



Once hunted to the verge of extinction by merciless gamekeepers during the 19th century, the lonesome pine marten is starting to be spotted across Britain once again. **Crispin Andrews** investigates the fate of one of our most elusive and unusual mammals

# A RARE FIND



*Here: pine martens are agile and nimble climbers, at home in trees. Top right: a hole in a trunk makes the perfect ready-made den*



**L**ast October, scientists confirmed what many knew and everyone suspected. One of Britain's rarest and most elusive animals is living in Wales. Olly Amy, from Powys, found an animal carcass on the road, near the village of Aberhafesp. Chestnut brown with a creamy yellow bib, the animal, which had been hit by a vehicle, was bigger than a squirrel but smaller than a fox. Olly handed over the carcass to the Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT); DNA analysis confirmed it was a pine marten. The first pine marten found in Wales for 41 years.

Omnivorous, cat-sized, relative of otters, weasels and badgers; the pine marten is one of Britain's rarest mammals and perhaps our most beautiful. Certainly it's the most unusual. To those who don't know the animal, a pine marten might look like a long-legged stoat, only bigger with a fox-like tail. Catch a glimpse of its angular face and sharp eyes and you might think squirrel or Siamese. The marten's light coloured bib, triangular ears and inquisitive air evoke further catty comparisons. "It's only when pine martens stand upright on their back legs that you recognise them as mustelids," says Lizzie Croose of the VWT.

The only mustelid with semi-retractable claws, pine martens are at home climbing trees or foraging on the forest floor – particularly at night but, in summer, during the day. On the ground, they don't scurry like polecats and mink, but rather lope, back slightly arched, hind legs appearing longer than front. "They're incredibly agile and fast," says Croose. "On a tree trunk, they can twist their bodies



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360 degrees to see all around them and if you take your eyes off one for a split second, it's gone."

At times, being a pine marten conservationist in Wales is like looking for Bigfoot. In the early 1990s, the People's Trust for Endangered Species declared pine martens extinct in the country. Spurred on by sightings, VWT conservationists kept looking. They've collected several scats and have around three hundred reported sightings from Snowdonia, the Cambrian Mountains, around Aberystwyth and in parts of Carmarthenshire. Now they have the Aberhafesp carcass. "You always hope you'll come across a live marten but these animals are so rare that even finding traces can prove difficult," Croose says.

### RELENTLESS PERSECUTION

Outside the UK, pine martens range from western Siberia across Russia and Europe. They are common from the northern limit of Europe's coniferous forest to the Mediterranean and the Caucasus, and also live on Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, Majorca and Minorca. Beech martens, a smaller relative, are also found throughout Europe, while other species of marten thrive in North America, northern Russia, East Asia, Japan and India. Two hundred years ago there were pine martens all over Britain.

It is thought that pine martens came to Britain after the last ice age, around 9,500 years ago. Back then, Britain was covered in forest and woodland and the pine marten was our second most common predator, after the weasel. People trapped them for their fur and pine marten

numbers decreased over the centuries when forests were cleared for agriculture. However, it was the rise of driven game-bird shooting in the 19th century that led to the eradication of pine martens from the British countryside.

Seeking to protect bird stocks, gamekeepers trapped, poisoned or shot any predator they found. By the 1850s, in southern England, pine martens remained only in Sussex, Devon and Cornwall. Seventy years later they were virtually extinct in England.

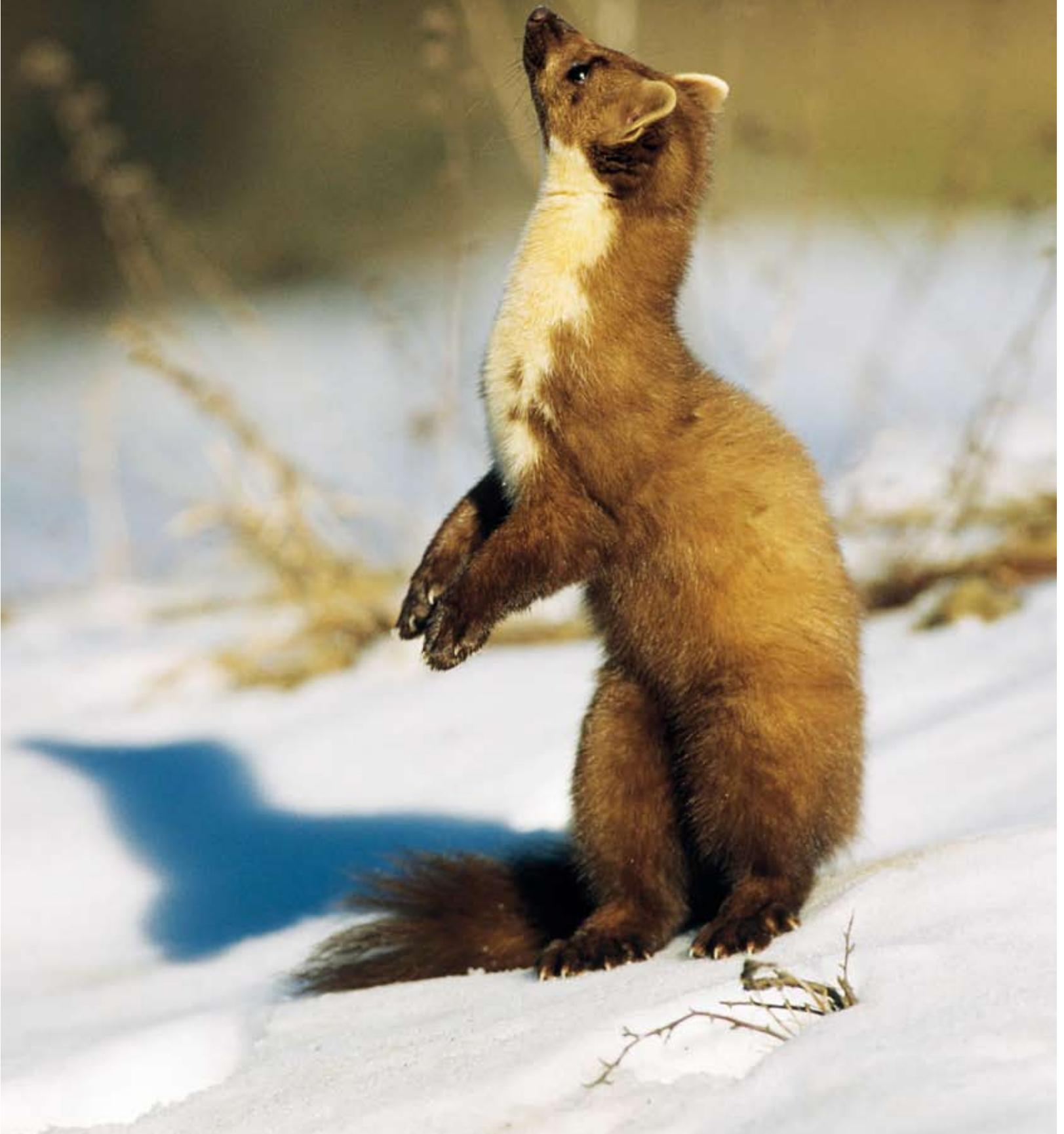
At the beginning of the 19th century, 10,000 gamekeepers waged their merciless war against the British countryside. Records show that gamekeepers from Glengarry Estate in Scotland killed 246 pine martens during one particular three-year period. They also killed 108 wildcats, 106 polecats, 301 stoats and weasels, 67 badgers and 48 otters, not to mention hundreds of raptors and crows. No predator was safe. Seventy-eight house cats feature on their death list. In 1911 there were twice as many gamekeepers in rural areas as policemen. By 1914, country estates employed 23,000. Pine martens and polecats, in particular, retreated to remote corners. Then the First World War started.

In 1916, *Country Life* magazine reported that two thirds of country estate staff had signed up to fight. Many never came back. Estate heirs died in battle, too. Around the same time, successive governments increased taxes on landowners and granted farmers the right to shoot game birds that wandered onto their land and ate their crops. When in 1918, government gave all men the vote, there

***Clockwise from top left: the Aberhafesp carcass; a young female spotted in Scotland; a classic pose standing on its back legs; martens hunt for food on the ground***



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were around 6,000 gamekeepers left. In 1928 women got the vote and the landed gentry could no longer guarantee laws protecting their privileged activities through parliament. The heyday of the British shooting estate had passed.

### PROTECTED BY LAW

Today, pine martens are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981. In Scotland, numbers have increased since the reforestation programme began. But in England and Wales, where polecats have spread out across the country since their persecution was outlawed, pine martens have not recovered.

“Pine martens need woodland to live, hunt and breed in,” says conservationist Johnny Birks. They also need trees so they can keep away from foxes. “Unlike polecats who can hide underground and emit a nasty stench to ward off predators, pine martens have no natural defences,” Birks adds. “Polecats can adapt to all kinds of landscapes, as long as there’s enough food around.”

Pine martens are solitary, territorial and females don’t breed until their third year. In Wales, where there are few martens, finding a mate would not be straightforward. While polecats have between four and 10 offspring, pine martens typically give birth to between one and three kits.

July and August is pine marten mating season. It’s not until seven months later, however, that the fertilised egg reaches the female’s uterus. Kits arrive in late March or early April, after a gestation period of about a month, blind and weighing about 30 grams. After five weeks, the young open their eyes and at six, the mother, solely responsible for rearing, weans them. Miniature fur-covered pine martens emerge from their den at around seven to eight

*Clockwise from above left: polecat numbers have increased since they became protected; martens are thriving in the forests of the Cairngorms in Scotland; in the 1980s a pine marten colony was established near Glen Trool in Galloway*



“TODAY, PINE MARTENS ARE PROTECTED UNDER THE WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT OF 1981”





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## WHERE ARE THEY ALL HIDING?

*Here: a shy inhabitant was sighted in Louth, Ireland.  
Below: a female in her den*



### **NORTH YORKSHIRE MOORS**

There have been more sightings here than anywhere else in England. In August 2009, the Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) instigated a scat hunt after a spate of sightings on the Forestry Commission's estate to the west of the North York Moors National Park. No traces were found, but sightings persist.

### **KIDLAND FOREST, CHEVIOT HILLS, NORTHUMBERLAND**

Pine marten scat was found in June 2010 outside a specially designed nest box and it was thought that a female marten had reared her kits in the box.

### **GRIZEDALE FOREST, CUMBRIA**

Over the last 10 years the VWT has received more than 100 good quality sightings around Ennerdale, Rusland Valley and Grizedale. Pine marten droppings were found in the forest in October 2011.

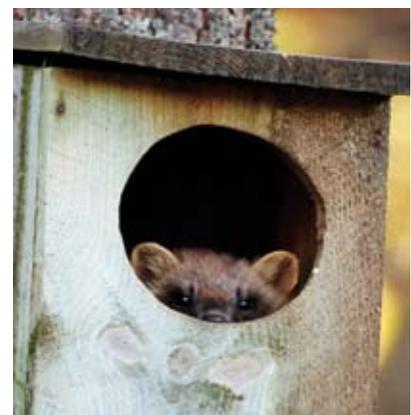
### **IRELAND**

In 2009, the Ecological Management Group (EMG) surveyed 80 forests and found evidence of pine martens in 55 per cent of the sites. With the largest populations thought to be in Fermanagh, South Tyrone, County Down and Armagh. EMG zoologist Declan

O'Mahony estimates that there are 350 breeding adults in Northern Ireland and 2,700 individuals in the Republic. Since the mid 1980s, the Republic's forest cover has increased from 420,000 ha to almost 700,000 ha in 2005.

### **SCOTLAND**

In the 20th century pine martens have emerged from the North West Highlands and re-colonised parts of their former territories. They're now present in Moray, Perth and Kinross, Argyll and Bute, parts of Aberdeenshire and Stirling. A small population was reintroduced into Galloway. Scottish Natural Heritage estimates that there are between 2,600 and 3,500 pine martens in Scotland.





“ MORE WOODLAND IS THE KEY TO ANY SUSTAINED RECOVERY IN ENGLAND AND WALES ”

weeks. It's nearly always a ready-made den: a rock crevice, a hole in a tree, or maybe even a house loft away from foxes. Kits disperse at around three to four months, in time for the next mating season. Some stay in their mother's territory until the following year.

In 2007, VWT conservationists found a pine marten scat in Cwm Rheidol forest, near Aberystwyth. Pine marten scats look like fox droppings but have a different smell. Field voles make up about 90 per cent of a pine marten's diet, but martens also eat berries, nuts and fungi as well as insects, birds' eggs and small mammals. "Pine marten scats give off a distinctive fruity smell, a bit like Parma violets," Croose says. She explains that the VWT has found other pine marten scats in the last 15 years, but as DNA had been washed out by the rain, they couldn't prove what they had. "Pine martens can't digest berries," Croose adds. "They must like the taste."

**UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

Pine martens are skilful, opportunistic predators and will take game birds, or chickens if the birds are not kept securely. Croose says research shows that pine martens are no bigger threat to game and poultry than other predators. Unfortunately, a pine martens' size can make it seem more of a threat than it actually is.

"A lot of landowners and managers still have 19th-century attitudes towards predators," Birks says. You hear it in the news from time to time: cull buzzards, they take osprey chicks; red kites dive bomb school children, time to reduce numbers; eagles take lambs. Any excuse to do away with predators. Last year, gaming interests in Scotland called for a pine marten cull, claiming, without hard evidence, that pine marten predation put the capercaillie at risk. The same lobby tried something similar in 2008. The long-held delusion that the British



*Top: foraging for food supplies in winter  
Above: juveniles, known as kits, leave the den at three to four months*

countryside is the personal playground of the privileged classes, persists, it seems. "Conservationists need to tackle the issue inside people's heads," Johnny Birks adds. "Their recovery is a cultural problem not just a biological one."

The VWT runs a hotline to record pine marten sightings and continues its fieldwork. In 2000, Dr Paul Bright from Royal Holloway, University of London, suggested that pine martens should be reintroduced into parts of Devon, Sussex, Somerset, Dorset and Cumbria, and last year, a report from the National University of Ireland, Galway, concluded that pine marten predation of grey squirrels helps restore red squirrel numbers. Greys come into contact with pine martens while foraging on the floor for acorns and beech nuts. Reds tend to stay in trees eating pine cone seeds. When pine martens arrive, greys retreat and reds thrive.

In Ireland, as in Scotland, pine martens have slowly reclaimed some of their former territories and Birks believes more woodland is the key to any sustained pine marten recovery in England and Wales. **W**

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