

## Mustelid Magic

### Pine Marten *Martes martes*



The conservation movement and legislation have both played their part in the recovery of a species brought to the verge of extinction. As one of Britain's six indigenous Mustelids the pine marten now enjoys general widespread public support and has increased its range from the stronghold in the Western Highlands deep into Aberdeenshire and is heading south and east across the Scottish mainland. Islands were not originally colonised. Whilst swimming well in fresh water there seems to have been a reluctance to cross even narrow sea passages and Skye only saw the arrival of martens following the opening of the Skye Bridge in 1995, since when they have spread to reach around half of the island. Mull now has a population, which is probably due to an opportunistic human introduction in recent years.

A small to medium agile climber with a dark brown coat and distinctive throat and chest patch, which varies from pale cream in winter to a rich yellow or orange after spring moult, pine martens have large ears and longer legs, which distinguish it from the even rarer and smaller polecat. Mean length about 75cm for males (including tail), weight nearly 2kg; females' 10% smaller in body length and 30% lighter in weight than males. Pine martens are opportunistic and adaptable omnivores. Their diet includes, a wide variety of food types including; birds, invertebrates including wild bee nests, carrion, small mammals and seasonal fruits. Wild food is augmented in some places by food intended for birds in private gardens, and by people feeding them deliberately.

Footprints in soft mud  
with 20p coin for scale.



The phenomenon of delayed implantation enables pine martens to mate from June to August and yet produce their young from mid-March to mid/late April in the following year. The young (average three kits) leave the natal den between mid-June to mid-July and disperse from mid-August to the end October.

Droppings are variable depending on diet, and difficult to distinguish from those of fox (see image) or cat (Davison *et al.*, 2002) unless fresh enough to retain their characteristic musky smell. They are roughly 4-12cm long and up to 1.9cm in diameter. They can be black, twisted and dry when containing fur or feathers; pale and loose when carrion is taken; yellow after raiding bumblebee nests for larvae and pollen; or purple after eating blaeberreries. Rowan berries pass through semi-digested.

Typical fox scat above  
pine marten below.



Deforestation, and the replacement of native hardwoods by regimented conifers, has deprived martens of secure natal den sites (tree-holes), as well as reducing the availability of prey. They are forced to use less than ideal ground-level sites - typically root plates of windblown trees, piles of brash or logs, rock crevices or burrows. In turn this has made them vulnerable to predation by foxes. Both inhabited and disused buildings are also now used, which can occasionally be problematic for people (Brown & Birks, 2006). Old large bird nests, and owl or duck nest boxes are occasionally used and offer more security.

To offset the loss of tree-holes, the Vincent Wildlife Trust has designed marten breeding boxes (Birks JDS *et al.*, 2006). From 2003 these have been increasingly successful in two Forestry Commission Scotland conifer woodlands (see image). In 2007 the first site produced 85% occupancy and 20% breeding; with 100% occupancy and 40% breeding at the second site. These boxes (design available) can also be used as mitigation when the martens' use of houses as natal den sites creates problems.

Female with kits  
in a dedicated box

