

Living with Pine Martens

About the Pine Marten

The Pine Marten is a native British mammal and a member of the mustelid family, which includes otters, stoats, weasels and polecats. The Pine Marten is the size of a small domestic cat, with rich brown fur, a creamy-yellow chest 'bib', prominent rounded ears and a long bushy tail. Pine Martens favour woodland habitats and prefer to use tree cavities as breeding and resting sites. They are largely nocturnal but are frequently active during the day, especially in the summer months. Pine Martens are highly opportunistic animals with a varied diet which includes small mammals (mainly voles), fruit, small birds, insects and carrion. As predators, Pine Martens are a vital part of a healthy ecosystem.

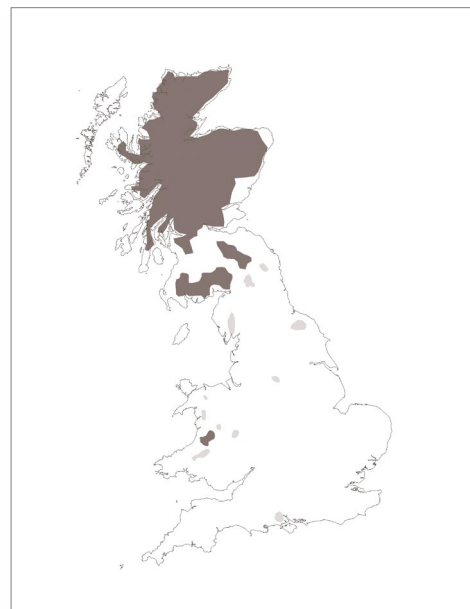
Pine Martens in England

Pine Martens were once widespread throughout Britain but populations decline severely during the 19th century as a result of persecution and deforestation.

By the early 20th century, the Pine Marten had become extinct across most of Britain and restricted to the north-west Highlands of Scotland and small parts of northern England and Wales. Today, Pine Martens are recovering well in Scotland but remain very rare in England, with occasional records of Pine Martens in parts of northern England, Shropshire and Hampshire. It is expected that Pine Martens will soon start to spread from southern Scotland into parts of Northumberland and Cumbria, where habitat is suitable.



Pine Marten © Robert Cruickshanks



Map: Distribution of the Pine Marten in Britain. Dark brown shading indicates core range, lighter brown shading indicates occasional records.

Predation of poultry and game birds

Pine Martens are excellent climbers and because of this they may gain access to poultry and game pens, but predation can be prevented using simple and effective husbandry techniques.

Preventing predation on domestic fowl

Pine Martens can squeeze through a hole of about 50mm in diameter and may access hen houses by enlarging a hole in rotten wood. Therefore, rotten wood should be replaced and there should be no holes in the hen house greater than 45mm in diameter. Hen house doors should be closed during the hours of darkness and the door should be secured to prevent it being lifted by a Pine 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

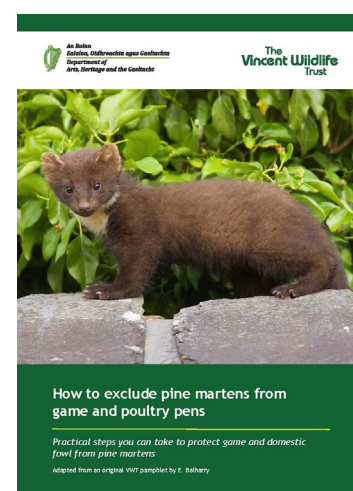
The most effective way to deter Pine Martens from entering game bird pens is the use of electric fencing. In order to exclude Pine Martens effectively, line wire electric fencing is recommended at the top of the enclosure, along with overhang electric fencing. A pen should have no gaps greater than 45mm to prevent Pine 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' used by birds for access at ground level should be closed at night. Pine Martens are excellent climbers and can jump a horizontal distance of about 2m. Therefore, a gap in tree canopy cover of at least 3m around the pen is recommended.

Pine Martens in gardens

Pine Martens will visit gardens and may take food left out for birds or red squirrels. Many people enjoy watching Pine Martens and tempt them into their gardens with food such as nuts, peanut butter and jam sandwiches! Pine Martens may be attracted to soft fruit growing in gardens; methods are available to exclude them, such as fruit cages or electric fencing.

How to exclude Pine Martens from game and poultry pens

More information on practical steps you can take to protect game and domestic fowl from Pine Martens is available in a leaflet from www.vwt.org.uk/downloads, click on "pine marten" and see "How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens".



Denning in buildings

As a result of the 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 ('kits'), who will stay with her until the end of the summer when they become independent. 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. This is because excessive disturbance may cause the female to abandon her kits.

Problems with Pine Martens are most acute when breeding is taking place. Initially, there may be very little evidence, but as the young grow and become mobile, they can be very noisy throughout the night. There are also likely to be issues with smell and hygiene, due to the droppings, urine and the remains of prey that the mother has brought into the den. Structural damage to the property can also occur, e.g. when a Pine Marten enlarges an existing small gap to gain access to the building.

If it is not possible to tolerate the Pine Martens, an exclusion may be carried out under licence by the relevant Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation (e.g. Natural England). Contact The Vincent Wildlife Trust or Natural England for more information.

Individual 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 the next page for more detail). In some cases a breeding female Pine Marten may choose to occupy a loft. If this takes place young may be present from March to July, with most births taking place in early April. Adult Pine Martens do not live in pairs, so if more than one animal is present, it 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 from Natural England. You are therefore strongly advised to seek advice if you suspect that breeding is taking place.



Pine Marten kit in roof space
© Hugh Brown



Prey remains and droppings in a roof space

Excluding a non-breeding Pine Marten from a house

In a domestic dwelling house, the following procedure can be done without a licence, although you may wish to seek specialist advice from the relevant Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation before taking any action. Note that during March to May (inclusive) a single animal may only be visible, but immobile (and often very quiet) young could be hidden away in the roof void, so don't assume that breeding is not taking place. If you are not comfortable working at height on a ladder you are likely to need to employ a specialist for the exclusion procedure.

1. Watch out for Pine Marten movements around the house and garden as this often helps to build up a picture of what is going on. Does the Pine Marten have regular patterns of behaviour? Sometimes this can be influenced by the movements of pets, e.g. if you have a dog and it is always let out into the garden last thing at 11pm; the Pine Marten will regulate its movements accordingly.
2. It is advisable to stop putting food out in the garden that is suitable for a Pine Marten until it has been excluded for a week or two.
3. Block all the potential access holes (50mm diameter or greater) with newspaper to establish which holes are being used by the Pine Marten. Do not attempt to permanently seal any potential access holes at this point. Blocking actual or potential entrance holes is needed in order to establish a plan to block all holes except the one used most frequently by the Pine Marten.
4. Ideally the blocking up of holes with newspaper should be done over several days to get an accurate record of which holes are being used. Often it is only one hole, but it could be two holes out of several possibilities that are being used. Sometimes the newspaper is pulled into the building and sometimes it is pushed out by the Pine Marten.

Prevention is better than cure!

Our advice is, that while Pine Martens are thrilling animals to see, they do not make good house guests! So, unless you are happy for Pine Martens to take up residence in your property, you can help prevent any problems by:

1. Not putting out food for Pine Martens. It is not uncommon for Pine Martens to occupy houses after they have been encouraged into the garden by putting out food, e.g. on the bird table. So, unless your property is very well maintained and you are certain there are no possible access points, you might want think twice about putting food out for them.
2. Ensuring good house maintenance. Many cases of Pine Martens occupying houses (or other buildings) could easily have been prevented if the building fabric had been properly maintained. Pine Martens are expert climbers and can shin up walls with no difficulty whatsoever. A favourite access point is through enlarged gaps in rotten soffits. Smaller gaps than 50mm can often be enlarged.



A potential access hole for a Pine Marten © Hugh Brown

5. Decide which hole is to be left for the Pine Marten to use and permanently block all others with a durable material such as mortar and/or strong steel mesh (if required) so it is impossible for the Pine Marten to get in by any of these. Put newspaper into the one remaining hole to monitor usage. Once this has been done and the Pine Marten is restricted to this one entrance to the house, it is a case of watching the animal's movements.

6. Sometimes it is possible to see the entrance/exit hole from the house but if not, you can sit in a vehicle strategically parked in the garden or driveway. You must not be out in the open, as the Pine Marten may be put off by human scent. Pets must be kept in the house at this time. Occasionally a dog in the house can confirm the presence of a Pine Marten in the loft as it can hear the animal move about. It is best if the Pine Marten can be seen leaving the house, but this is not always possible so the only way of knowing if it has left is by the removal of the newspaper.

7. When the Pine Marten is out of the house, i.e. the newspaper has been removed (or you have actually seen the animal leave) this final hole can be blocked. However, this should be done in such a way that it can be unblocked just in case an animal is inadvertently shut in the house with no way out. Cement is not recommended at this stage but the use of wood and screws (not nails) so the hole can be quickly and easily opened up again should this be necessary. It is best to start this procedure at least two hours before sunset on the assumption that the Pine Marten will be coming out as it gets dark outside.

8. With the hole now blocked (with wood), for the next two to three hours you need to listen out for noises in the attic (with the TV and audio equipment turned off). If all is quiet and it is during the evening it can be concluded that the Pine Marten is out. (It is a waste of time trying this during the day). If a Pine Marten has been inadvertently shut in there will be a lot of scratching noises as it looks for a way out. If so, unscrew the piece of wood and try again.

Providing alternative accommodation

If you would like to continue to have Pine Martens around in your garden, but not in your house, you can construct a Pine Marten den ("nest") box and mount it on a suitable tree nearby. It is recommended that you put wood shavings (not saw dust) in the central chamber 5 to 10 cm deep.

Details can be found at www.vwt.org.uk/downloads, click on "pine marten" and see "Constructing, erecting and monitoring den boxes".



A Pine Marten den box
© Ruth Hanniffy

Tourism

Pine Martens are a good tourist attraction and many people visit Scotland in the hope of seeing one. Pine Martens are often attracted to wildlife hides or gardens of B&Bs and holiday cottages by people who leave food out for them. Pine Martens can, therefore, offer the potential for economic benefits by bringing revenue to local hoteliers and businesses from visitors keen to see Pine Martens.

Suggestions for places to watch Pine Martens in Scotland are available online: www.wild-scotland.org.uk/species/72/pine-marten/

Pine Martens and squirrels

A study in 2014 in the Irish midlands found that grey squirrels were absent from woodlands where Pine Martens were present at high densities, leading to the suggestion that Pine Martens may have a negative effect on grey squirrels. However, further research was needed to determine if this is a causal relationship and whether it is unique to Ireland, where Pine Martens occur at much higher densities than elsewhere and where there are fewer prey species present.

A recent paper by Sheehy *et al.* (2018) reports on a study in Scotland which found that, where Pine Marten recovery is more advanced and the population is at relatively high densities, the native red squirrel now occupies a greater portion of the landscape than non-native grey squirrels. Despite uncertainty on whether the return of the Pine Marten will ultimately lead to the extirpation or suppression of grey squirrel abundance, it is suggested that it will likely profoundly alter the overall competitive interaction between the two squirrel species through potential impacts on squirrel pox dynamics.



Pine Marten at viewing hide
© Robert Cruickshanks



Red squirrel © Lizzie Croose

About us

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

The VWT is a mammal conservation charity that has spent over 40 years carrying out research and practical conservation. It has focused particularly on the needs of British mammals including the otter, pine marten, polecat, stoat, weasel, water vole, dormouse and the bats. Currently the VWT's work is centred on the pine marten, polecat, and bats.

Back from the Brink

Back from the Brink is the first time ever that so many conservation organisations have come together with one focus in mind – to bring back from the brink of extinction some of England's most threatened species of animal, plant and fungi. Natural England is working in partnership with Rethink Nature, and the entire project is made possible thanks to funding from the National Lottery.

More information

For more information about the project, or to get involved, contact Kevin O'Hara, Pine Marten Project Officer:

Email: kevinohara@vwt.org.uk
Tel: 07377 993626

Events and volunteering opportunities will be advertised online:

Website: naturebftb.co.uk
Social media: @naturebftb

Contact us

The Vincent Wildlife Trust
3 & 4 Bronsil Courtyard,
Eastnor, Ledbury HR8 1EP
www.vwt.org.uk
enquiries@vwt.org.uk
01531 636441

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(England), SCO43066 (Scotland),
20100841 (Ireland)