



Ronald Surgenor

The pine marten in Northern Ireland - A Guide for Householders

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Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

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Adapted from work by National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) - Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) with their kind permission.

Introduction

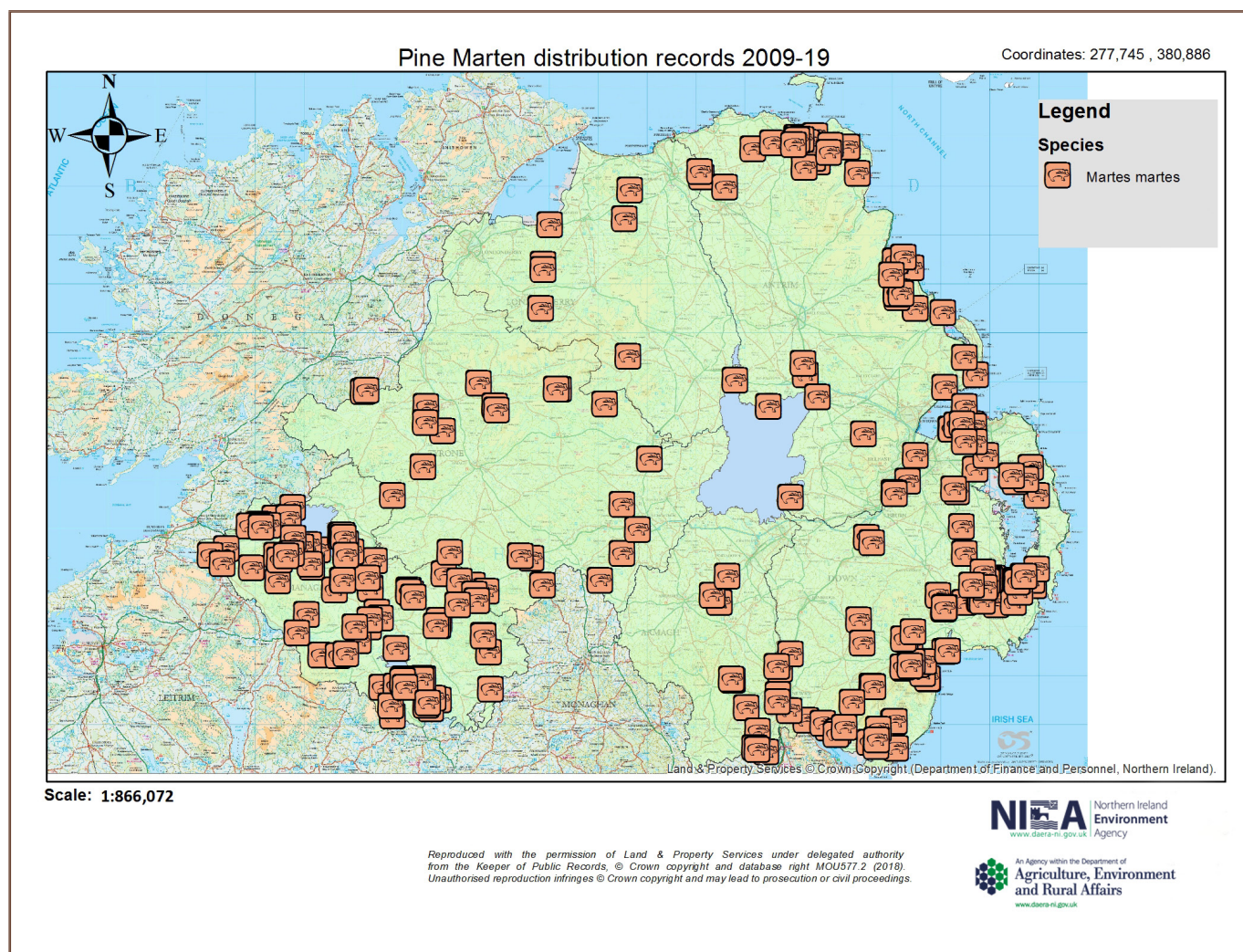
The pine marten is native to Ireland and is one of our rarest mammals. Once common throughout the country, by the 20th century this species had become extinct from the majority of the island. In Northern Ireland the pine marten was surviving only in a few isolated and fragmented populations, mainly in the south and west of the province. This decline was the result of hunting of pine martens for their fur, loss of habitat, direct or indirect poisoning, and general persecution.



Distribution and population

The pine marten is gradually recolonising across Ireland and returning to areas where it has not been seen for decades.

Following the introduction of legal protection in 1976 in Republic of Ireland and 1985 in Northern Ireland, numbers built up slowly in its refuges in the west and south. From there, facilitated to some extent by the expansion of forestry and maturation of post war forestry plantations, it has spread northwards, with considerable increases up the east coast. Although the pine marten population is recovering, its slow reproduction rate and large territory size means it never reaches high densities. The pine marten, as its Irish name (cat crainn) suggests, are typically associated with coniferous and broadleaf wood habitats, however have adapted to heath and scrubland.



Description

The pine marten is related to the Irish stoat, otter and badger (the Mustelid family) and adults are about the size of a domestic cat. Pine martens weigh between 1.0kg-2.2kg and the head and body measure about 45cm, with females generally lighter and smaller than the males. Pine martens tails are around 20cm giving an approximate nose to tail tip measurement of 65cm. Pine martens have large feet, large ears ringed by pale fur, and a long bushy tail. The coat is a rich brown, with a large patch of pale-coloured fur over the throat and chest. In summer, the coat is sleek and dark brown, except for the throat patch, whilst in winter it is mostly light brown with dense underfur.



Pine marten facts:

- **Dominant Pine martens are solitary animals. Sub-adult siblings especially males will form collations and will often cohabit and control territories together.**
- **Adults of both sexes exclude other pine martens of the same sex from their core territory - there is often considerable overlaps of home range.**
- **Breeding occurs once a year, with up to five three kits born in spring, although 2 or 3 is the usual number.**
- **Pregnant pine martens need to find a warm secure place in which to give birth, because the kits are born blind, hairless, and are wholly dependent on the mother for the first 40 days.**
- **Natural dens are in hollow trees, rabbit burrows, squirrel dreys, tree roots and rock crevices.**
- **Pine martens are slow reproducers, with both sexes mating in their second year.**
- **Diet is varied and includes berries, fruits, insects, frogs, birds, small mammals and carrion.**

Although largely nocturnal, pine martens can be active during the day, especially in summer.

Legal protection of pine martens

The pine marten is protected in Northern Ireland by the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 as amended. It is an offence, except under licence, to capture or kill a pine marten, or to destroy or disturb its resting places. For further information on licences please email: elmswildlife@daera-ni.gov.uk.

Pine marten in houses

As a result of the scarcity of natural den sites, pine martens may use both inhabited and uninhabited buildings as dens.

This is most common when a pregnant female uses the roof-space of a building to give birth. If this happens, the young pine martens, called kits, may be present from March to August, although only the female may be seen entering and leaving the building. The young are often very quiet and hidden away in the roof void. However, as the kits grow and become more mobile, they can be very noisy throughout the night. The presence of a female pine marten

and her young in a building can also give rise to problems of smell, hygiene and possibly also structural damage, e.g. when a pine marten enlarges an existing small gap to gain access to the building. Generally 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. Due to the risk of a female abandoning her kits if disturbed, no action should be taken to exclude or deter a pine marten from a building between the months of March to August. Such action could constitute an offence. If in doubt contact the NIEA Wildlife Team.



How to prevent pine martens taking up residence in your home

Although the pine marten is one of our more attractive native mammals, they do not make good house guests, for the reasons already discussed.

Steps you can take to prevent pine martens moving in:

- Unless your home is 'pine marten proof', do not deliberately attract a pine marten into your garden by leaving out food for it. Pine martens will also take food that has been left out for birds and red squirrels.
- Do not leave food unattended outside in pet feeding bowls - this can encourage pine martens to show an interest in your home and to then search for openings into a roof void.

- **Ensure lids of bins containing food scraps are secure.**
- **Keep your home in a good state of repair. Remember pine martens are excellent and agile climbers, so ensure that even small gaps in external timbers are repaired and replace damaged slates - pine martens can squeeze through gaps of 45mm in diameter and will chew small openings to create an access point.**
- **Always follow up unusual or one-off sounds you hear from your attic, particularly during the months of November to February. Pine martens search for possible denning sites during these months, although they may not take up residence until late spring. However, be aware that pine martens are often not overly frightened of humans and are extremely curious; they will not always flee if you approach them in an attic for example. This can make them harder to scare away than other species.**
- **Act early to prevent a rodent infestation in your attic, particularly when rats and mice seek shelter in attics in October and November, because pine martens are often attracted into roof spaces in pursuit of these rodents.**
- **Construct pine marten den boxes outside your home.**

Steps to take outside the breeding season if you suspect you have a pine marten in your building

Contact the NIEA Wildlife Team for advice. We can advise you on the best course of action, depending on your specific situation. If you can establish that you have a single, non-breeding pine marten in your home you may then be able to take the following steps.

Watch out for pine marten movements around the house and garden over several evenings as this often helps to build up a picture of what is going on. Try using a camera trap if you have access to one.

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.

It is advisable to stop putting out bird food that is suitable for pine martens (e.g. nuts, fruit) until the pine marten has been excluded for a week or two.

Placing a radio in the attic may deter pine martens from settling in.

Block all the potential access holes (45mm 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.

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.

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.

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 pine marten 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.

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.

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 as pine martens may not be active). 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 for pine martens

Best results may be achieved if you provide alternative accommodation. If you would like to continue to have pine martens in your garden, but not in your house, you can construct a pine marten den box and mount it on a suitable tree nearby. Details can be found at:

www.pinemarten.ie/resources, click on "householders".

Vincent Wildlife Trust



Vincent Wildlife Trust is a mammal conservation charity that has spent more than 40 years carrying out research and practical conservation, with a focus on the bats and mustelids. It has been playing a key role in mammal conservation in the Republic of Ireland since 1991, specifically bat conservation.

Submit pine marten sighting records to CEDaR www2.habitats.org.uk/records/pine-marten



Contact: The Vincent Wildlife Trust, Donaghpatrick, Headford, County Galway.
Tel: 00353 93 35304, Email: enquiries@vwt.org.uk,
<https://pinemarten.ie/>

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Wildlife Team The Wildlife Team are part of the Biodiversity and Conservation Science Unit of Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

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