

Advice note

Release of pine martens (*Martes martes*) into the wild in Britain



Background

The pine marten (*Martes martes*) is a medium-sized, arboreal member of the mustelid (stoat and weasel) family. Pine martens were historically widespread throughout Britain but by 1915 the combined effects of woodland clearance and intensive predator control had resulted in extinction in all but the most remote upland areas of northwest Scotland, northern England and Wales. Today, populations are expanding in number and range in Scotland and Ireland. However, in England and Wales the population has not recovered from its decline and pine martens occur at low densities with a very restricted distribution.

Habitat requirements and ecology

Pine martens are largely solitary and normally exclude members of the same sex from their home ranges. Home range size varies widely according to habitat. In Britain a single male home range can vary from 33km² in upland spruce to 3km² in more productive, lowland woodland. For females this is smaller, from 10km² to just under 1km² in these habitats. This means that many woodlands will not be large enough to sustain sufficient numbers of pine martens to maintain a viable breeding population.

Pine martens are slow breeders, with females not usually breeding until their third year. Mating occurs in July and August and litters of typically one to three young are born in late March or early April. Pine martens rarely excavate their own dens, preferring existing cavities in tree holes, squirrel dreys or rock crevices. As foxes are known to catch and kill martens, these above ground sites are thought to be essential in avoiding such predation.

Pine martens are carnivores, but they eat a variety of foods, including small mammals, birds and their eggs, carrion, invertebrates, fruits and nuts.

Pine martens and grey squirrels

A recent study in the Irish midlands¹ 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. Research is currently on-going to determine the cause of this effect 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.



Photograph: Central tree with hole used as a marten den



Photograph: Pine martens © A. Achterberg

Pine martens and the law

Pine martens are legally protected by The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which in Scotland is amended by the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. Under this legislation it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take a wild pine marten; or to possess or control, sell, offer for sale or possess, or transport for the purpose of sale, any live or dead wild pine marten. The release of captive bred animals without adequate effort to ensure their future well-being may be an offence under the Abandonment of Animals Act 1960.

Pine marten translocations

Any proposed translocation of pine martens must be considered very carefully and comply with IUCN guidelines on translocationⁱⁱ, whether for re-introduction or reinforcement (re-stocking). The importance of animal welfare and health screening is emphasised in these guidelines, as is the requirement for a detailed ecological assessment to maintain favourable conservation status of this protected species. Relevant statutory organisations (including Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage) should be consulted and all necessary permits and licences obtained.

The VWT Pine Marten Recovery Project

The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) is currently undertaking a feasibility study in accordance with IUCN guidelines to identify specific locations in England and Wales that would be suitable for future pine marten recovery projects. This takes into consideration all the factors that would affect the viability of an increased pine marten population, including habitat suitability and adequate prey sources, and also any potential areas of conflict. The Trust is keen to work with others on the conservation of this charismatic species and would like to hear from anyone who would be interested in working with us on sound evidence-based recovery plans.



Photograph: Project Manager, Dr Jenny Macpherson, radio-tracking pine martens.

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

The VWT is a mammal conservation charity that has spent 40 years carrying out research and practical conservation. 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 bats. Today, 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 the bats. The Trust also manages nearly 40 reserves in England, Wales and Ireland, most of which are horseshoe bat roosts.

Useful links

IUCN/SSC Reintroduction Specialist Group - <http://iucnsscrg.org>

Scottish Natural Heritage - <http://www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/reintroducing-native-species/scct/>

The Vincent Wildlife Trust Pine Marten Recovery Project - <http://www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk>

ⁱSheehy, E., & Lawton, C. (2014). Population crash in an invasive species following the recovery of a native predator: the case of the American grey squirrel and the European pine marten in Ireland. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 23(3): 753-774.

ⁱⁱIUCN (2013) Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations. IUCN Species Survival Commission, Gland, Switzerland.

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Registered Charity No. 1112100 (England) and SCO43066 (Scotland)

This briefing was funded by:

