

THE VINCENT WILDLIFE TRUST / THE MAMMAL SOCIETY POLECAT SURVEY 2004-2006

Newsletter Number 5, July 2006

We are sending this newsletter to all who have helped with the survey and to others who may have an interest in its progress. Please pass copies on to others who may be interested.

Aims of the Polecat Survey

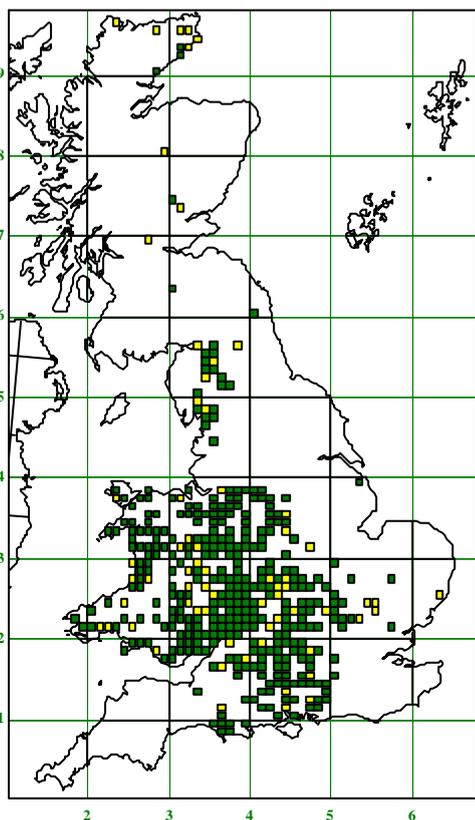
The survey is designed to produce a new 10km square distribution map for the polecat in Britain. We also aim to record the presence of feral ferrets on the British mainland. Because of hybridisation between polecats and ferrets we need to see visual evidence (preferably a complete specimen, though good photographs are acceptable) before we can verify each record.

Results so far (January 2004 – June 2006)

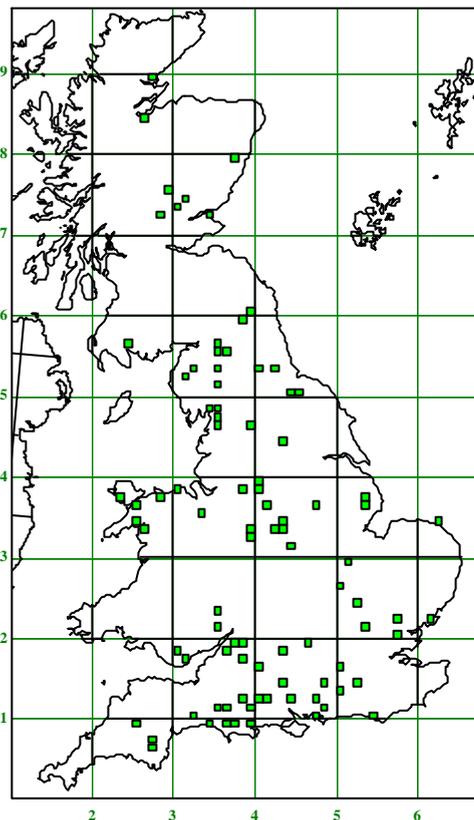
We are now into the last six months of our three-year survey. With your help we have logged 924 records of polecats or ferrets (from 451 10km squares), of which 712 were supported by verifiable evidence (specimen or photograph). External features suggest 609 of these were pure polecats and 103 had some evidence of ferret in their pelage (map on right). 358 specimens have now been sent to Edinburgh Museum for curation.

to expand slowly. In contrast, the large gaps remaining in central and West Wales are mystifying. Is this a recorder effect? Or are polecats genuinely scarce now in parts of the Principality? This is clearly a priority area for recording now, so please pack your camera along with your bucket and spade if you are heading to West Wales this summer!

The majority of specimens with 'ferrety' features appeared very polecat-like, with subtle signs in their pelage indicating that they have some ferret in their ancestry. These animals are probably behaving like true polecats, so we should not dismiss them as worthless elements in the gene pool. Their distribution in the map below tends to be near or beyond the main polecat range; this might reflect the better survival of escaped ferrets where polecats are scarce or absent, and/or a higher incidence of matings between polecats and ferrets at the fringes of the polecat's expanding range.



10km squares with verifiable (green) and unverifiable (yellow) records of polecats, January 2004 to June 2006 inclusive.



10km squares with verifiable records of specimens with 'ferrety' features, January 2004 to June 2006 inclusive.

The spread of positive squares across the English Midlands and central southern England is very pleasing, with good coverage also in North-west England. While most 10km squares are positive on the basis of one or two records, 32 squares have now generated five or more during the survey period. The most verifiable records of true polecats from one square is 13 (from SO73, which contains the VWT's head office in Herefordshire where Johnny Birks works!).

From the progress of the survey so far, we can confirm that the polecat's distributional range in England has continued

Juvenile polecats

Although most polecat records come in the form of single fatal road casualties, in late May to July some records comprise whole polecat families. Though polecats are nocturnal for most of the year, in mid-summer mother polecats and their young often forage in daylight in order to meet the growing needs of the family. In late June 2006, Simon Edwards was able to take a remarkable series of photographs of a family group from his vehicle on a minor road near Cranborne Chase in south-west Wiltshire (photo below).



A family group of polecats photographed on 20.6.06 by Simon Edwards on a minor road in 10km square ST92 in Wiltshire.

Family groups on roads are vulnerable, and many mothers and young are killed by vehicles in mid-summer; occasionally orphan juveniles are recovered by passing motorists. The Anderson family from Gloucestershire rescued a young female in July 2005 and reared her at home (photo below), gradually giving her more freedom to come and go. Named Mineem, she became independent during the winter, but returned to the house for food every few days. Endearingly, Mineem returned heavily pregnant in the spring of 2006 and established a breeding den under the Andersons' house, visiting the living space via a hole to collect food and drink. Though her young also entered the house to play beneath the sofa, Mineem usually pulled them back down the hole by the scruff of the neck. The family left the den in early June.



Mineem, a young female polecat rescued in July 2005, reared and released by the Anderson family in Gloucestershire, only to return in 2006 to give birth beneath their house.

The RSPCA Polecat Rehabilitation Study

The RSPCA's Stapeley Grange Wildlife Centre in Cheshire has played the lead role in rearing and releasing orphan polecats. Between 2001 and 2005, it received 48 orphan juvenile polecats ranging in age from 1 to 8 weeks. Of these, 45 were rehabilitated and released. However, we have very little knowledge of what happened to these animals subsequently. In order to improve our understanding of their behaviour and survival post-release, staff at Stapeley Grange have carried out a radio-tracking study. In 2005, seven young polecats were micro-chipped and fitted with radio collars before release in September at sites in South Cheshire and North Wales. This study will continue in autumn 2006, with more young orphans from this year already in residence at Stapeley Grange. The good news from 2005 is that radio contact was maintained with at least three animals for 57-68 days, and for two

other animals contact was maintained for nearly 20 days; sadly one animal was run over by a vehicle.



Inserting an identichip into a sedated young polecat at Stapeley Grange.



Young polecat at Stapeley Grange wearing a radio collar prior to release.



Rob Scrivens of the RSPCA radio-tracking rehabilitated polecats at Wybunbury Moss National Nature Reserve.

Thanks - and more records please!

We are very grateful to all who have contributed to the survey. Please keep sending us records, preferably supported by a body or photograph. In this last six months of the survey we are especially keen to fill in more blank 10km squares where polecats are likely to occur. Please contact us by email if you would like to know which squares in your area are still blank.

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