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Pine Marten (*Martes martes*)

The pine marten is one of Ireland's most exquisite native mammals. Once distributed throughout Ireland, now they exist only in a number of localised patches, mainly in the south and west of the country.

Names

The Irish name for pine marten is *Cat crainn* meaning *tree cat*. There are many Irish place names referring to the pine marten, particularly in the west e.g. Carrickacat (Co. Mayo) (*the rock of the cat*) and Knockaunacat (Co. Galway) (*hill of the cat*). In Limerick, they are known as 'marten cat'. However, the pine marten is a part of the Mustelidae family, unrelated to cats, a relative of the Stoat, Otter, Mink and Badger. 'Marten' is an old Germanic name for a Weasel. The name 'Pine Marten' is misleading, as pine martens don't use pine trees exclusively, instead they prefer to live in mixed woodland.

Appearance

Pine Martens are roughly the same size as a cat but have stumpy front legs and have a

long bushier tail. The coat is a rich brown, but can vary to almost black during the summer. The distinctive feature is the creamy-white patch, extending from the throat to their front legs. The ears are large and rounded and are pale fawn on the inside. Average measurement (nose to tip of tail) 69cm (male) and 63cm (female).

History of Distribution

The Pine Marten is widespread in continental Europe. It is believed that pine marten came to Ireland

8000-9000 years ago after the last ice age. However, the oldest dated specimen found was from 2780 years ago. The pine martens were found throughout Ireland but the population has suffered major decline in the past few centuries. Reasons for the dramatic decline include habitat loss due to deforestation throughout the country. Presently, Ireland is covered by 9% woodland, the lowest in Europe. In the 19th century, pine martens were killed for their pelts (coats). They produce small litters and do not reach reproductively maturity until 3 years. The use of





Recorded Distribution

strychnine poisoned carrion (dead animals) which was used to kill foxes also led to further mortality of the pine marten. In recent decades road casualties take a toll on pine martens and other wildlife.

50-80 ha and female territories vary from 14-25 ha. Pine martens have a number of dens in their territory. Nest sites are varied, hollow trees, abandoned crow

nests, squirrel dreys and among rocks or boulders. They have been known to reside in roofs of occupied buildings. During winter they do not hibernate but become less active to conserve energy reserves. Pine martens are not particularly vocal but they have been heard to meow, purr and squeal.

Diet

The Pine marten is a nocturnal, solitary species, hunting through the night and especially at dusk. It is primarily a carnivore however they are opportunistic feeders and eat a wide range of food. Even though they are excellent climbers they mainly feed on the ground. Their diet includes

- 1) *Vertebrates : rats, mice, rabbits, roosting birds, frogs and the pine marten is one of the few predators agile enough to catch squirrels.*
- 2) *A wide range of invertebrates : earthworms, beetles, etc.*
- 3) *In autumn a wide variety of berries : sloes, blackberries, etc.*
- 4) *On the coast : crabs and fish.*

Habitat & Behaviour

The pine marten is an opportunistic species well adapted to an arboreal (tree living) lifestyle. They normally inhabit coniferous, mixed woods or scrub but can be found on open rocky ground, such as the Burren, in Co. Clare, pastures and also coastal areas. Both males and females have territories, and defend them independently. Territory boundaries are marked by faeces (scats) and urine. In Dromore Woodland (Co. Sligo), male territories may vary from



Typical habitat mixed woodland



Reproduction

Mating occurs in August to September, when normally solitary pairs come together. Courtship is usually quite aggressive. After fertilisation occurs implantation of the embryonic cells is delayed until the appropriate time. This process allows the young to be born when food is plentiful and the weather is less severe. The litters are born in late March or April. The average litter size is about three kittens. At birth, the young are blind and covered in a coat of greyish hair that changes to brown as they mature. They stay with their mothers for about six weeks. There is only one litter per year. Reproductive maturity is at around 3 years. They may live to 10 years old in captivity, but in the wild most probably die before they are 5-6 years old.

How to find Pine Martens

The pine marten is a nocturnal, shy animal and therefore rarely seen. Their presence is usually discovered by their droppings (known as scats). They like to use woodland tracks and roads, and will leave their scats along these tracks to indicate their territory boundaries. They will also leave their scats on prominent natural structures, trees, mounds and rocks. Tracks are hard to find because they tend to avoid muddy patches. The best time to find tracks is during snowy spells.



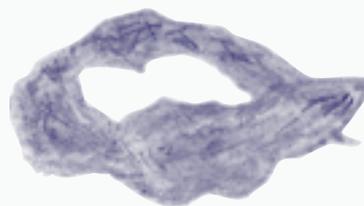
Footprint of Pine marten
semi-inverted claws

If you are fortunate enough to see pine martens regularly in your garden, you may choose to feed them. A mixture of seeds, raisins and raspberry jam is their favourite. If you leave large food items they can simply run away with the food, however, with seeds they will stay and munch allowing you to view them as they eat.

Threats and Conservation

The fox is a predator of the pine martens but the biggest threat is humankind. With more urbanisation and increasing density of roads, habitat fragmentation is the biggest threat to the pine marten. However, it is hoped that we will have 16% of the land of Ireland under woodland by 2035. This increased forestry is likely to help the pine martens naturally recolonise their former haunts. Re-introduction programs, such as the Killarney national park initiative, restored a pine marten population that had become locally extinct by 1980.

The pine marten is listed in Annexes II and IV of the habitat directive as a species of European interest. They are also listed in Appendix III of the Bern Convention as a species requiring protection. In Ireland the species is protected under the Wildlife Act 1976 meaning it is a criminal offence to kill, trap or disturb them intentionally.



Characteristic shape of a Pine
marten scat

What can you do?

There are numerous ways you can help the pine marten to survive as a species.

- 1) *Firstly, you can find out as much as possible about them and share your enthusiasm with other people. Increased public awareness and concern will protect this species future.*
- 2) *If you discover pine martens living in your own area, let your local wildlife ranger know of their presence. It is always useful for them to have records of where they are ranging. If you are even luckier to have pine martens nesting in your attic but want them out, contact the local wildlife ranger and they will remove them for you.*
- 3) *You can help by supporting the many organizations that work to protect and restore woodlands including the Tree Council of Ireland, Coillte, The Forest Service, Trees for Ireland and Crann together with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the Irish Wildlife Trust.*

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