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Welcome to the latest Pine Marten Recovery Project Newsletter. Here you can read the latest news on the pine martens relocated to Wales in the autumn of 2015 and find out more about our on-going pine marten work both in the UK and in Ireland.

The story so far

DR JENNY MACPHERSON, PINE MARTEN PROJECT MANAGER

Twenty adult pine martens (ten males and ten females) were successfully translocated from northern Scotland to mid Wales in autumn last year. We have been monitoring them with radio-tracking and camera traps since their release. Not all have survived, as expected, but the radio collars have mortality sensors so that, if an animal dies, the collar transmits a different signal and we are able to locate and retrieve it and carry out a post mortem examination. The results of the post mortems show that, so far, all mortality has been from natural causes, mainly predation.

Trapping in Scotland was carried out immediately after the marten mating season to maximise the chances of translocating females that had already been mated. Pine martens, in common with some of the other mustelids, have delayed implantation so, although mating takes place in July-August, the females do not become pregnant until early the following year. By early April some of the radio tracked females began staying very close to their chosen den site, which suggested that they might have had kits, but we had to wait until the middle of May to find out for certain. By this time the kits are quite well developed and the females start to leave the den for longer periods of time so we were able, under licence, to check the dens. Happily, this confirmed that at least three of our females successfully bred this year and, so far, we have counted five healthy looking, Welsh-born pine marten kits.

Photographs (top to bottom): Pine marten © A. Achterberg. Two of this year's kits in one of the WWT den boxes.



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2nd All-Ireland
Pine Marten Symposium
14th-15th October 2016

2nd All-Ireland Pine Marten
Symposium 14-15 October

See [page 10](#) for details



We have just begun to re-trap the first year's released martens in Wales, so that we can check them over and remove radio collars while there is still plenty of life in the batteries. Trap sites are targeted in the vicinity of known den sites for each individual and this has resulted in good trapping success. The martens that have been re-captured so far have all been in good condition and weighing around, or in excess of, what they weighed in early Autumn last year. This is a very good sign that they are finding enough food in their newly established territories in Wales.

Plans for summer/autumn

Following on from our spring surveys in Scotland, we have confirmed that the proposed source sites for this year have high indices of marten activity. We will be returning to them in mid-August to begin pre-baiting at trap sites ahead of trapping in the autumn. Once again we aim to trap and translocate another twenty adult (breeding age) martens to mid Wales to further consolidate the population which is establishing there. In 2015, we fitted small GPS loggers to some of the marten radio collars and we will be doing this again. Pine martens are a tricky animal when it comes to using GPS tracking: because martens are relatively small, the GPS and its battery must also be small and light. Also, in contrast to many of the species that are tracked with GPS collars, martens spend most of their time under dense forest cover or in rocky crags, where communication between satellites and the GPS is difficult. However, the technology in this area of wildlife tracking is moving forward all the time and so we are also trying out a new type of GPS tracker on a subsample of the martens released this year.

In the autumn edition of this newsletter we will be able to tell you how well the new trackers are working.

Photographs (top to bottom): Pine marten with radio-collar © Nick Upton. Jenny trying out the remote download from GPS logger on a pine marten in the field.



'Wild in Wales'

What does it mean to you to have pine martens in Wales? In a new video produced by the VWT, we ask this question to a number of people who live or work in Wales. You can watch and listen to their answers [here](#). This is what a few of those interviewed had to say:



"To think that they have come back to mid Wales, not far from my home, I tell you it is like welcoming back an old friend really. I dream of the day when I can walk along here and actually see a pine marten so I am so happy about this."

Iolo Williams, Naturalist & Broadcaster

"One of the things that has really impressed me about the pine marten reinforcement programme in mid Wales is The Vincent Wildlife Trust's considerable attention to detail."

Arwel Jones, Independent Consultant on Rural Development



Update from Pine Marten Field Staff

DAVID BAVIN, PINE MARTEN PROJECT OFFICER

JOSIE BRIDGES, PINE MARTEN PROJECT FIELD ASSISTANT

Spring saw some unexpected shifts in home ranges for most of our martens, which challenged us in keeping contact with them. Expansions (and sometimes retractions) of home ranges is a known practice for pine martens in the spring, but the wholesale upheaval of entire territories, which occurred for a number of our animals, is unreported by existing studies; we were caught by surprise. Fortunately, we rounded them all up again, and they appear to have settled back into place, with some slight (and the odd dramatic) shifts. PM03 is an exception; he has been one of our steady animals, reliably found roaming the same patch of forest for seven months since his release in September. He also used a number of our den boxes, which endeared him to the team (who spent so much time lugging the boxes up hills into the woods...). It appears he has now been usurped of his kingdom by PM10 (male), who has been largely nomadic since his release in October. He recently turned up in the heart of 03's territory, and has since stayed there, apparently displacing 03. PM03 has been relegated to a much less attractive area of forest a few kilometres away. This is just one example of the complex interactions that must go on with regularity in our newly established population, as animals vie for dominance, the most productive territories and potential mates. Although we are out tracking every night, and accrue data from our remote cameras, we are merely squinting through a peephole into their world - there is a lot to learn!

We were overjoyed to learn of our first Welsh born kits in April. We knew there was a possibility of them; the female martens were mated in the summer before we bought them down, and they experience delayed implantation, whereby the fertilised egg is held in stasis until the spring. So there was always the potential that some of the females we translocated would be carrying fertilised eggs. The greatest relief for us is that at least three of them proceeded on to the full pregnancy; they would not have



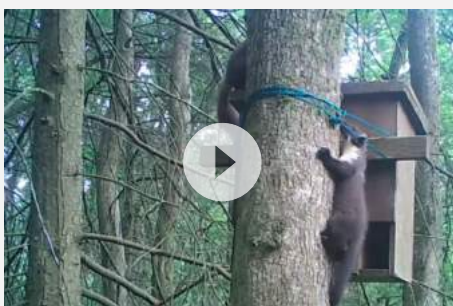
Photographs (top to bottom): David checking camera trap footage © Nick Upton. David and Josie radio-tracking pine martens © Nick Upton. Pine marten with radio-collar © Nick Upton.

done this had the environmental conditions not been suitable, or had they been under stress. So their kits are not only incredibly significant as the first generation of our truly Welsh pine martens, but they are also a stamp of approval from our martens that the Welsh environment is able to support them. The kits are currently approximately eight weeks old, and are just beginning to cause their mothers problems by crawling around and making nuisances of themselves. We have some footage on the website of a particularly chubby kit that repeatedly falls out of its tree den, to be rescued each time by the harassed mother. Amazingly, the third time it falls, it climbs back up (albeit clumsily) of its own accord – you have to learn quickly if you live in the trees!

We will soon lose regular contact with the 'phase one' martens, as we will be removing their radio collars and preparing for 'phase two' (the second batch of 20 martens) this autumn. We have mixed feelings about this; sadness that we will no longer be able to keep a watchful eye on our charges, and relief that we have a temporary rest from the daily chase! We recently removed the collars from our first three martens and our nagging worries for the animals' welfare melted away; they were all in superb condition. It was a powerful moment when the un-collared animals were released and then sprung off into the undergrowth.



Photographs: A still from camera trap footage of a mother climbing down a tree with a grey squirrel in her mouth. A still from camera trap footage of a mother and her kit.



Kit footage

Some remote cameras set up by our Pine Marten Project Field Assistant, Josie Bridges, have captured some amazing pine marten footage. We have had several cameras trained on a den box in which PM02 had chosen to give birth.

Watch the video [here](#).



© Anne-Marie Kalus

Project funding news

NATALIE BUTTRISS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Raising £800,000 over a six-year period was always going to be a challenge for the project. Nevertheless, we have had a great start to the fundraising year with the confirmation from People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) of £90,000 over three years. This is supporting the costs of the team required to translocate and monitor the martens in 2016 through to 2018. The total contribution from PTES now stands at £117,600 when added to their grant from last year for the development of conflict avoidance and resolution activity. We are so grateful for their confidence in the project at this early stage which takes our confirmed level of income to just over £275,000. If current discussions and pledges become confirmed, our progress towards our overall £800k target is close to 50%. A large proportion of this to date has been through long-term commitments from Chester Zoo and The Woodland Trust, but we have also had a number of important donations from others and we appreciate contributions whatever their size. Recent donations have been received from The Biodiversity Consultancy (£15k), Cuthbert Horn Charitable Trust (£4k) and Swift Ecology (£600), the latter also providing an additional contribution of support in-kind through the advice and volunteer involvement of their Principal Ecologist, Dr Johnny Birks. We still have a long way to go and many ‘irons are in the fire’ as we approach the crucial phase of ‘next generation’ monitoring and support of the pine marten kits born over the next two years.



Donate to the project

A regular donation to the project is an option available to everyone – please visit our project website. The [Donate](#) button on the website will take you through to the ‘regular donation’ bar where you can opt to give whatever amount you choose on a monthly basis. In time, we hope to give regular donors an exclusive viewing opportunity of the martens in years to come, subject to the population expanding sustainably and a suitable viewing hide being set up.



Visit www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk



Returning to the Highlands

LIZZIE CROOSE, MUSTELID CONSERVATION OFFICER

Now that the first batch of martens have settled in Wales and winter has flown by, it's time to start moving onto the next phase of the project which involves translocating another 20 pine martens from Scotland to Wales this autumn. A crucial part of this is to identify those forests in Scotland from which we will capture and remove pine martens, under licence from Scottish Natural Heritage.

We headed back to the Highlands in early March and were greeted with some glorious spring weather, stunning snow-topped mountains and, mercifully, no midges!

We surveyed several targeted Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) sites and we are grateful to FCS for their ongoing support. We collected pine marten scats to give us an index of pine marten activity at these sites. Subsequent genetic analysis can identify the individual genotype (fingerprint) of each scat and therefore tell us the minimum number of pine martens in each forest. We carried out the survey work in March as this is the time of year when the pine marten population is at its annual low prior to breeding taking place during late March and April. Previous work has shown that the densities of pine marten scats on forest tracks can have seasonable variations of 100-fold, with the fewest marten scats found during the winter. Therefore, surveying at this time of year means we can make conservative estimates of the activity and number of pine martens at these sites.

We found good numbers of scats in all of the forests we surveyed and we selected sites where we will trap pine martens later in the year. Most marten scats were filled with small mammal (mostly vole) fur and bones, and also bird quills and berries. Bizarrely, we found one scat that was full of chewing gum, proving that pine martens are ever the opportunist!

Interestingly, the owner of the house we stayed in reported that pine martens had taken up residence in his house a couple of years ago and he saw them not infrequently in the garden, where they had taken advantage of exploring his wheelie bins! We optimistically put a camera trap up in the garden, baited with some leftovers from dinner, and were very pleased to record a pine marten on the camera.

We also re-surveyed the sites from which we took pine martens last autumn for translocation to Wales. We wanted to survey these sites to assess what impact, if any, removing the small numbers of pine martens last autumn might have had on the population. It was really interesting to return to these sites and reminisce about our trapping experience, remembering which pine martens came from where. We found good numbers of scats at each of the sites and it was reassuring to see that martens remain widely distributed in these forests. Future genetic analysis will be able to provide detailed information on the numbers of pine martens in each of these forests before and after the removal of animals for translocation. After a successful couple of weeks, we headed back south with a cool-box overflowing with scats.

The next time we return to the Highlands will be later in the year when we'll be capturing pine martens for the next translocation. I'm looking forward to it already!



Photographs (top to bottom): A scenic scat transect Collecting a marten scat. Pine marten tracks in the snow. Pine marten recorded on camera trap in the garden.



Impact of pine marten presence on grey squirrel populations

CATHERINE MCNICOL, PHD STUDENT

I have almost completed one year of my PhD and I am very pleased with what the VWT pine marten team and I have achieved so far. My PhD focusses on the impact of pine marten presence on grey squirrel populations. This work expands on a study in Ireland, which suggested the presence of pine martens was causing a reduction and range shift in grey squirrels. This in turn is hoped to benefit the native red squirrel.

The first field season was a steep learning curve; however, I was able to identify grey squirrel populations within and around pine marten reinforcement sites. A number of squirrels at each of these locations were collared to enable fine-scale tracking of individuals throughout the marten reinforcement. The movement of individuals in relation to pine marten distribution will be modelled in the coming months before the second field season begins and the study will be repeated.

The VWT team and I have also been collecting pine marten scats which we hope will help us determine the contribution of grey squirrels to the pine marten diet. We were able to identify some level of grey squirrel predation by pine martens but it is not yet known how significant this is. I am sure that the coming year will bring interesting results and I look forward to sharing them with you.

Photographs (top to bottom): Grey squirrel © James Warwick. Catherine checking a trap with a grey squirrel © Nick Upton. Grey squirrel running from trap © Nick Upton. Catherine with a grey squirrel in a trap © Nick Upton.





“Being able to uncover the activities of such a rare and secretive animal is certainly a privilege”

NAOMI DAVIES, PROJECT VOLUNTEER

I imagine sitting in a truck listening to white noise over the radio in the middle of the night whilst trying to locate 20 cat-sized carnivores in the wilds of rural Wales isn't most people's idea of fun, but I would disagree. I've been a volunteer with The Vincent Wildlife Trust since 2013, and since graduating from university have been fortunate enough to be part of the translocation of pine martens to mid-Wales. Our job sounds simple: monitoring the martens using various methods such as scat surveying and radio tracking, but since when was working with wild animals ever easy?

Tracking allows us unprecedented insight into the pine martens' ranging behaviour and use of the landscape as they forage for food and set up dens in dead trees, squirrel dreys, and man-made boxes (installed by VWT over the past few years). Once a den site is located, which may require a 150ft scramble up a brash and bramble-filled hillside, we set camera traps and leave a little snack of eggs and blueberries with the hope of snatching some footage of these arboreal acrobats. The staff and volunteers of VWT encounter a wide range of physical challenges covering the same terrain as these long-ranging creatures, although I draw the line at tree climbing without a ladder!

Pine martens can travel upwards of 10km in a single night, so catching up with them the following day can take some time. But the knowledge and experience of the project leaders, Josie and Dave, often means we're never searching for very long before a “blip” is heard on the tracker speaker and feelings of tangible excitement exchanged as we pull over in the nearest layby to take a compass bearing.

Exploring large expanses of forestry, farmland, and ffridd affords us the freedom to appreciate the landscape, and see a lot of wildlife along the way. Mammals such as fox and hare are spotted often, plus numerous birds of prey species (osprey and barn owl are my favourites so far). But nothing really quite compares to the excitement of even a couple of seconds of marten footage from a camera trap. The unique fur markings on the creamy chest bib, in addition to tracking data, means we can identify individuals and map their home ranges. Even though it's still early days, each marten has already shown signs of their distinctive personality, as a behaviourist I'm fascinated by the potential information we can gain by studying this reinforced population.

Being able to uncover the activities of such a rare and secretive animal is certainly a privilege and definitely worth all the long hours, late nights, and poor weather conditions. It's a real pleasure to be a part of this project alongside some of the most passionate people I have ever met who, like me, are determined to see pine martens flourish in Wales once again.



Photographs (top to bottom): Part of the release area in mid Wales. Naomi radio-tracking pine martens. A pine marten den site in a tree.



Update on our pine marten work in Ireland

DR KATE MCANEY, MAMMAL DEVELOPMENT MANAGER (IRELAND)

Practical steps to protect game and domestic fowl

Although it will be some time before we know the results of the Pine Marten Population Assessment that is currently underway, which is detailed elsewhere in this newsletter, we can safely say that in some parts of Ireland the pine marten population has recovered from a decline during the 20th century. While this is being welcomed by many people who relish a glimpse of this elusive and handsome mammal, the reappearance of a small predator that has been absent for over fifty years is giving rise to concern in some quarters, particularly within small gun clubs who rear pheasants in pens to release for game shooting each autumn. This concern prompted the Trust, in partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to produce a leaflet describing practical steps to protect game and domestic fowl from pine martens and this was launched at Ireland's premier agricultural show in September 2013.

In follow up discussions with members of gun clubs, however, we learned that some of the measures were not feasible for many of these clubs, which have very limited access to funds for predator control measures. So, in February this year we entered into a field experiment with one club in the midlands to create what we hope will be the ultimate predator proof release pheasant pen. Finding a suitable long-term location for a release pen is not always easy, so when a landowner gives a club permission to construct one, it is essentially a permanent structure and one that will be used year after year, so construction features are important.

Many hours and much wire went into the construction of 'our' pen, with security of the birds that will take up residence in June obviously the primary aim, but also important are ease of maintenance and value for money. Our midlands pen has the features of a traditional pen, some of which you can see from the photos: overhead netting – now necessary to deter buzzards; galvanised sheeting – to visually screen the young birds from potential predators, and three to four lines of electric current-carrying wire close to the ground and overhead. But, we are testing a feature new to the world of Irish game keeping as we have set up an outer line of defence in the form of an electric fencing or netting system.



[Download 'How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens'](#)



Photographs (top to bottom): Dr Ferdia Marnell (NPWS), Minister Deenihan and Dr Kate McAney (VWT) launching the leaflet in 2013. Old style electrical wiring. Corner for upper wires.



Photographs (top to bottom): Pathway and outer electrical netting system. Netting for buzzards.

The use of electric netting is a standard and successful practice in poultry keeping, so it will be interesting to see how this works within the game fowl setting. We certainly hope that it lives up to the promise on the suppliers website that states 'electric netting is simply the best way we have found for protecting your poultry from the desires of the fox, badger, mink etc.' We will be monitoring closely the behaviour of any predator in the vicinity of the pen over the summer and, if the electric netting proves effective, then some of the more time consuming aspects of pen construction and maintenance could be scaled down.

2nd All-Ireland Pine Marten Symposium

The 2nd All-Ireland Pine Marten Symposium will take place at the Ti Chulainn Community and Conference Centre in the Ring of Gullion, Armagh, on the 14th and 15th of October. The first day of the event will feature oral presentations covering a range of research, conservation and management topics, including distribution, ecology and interactions with other species. Delegates will then take to the woods on the second day to see a practical demonstration on erecting artificial den boxes and to view an ongoing den box scheme.



Visit www.ringofgullion.org for more details and to book your place.

Abstracts should be submitted to Dr David Tosh at dave.tosh@gmail.com by June 30th. They should not exceed 150 words in length and must include a title and corresponding author details. The symposium is a joint undertaking by Dr David Tosh, The Ring of Gullion Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Newry and Mourne District Council) and The Vincent Wildlife Trust.



The pine marten in Ireland – measuring its recovery

RUTH HANNIFFY, IRELAND PROJECTS SUPPORT OFFICER

As my three months surveying the pine marten in Ireland draws to a close, I am already wondering how I will fill the void left by what has been an intense but hugely fulfilling programme of fieldwork.

The Pine Marten Population Assessment (PMPA) has been funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and is being managed by Peter Turner and Catherine O'Reilly from the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), and Declan O'Mahony from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. The programme of fieldwork - covering 17 10km squares throughout the country - is now entering its final weeks. Upon completion, the survey will have sampled approximately 1.7% or 11,000ha of forest habitat to determine pine marten density and abundance in the Republic of Ireland.

The species, which has full legal protection, appears to have been slowly recovering both in its range and abundance following its near extinction. Historical declines due to deforestation have been reversing, primarily as a result of increased habitat availability and connectivity, predominately of conifer woodlands, as well as the legal protection afforded the species in 1976. The current estimate – a breeding population of 2,740 individuals - is based on a study undertaken in 2005-2007, thus a revision is timely. Updated estimates are also required for Article 17 reporting under the Habitats Directive on the status of a protected species. The current indication is that density can vary from 0.46 to 4.42 martens per km² of forest habitat. Anecdotal evidence and sightings indicate that numbers are indeed increasing, particularly in localised areas, and a more accurate estimate of density is needed.

The VWT are surveying three of the 17 10km squares, and are delighted to be involved. The methodology is simple yet effective and has been successful in 15 sites in Ireland. This non-invasive genetic survey uses plastic hair tubes temporarily attached to trees to passively collect hair samples. The tubes are secured 1.5 metres up a tree trunk, ensuring that the pine marten is the only carnivore with the climbing skills adept to leave a sample. Lids prevent the marten from simply taking the prey from the top of the tube, and the effort of removing the bait from its securely wired position brings the marten into contact with the sticky patches, thus obtaining a hair sample. Hair tubes are re-baited over a four-week period at each site to maximise the capture re-capture rate of individuals.

I have been surveying sites in Galway, Mayo and Clare ranging from mature broadleaf woodland, coniferous plantation and conifer and scrub overlaying karst limestone. The survey sites bordered Lough Mask in County Mayo during its highest levels in decades, and encompassed Dromore Nature Reserve in County Clare while floodwaters were finally receding.



Photographs (top to bottom): Pine marten © Terry Whittaker. Native Woodland Trust staff in Arden Wood. A hair tube secured to a tree.



Photographs (top to bottom): A hair tube at a survey site at Cong. A successful hair sample. One of our volunteers checking tubes for hair samples.

Lastly I padded my way through coniferous forests seemingly floating on squelching bogs in East Galway. Each site brought new surprises like coming face to face with impressive fallow deer disgruntled at my presence in their lunar-like clear-fell landscape; or the myth-like feral goats with 3ft horns bounding effortlessly through wooded scrub in Cong; the fairy-like red squirrels in the treetops around Dromore left me in awe. Unfortunately my camera was no match for the speed of a disturbed wild animal but the memory of the encounter will suffice! On one occasion a pine marten ran down a nearby tree while we were setting up the hair tube. By week three it finally decided to grace us with its presence and a hair sample, perhaps amphibians were its cuisine of choice during those weeks!

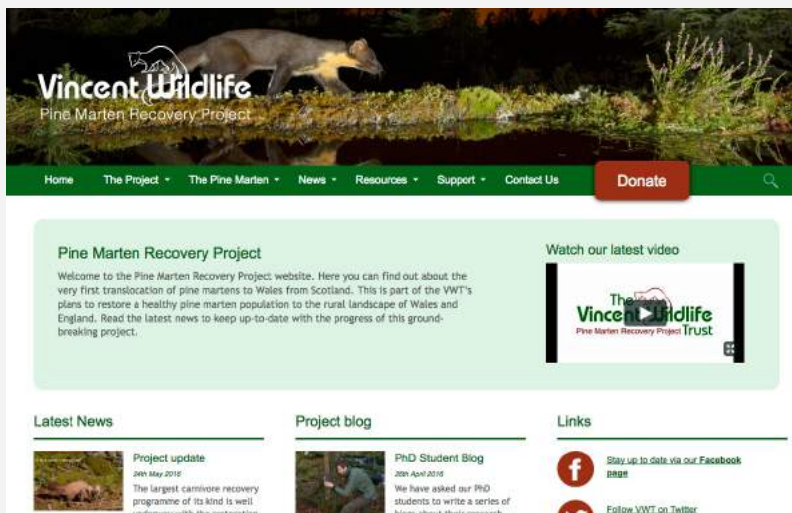
With the help of a few hardy volunteers I began the 1st square in early February in Cong, County Mayo. Despite an idyllic location on the shores of Lough Mask in the shadow of the snow-capped Connemara mountains, we surveyed in extremely wet and cold conditions, winter well and truly had us in its grip. Despite the assumption that most mammals are less active during colder weather, we had a high uptake with one third of the hair tubes visited by martens during the first sample week culminating with almost two thirds of the tubes visited by the final week. Perhaps a lower availability of prey meant the tubes were the equivalent of an easy fast-food take away.

As the weeks progressed spring revealed itself in time for the 2nd square, including Dromore Nature Reserve and the surrounding woodlands - 1000 acres of broadleaf woodland, rivers, lakes, callows and limestone pavement. Despite the expectation that uptake would be high, this site had a slow start with less than half the tubes visited by the final week. Visual sightings, trail camera footage, as well as anecdotal evidence meant this was a surprising outcome, particularly to the local NPWS Rangers, whose help during this survey was invaluable. Perhaps we were dealing with a low density of individuals, or the martens reacted differently when ample prey in the form of small mammals was available. Maybe we were dealing with more evasive tube-shy individuals. Whatever the reason the results of the DNA analysis will improve our understanding of how the area is used by martens.

My final site in East Galway is proving no less interesting with a high uptake at the study sites. They are a haven of moss species and dense conifer plantations, with little or no visitors, quite a variation from some of the more publicly accessible sites. However, in the animal kingdom, wildlife differs from individual to individual. Like all mammals, including us, pine martens vary in their personalities, habits and tolerance to disturbance and threats, making them a fascinating study.

Now the meticulous DNA analysis and mathematical modelling will ensue. The team at WIT have begun the task of obtaining and analysing DNA from the samples collected around the country to create capture histories for individuals based on microsatellite genetic analysis. This will enable them to identify the species and sex, as well as individual martens using genotyping. The results will be combined with other current data to produce a population status assessment that will inform the future monitoring and conservation management of the pine marten in Ireland. The analysis will indicate the density and sex ratio of local populations as well as the genetic diversity of the overall population.

The role of DNA and modelling in conservation is invaluable and will give us the evidence base to gain an understanding of where our marten populations are thriving, where they are isolated and fragmented, and how robust they are genetically. This is critical to understanding the current resilience and the long-term population trends of the pine marten in Ireland and will shape how we safeguard this species in the future. Truly science and conservation at their best!



For more of the latest news and how you can support the Pine Marten Recovery Project, visit the website:

www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk

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