

WHAT IS THE POLECAT ?

The polecat is a medium sized, carnivorous member of the *Mustelid* (i.e. weasel) family. This group of mammals possess musk glands, the secretions of which are used for communication. Larger than a stoat and smaller than the pine marten, polecats are similar in size to the captive bred ferret and the introduced mink. Polecats are generally dark brown in colour with cream belly, ear tips and facial markings.

Polecats occupy a wide variety of habitats including woodlands, hedgerows, farmland and riverbanks although they tend to avoid mountainous areas. Females are territorial and occupy individual home ranges throughout the year whereas juveniles and males are more mobile.

Most food is taken as live prey of which the most important are rabbits with smaller proportions of small rodents, birds and amphibians. Some food is taken opportunistically, such as carrion or birds' eggs.

CURRENT STATUS:

The polecat was widespread as a species until the mid nineteenth century when the establishment of shooting estates led to their persecution as a threat to game shooting interests. The last definite record for Scotland occurred in 1912, the species remained in England until the 1930s. Their range was reduced to central Wales, and the Welsh Marches throughout the middle of the twentieth century, with the 'last' record in Durham in 1919.

Changes in legislation, which outlawed gin traps, and the reduction in direct persecution led to a steady increase in both range and population. Whilst the stronghold for the species remains central Wales polecat populations have gradually spread into neighbouring counties and beyond. The modern, confirmed record of a polecat in Durham occurred on 1999; but sightings apparently relating to animals are increasing.

The current distribution of polecats is complicated by the fact that they readily interbreed with feral ferrets and both the resulting offspring and some feral ferrets are difficult to distinguish purely on external features. The only reliable techniques for distinguishing pure polecats

WHY IS THE POLECAT OF CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

Because its range and status have been severely reduced as a result of long term persecution by man.

POLECATS ARE AT RISK FROM:

Genetic dilution from interbreeding with ferrets

Trapping

Road traffic

SUGGESTED ACTIONS:

Collect all road traffic and other casualties to identify and aid in assessing extent of population.

Raise awareness of possible polecat presence amongst land owners.