or loft. If this takes place young may be present from March to July, with most births taking place in early April. Adult martens do not live in pairs, so if more than one animal is present this will almost certainly be a female with young. If breeding is suspected, it may be possible to humanely move the whole family out of the building where the young will be taken to an alternative den by the mother. However, ***this should only be attempted by an experienced person*** and is only practical when the young are small and immobile (i.e. up to about 6 weeks old). ***It is illegal to attempt this without an appropriate licence.*** Anyone who suspects that breeding is taking place is strongly advised to seek advice from NRW or the VWT.

Excluding a non-breeding pine marten from a house

Individual non-breeding pine martens may use buildings at any time of year. These animals can be humanely deterred and/or excluded from a dwelling house without a licence, often without the need for specialist assistance (but see below for guidance). However, exclusion from other structures such as agricultural buildings would require a licence.

Certain procedures can be undertaken without a licence to *prevent* pine martens from entering a dwelling house. Further details on these procedures can be found in a specific leaflet produced by the VWT (Living With Pine Martens), which can be downloaded here;

<http://www.vwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/scotland-pine-marten-leaflet.pdf>

It is strongly advised that you consult the 'Living With Pine Martens' guidance, and seek specialist advice from NRW or the VWT before taking any action.

Pine martens and tree felling operations

Pine martens prefer woodlands with a diverse, complex three dimensional aspect. However, the majority of large, continuous woodland available in Wales is commercially planted coniferous forest, which tends to be managed by rotational clear fell. Pine martens should be subject to the same management precautions and considerations associated with other protected species that inhabit commercial forests, such as red kites, otters and goshawks, and should be considered in the planning stage.

In general, pine martens should not impinge on the management of woodlands, but there are some extra considerations to be aware of if it is thought that pine martens are present. The most important step is to ensure that forest contractors are aware of pine martens in a general sense, and can identify them visually. The VWT has up to date information on the species distribution, and can offer guidance and advice on simple survey methods to detect their presence. The only time when the presence of pine martens can impact on forestry operations is when the female martens give birth to kits from March to April, and become faithful to one or more natal den sites until the kits are weaned in July. During this time, if forest operations planned, the planning stage should include a survey of the affected area for pine martens and potential den sites, with mitigation undertaken for their presence where appropriate.

The VWT has produced detailed guidance for woodland owners ('Managing forest and woodlands for pine marten'), in collaboration with Huw Denman (Select for Forestry) for managing woodlands with pine martens

present. The guide deals with some more general considerations for managing woodlands with pine martens. This guidance can be freely downloaded from the VWT website: http://www.vwt.org.uk/download_category/pine-marten/

Pine martens, birds and other animals

Pine martens are principally carnivores and do predate other animals. Predation is a natural process, and is key to a healthy, balanced ecosystem. Native predators often have a stabilising influence on the food chain below them, preventing common species becoming overabundant and out competing rarer species. Pine martens primarily hunt what is most abundant and easiest to catch: in Britain this is the field vole, which constitutes the bulk of the diet for a wide range of predators, from kestrels to adders.

Pine martens do not hunt in groups. It is a myth that they do. Pine martens are solitary, only interacting through choice briefly in the mating season (June-August). The kits will stay with their mother until they reach maturity and are driven off, and sometimes siblings will stay together for a short time after they have become independent. Pine martens do not share food, or co-operate to hunt and will not generally tolerate each other at a food source. They actively exclude rivals from their territories.

Landowners and spring traps

As it is an offence to deliberately place a trap or snare in such a manner as it could cause bodily injury or harm to a pine marten, all reasonable precautions must be taken to avoid such contact.

Legally approved spring loaded traps, for targeting stoats, weasels, grey squirrels and rats, must be installed inside a tunnel. Measures can be taken to exclude larger non-target animals by fitting bars across the entrance of the tunnels. A pine marten can squeeze through a 45mm gap, so the space between the bars should be smaller than this.

Will I be liable if I accidentally kill a pine marten?

Every conceivable effort must be made to exclude pine martens from traps. If this can be demonstrated, there is no liability for accidentally killing a pine marten whilst carrying out legitimate predator control.

It is not an offence to trap or kill a pine marten in order to prevent serious damage to livestock, gamebirds or poultry, if there is no time to apply for a licence. This defence is not available if the threat is simply perceived; it must be a realistic, demonstrable threat.

Further guidance on the correct use of tunnel traps can be found on the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trusts website: <http://www.gwct.org.uk/game/research/predation-control/tunnel-traps/>

Pine martens, pets and livestock

Pine martens are not a threat to cats or dogs and will avoid confrontation wherever possible. They are also not a threat to sheep or other livestock. They are the size of a typical small housecat, so it is highly unlikely that a pine marten would attack a lamb, and there has never been a recorded case of this behaviour. Pine martens are reluctant to venture into open ground away from cover due to the risk they themselves face from larger predators and raptors. If a pine marten is observed feeding on a sheep carcass it will be scavenging on the carcass of an animal that has already died, rather than an act of predation.

Pine martens, poultry and game birds

Pine martens are excellent climbers and because of this they may gain access to poultry and game pens. As described below, predation can be prevented in most circumstances using appropriate husbandry techniques.

Preventing predation on domestic fowl

Pine martens can squeeze through a hole of about 45mm in diameter and may access hen houses by enlarging a hole in rotten wood. Therefore, rotten wood should be replaced and any holes in the hen house must be smaller than 45mm in diameter (but also consider that polecats and stoats, which will also predate poultry, can access holes that are smaller still). Hen house doors should be closed during the hours of darkness and the door should be secured to prevent it being lifted by a marten. Devices are commercially available that are sensitive to light levels and automatically open and shut hen house entrances accordingly.

Preventing predation on penned game birds

The most effective way to deter martens from entering game bird pens is the use of electric fencing. In order to exclude martens effectively, line wire electric fencing is recommended at the top of the enclosure, along with overhanging electric wire (Image 1). A pen should have no gaps greater than 45mm to prevent martens squeezing through gaps in fencing. Mesh at the bottom of the fence should be well-pegged down or dug into the ground. 'Pop-holes' that are used by birds for access at ground level should be closed at night. Martens can jump a horizontal distance of about 2m, therefore, a gap in tree canopy cover of at least 3m around the pen is recommended. More information on these adaptations is available in a leaflet from the VWT's website:

<http://www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/how-to-exclude-pine-martens-from-game-and-poultry-pens.pdf>



Image: A pheasant pen is protected by electric wiring running around the top perimeter of the pen, and electric netting is placed around the overall perimeter. Trees have also been pruned back to prevent overhead access to the pen.

The pilot study and how the VWT will respond to conflict involving the translocated pine martens

The release region – geographic extent:



Duration

The project's overall lifespan is four to five years. The pilot study, which encompasses the period of translocation and post-release monitoring of the radio collared pine martens, consists of two planned release phases of the release of up to 20 animals in each phase - up to 40 martens in total. There is also the contingency of a third year of releases if it is deemed necessary. The pine martens translocated in the first phase will continue to be monitored non-invasively after their radio collars have been removed in June 2016, and all martens will be monitored in this way post June 2017.

The VWT will provide expert advice and first response in the study region until the end of the project, and, where possible, beyond. The VWT's research and conservation objectives mean there will be a full-time member of staff resident in or close to the release region during this five-year period.

The VWT response to reports of loss within the release region during the life of the pilot project

The movements of pine martens with radio collars will be monitored by nightly tracking. There will be a period of overlap when the phase one martens have had their radio collars removed and are then part of the existing wild population, whilst the phase two animals have radio collars on and are under intensive study. Protection and licence considerations relating to the pine martens fall under the jurisdiction of NRW. However, the VWT is committed to minimising the potential for conflicts between pine martens and the public, including owners of birds and other animals. The VWT will respond to reports of damage attributed to pine martens whether they concern a pine marten without a collar in the release region or a collared animal.

Throughout the project, guidance, advice and when appropriate, direct action will be available from the VWT, and thereafter from NRW. In the long-term, the VWT is committed to working with all stakeholders to ensure that a balance is maintained that sees the Welsh pine marten population recover range and become self-sustaining, whilst the interests of stakeholders are respected and protected where possible. The pine marten is a legally protected species and the VWT is committed to working with NRW in order to identify and make accessible funds that can be used by stakeholders to implement management practices that benefit both people and pine martens.

VWT response to predation complaint

Owners of poultry, game birds and livestock who believe that they have sustained loss as a result of predation by pine marten must demonstrate that they had taken all reasonable measures to protect birds and livestock from predators, that they have **taken reasonable action to mitigate any injury to birds and livestock, and that they ensured that where appropriate injured birds and livestock received prompt and professional veterinary or other treatment** to be eligible for a claim. The VWT has the right to decline a claim if the owner has not taken reasonable prevention measures.

Replacement costs

VWT will pay the direct replacement value of birds and livestock if it is confirmed that a bird or animal was predated by a radio collared pine marten during the pilot programme.

- Payment will be based on the average market value for the type of bird or other animal on the day it was killed.
- Payment will not be made for missing stock
- Incidents of feeding or scavenging of stock that was already dead will not be eligible for payment
- Replacement costs will be reduced by any amount realised from the sale or salvage of a dead or injured animal.

Any veterinary fees incurred in attending to injured domestic animals or livestock (but not birds) may be paid at the discretion of the VWT and in any such case may be reimbursed up to the cost of the direct replacement value of the injured animal or livestock had it been killed.

Reporting loss and assessment of claim

- An accredited RICS assessor (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors) will be paid for by the VWT to assess and value lost stock. Any payment made will be based on the assessment of the appointed assessor.
- Stock loss must be reported within three days of loss to be considered for payment.
- Stock loss can be reported to the VWT, who will then arrange a RICS assessor to visit the site.

Preventative measures

The VWT are keen to help devise and implement measures to prevent pine martens from gaining access to poultry and game bird pens. If you would like help and advice then please contact the project staff to arrange a visit: <http://www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk/contact-us>

The Vincent Wildlife Trust, 3 & 4 Bronsil Courtyard, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1EP
Tel: 01531 636441 | www.vwt.org.uk | www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk

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