



The Pine Marten in Ireland

A guide for householders

Adapted from A guide to the pine marten in Scotland by Scottish Natural Heritage & the VWT

Introduction

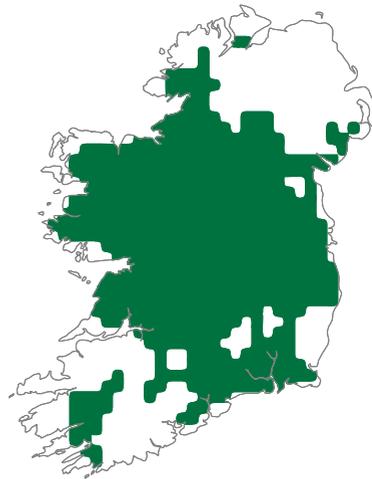
The pine marten is native to Ireland and is one of our rarest mammals. Once common throughout the country, by the 20th century this species had become extinct from the majority of the island, surviving only in a few isolated and fragmented populations, mainly in the west. This decline was the result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

Distribution and population

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

Following the introduction of legal protection in 1976, numbers built up slowly in its refuges in the west and south. From there, facilitated to some extent by the expansion of forestry, it has spread into the midlands and the north-west. In recent years small numbers have reached the east coast. Although the marten population is recovering, its slow reproduction rate and large territory size means it never reaches high densities.

The marten, as its Irish name (*cat crainn*) suggests, spends most of its time in trees. It is found mainly in deciduous and coniferous woodland, but has also adapted to scrubland.



Current distribution of the pine marten in Ireland

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. Martens weigh between 1.0kg-2.2kg and the head and body measure about 60cm, with females lighter and smaller than the males.

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.

More pine marten facts

- Pine martens are solitary animals.
- Adults of both sexes exclude other martens of the same sex from their territory - thus in any one patch of ground, only one adult of each sex will be present.
- Breeding occurs once a year, with two or three kits born in spring.
- Pregnant martens need to find a warm secure place in which to give birth, because the kits are born blind and 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.
- Martens are slow reproducers, males mating in their third year, females in their second.
- Diet is varied and includes berries, fruits, insects, frogs, birds, small mammals and carrion.
- Although largely nocturnal, martens can be active during the day, especially in summer.

Legal protection of martens

The pine marten is protected in Ireland by both national and international legislation. Under the Irish Wildlife Acts 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: wildlifelicence@ahg.gov.ie.

The European Union's Habitats & Species Directive further obliges Ireland to maintain the favourable conservation status of the pine marten throughout its range.

Pine martens 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 martens, called kits, may be present from March to July, 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 marten and her young in a building can also give rise to problems of smell and hygiene and possibly also structural damage, e.g. when a marten enlarges an existing small gap to gain access to the building. Adult 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 July. Such action could constitute an offence. If in doubt contact your local NPWS ranger.



Pine marten on a squirrel feeder © Vernon Mackie

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.



Pine marten kit in roof space © Hugh Brown

Steps you can take to prevent pine martens moving in:

- Unless your home is 'marten proof', do not deliberately attract a pine marten into your garden by leaving out food for it. 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 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 - martens can squeeze through gaps of 45mm in diameter and will chew small openings to create an access point. Replace damaged slates.
- Always follow up unusual or one-off sounds you hear from your attic, particularly during the months of November to February. Martens search for possible denning sites during these months, although they may not take up residence until late spring. However, be aware that martens are not normally overly frightened of humans and are extremely curious; they will not always flee if you approach them in an attic for example. This makes 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 martens are often attracted into roof spaces in pursuit of these rodents.

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

Firstly, always contact the National Parks and Wildlife Service for contact details of your local conservation ranger (see back of leaflet). The ranger will be able to 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.

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 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 marten will regulate its movements accordingly.
2. It is advisable to stop putting out bird food that is suitable for martens (e.g. nuts, fruit) until the marten has been excluded for a week or two.
3. Placing a radio in the attic may deter pine martens from settling in.
4. Block all the potential access holes (45mm diameter or greater) with newspaper to establish which holes are being used by the 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 marten.
5. 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.
6. Decide which hole is to be left for the 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 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 marten is restricted to this one entrance to the house, it is a case of watching the animal's movements.

7. 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 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 marten in the loft as it can hear the marten move about. It is best if the 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.



A potential access hole for a marten
© Hugh Brown

8. When the 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 marten will be coming out as it gets dark outside.
9. 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 marten is out (it is a waste of time trying this during the day as martens may not be active). If a 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

If you would like to continue to have 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.mammals-in-ireland.ie/resources, click on "pine marten" and see "Constructing, erecting and monitoring den boxes".

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

The Vincent Wildlife Trust is a mammal conservation charity that has spent more than 35 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. The Trust is interested in recording reports of pine martens in buildings and cases where martens are being attracted to gardens. For more information on pine martens please contact us using the details below.

Contact: The Vincent Wildlife Trust, Donaghpatrick, Headford, County Galway
Tel: 093 35304, **Email:** katemcaney@vwt.org.uk, www.mammals-in-ireland.ie

The National Parks and Wildlife Service

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), part of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, provides the legislative and policy framework for the conservation of nature and biodiversity in the Republic of Ireland. It also oversees its implementation, based on good science, with particular emphasis on the protection of habitats and species.

Contact: National Parks & Wildlife Service, 7 Ely Place, Dublin 2
Tel: 01 8883242, **Email:** natureconservation@ahg.gov.ie, www.npws.ie

How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens

The VWT and the NPWS jointly produced a leaflet 'How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens'. The leaflet provides practical steps that can be taken to protect game and domestic fowl from pine martens. Copies are available from both the VWT and the NPWS at the above addresses or as a downloadable file from the website: www.mammals-in-ireland.ie

Notice Nature (www.noticenature.ie) is Ireland's public awareness campaign on biodiversity and aims to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity and to encourage everyone to play their part in its protection. This will help halt the damage being done to our plants and animals and the landscape, waters and habitats in which they live.



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Front cover photo: Pine marten © Maurice Flynn.

Exclusion advice is based on the experience gained by SNH in Scotland.