

SxBRC Occasional Paper No. 4

The polecat in Sussex

In July 2004 a polecat *Mustela putorius* was found as a road fatality on the A272 near Cowdray Park Golf Course (SU908221), West Sussex. This was the first record of the species in Sussex since the late 19th century.



Polecats were formerly widespread in lowland Britain but, following persecution by gamekeepers, farmers and others and for their fur they were, by the mid-20th century, pushed back to an area of North Wales centred broadly on Tregaron Bog. With the outlawing of gin-trapping and generally more enlightened attitudes towards nature conservation, the polecat started to expand its range and is now well-established again across much of central and southern England.

Our new Sussex animal probably came from the recently established populations in Hampshire and Surrey and, as well as moving eastwards, the polecat is also moving westwards with several recent records from Dorset.

The polecat is essentially a lowland species of farms, woods, wetlands and river valleys and, in the past, would undoubtedly have been at home in most parts of Sussex. Historic records appear to be rather few¹ and those mentioned in the Victoria County History are mostly centred on an area around Hastings in the 19th century, but this is perhaps because the writer lived in that area. A Sussex dialect word for the polecat was 'fitch' and this was also a name for their fur, something that perhaps indicates the fate of many of these animals in our area. Another widespread word for the animal was 'foulmart' due to the powerfully offensive smell it is capable of producing from its scent glands. This often tainted the fur so that it was unusable, though clearly there were ways of avoiding (or putting up with) this problem.

The polecat is very closely related to the ferret, *Mustela furo*. Indeed most authorities now regard them as different forms of the same species. Over the centuries innumerable ferrets have escaped from captivity and are now often to be found bred with wild polecats. Dark ferrets,

¹ We would like to hear from anyone who comes across any older Sussex records.

known as polecat-ferrets, have also been deliberately raised in captivity and these have escaped too and are sometimes recorded in the wild.

True polecats are generally rather larger than polecat-ferrets and, other than the face mask, have little pale fur. There are also some differences in the structure of the skull. However, the two forms are now so mixed that precise definition of status of any particular individual is necessarily difficult to determine.

Wild polecat-ferrets (of ferrets of any kind) have only been rarely recorded in Sussex and it is possible that the few recent records of dark animals that have come into the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre were of true polecats rather than polecat-ferrets but, in the absence of a corpse, no one will ever know.

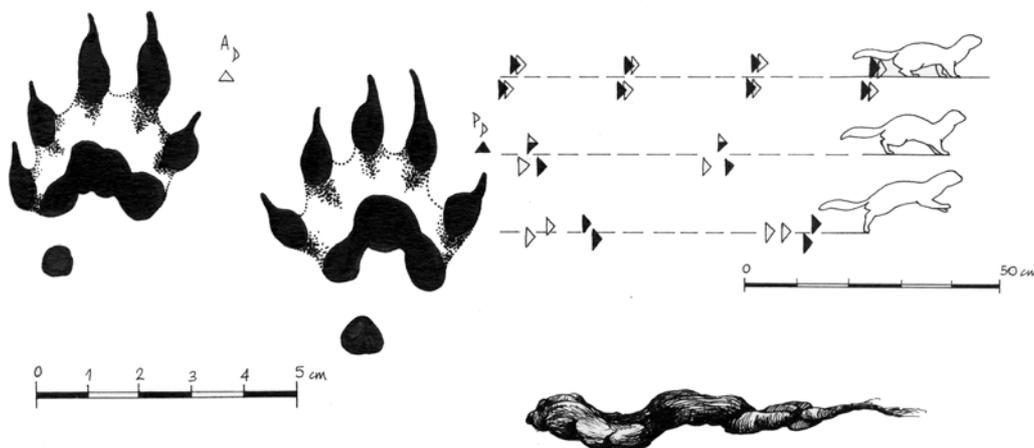
Polecats are fiercely predatory and live of a diet of small mammals, birds eggs and reptiles and amphibians. They are particularly fond of frogs and have been known to lay up stores of these. Resident polecats may have a marked effect on populations of several protected species such as water voles, water shrews and lizards. They were once, of course, one of the natural predators of these species, but current conditions are very different from those that prevailed in the past and it is not possible to predict the impact the polecat will have on the countryside. Polecats also raided chicken runs and similar places housing small domestic birds or animals, but again the extent to which they will do this in the future is uncertain.

Polecats usually have young once a year in late spring or early summer with the females producing three or four pups. The animals have a range of about 1 km² and are mainly active at night. Many modern records are from road kills, but the reason for this is unclear. It has been suggested that they are scavenging for food along roadsides where other animals may have been killed or injured by vehicles.

The pale facial mask of the polecat and polecat-ferret, plus their general appearance makes them fairly readily identifiable. Separating the two forms, as described above, is a job for the expert and can only be reliably done from an actual animal. Keen recorders who discover a corpse are encouraged to put it in a tightly sealed container in a freezer and contact the Vincent Wildlife Trust who are doing detailed research on the spread of the animal in Britain:

3 & 4 Bronsil Courtyard, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1EP
Tel: 01531 636441 E-mail: vwt@vwt.org.uk Website: <http://www.vwt.org.uk>

Please also supply any records, past or present, to the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre.



The drawings on this information sheet are by Osvaldo Negra and our thanks are due to the artist and the Museo Tridentino di Scienze Naturale, Italy, for permission to use them.