



Polecat

Local Biodiversity Action Plan

Species English Name(Scientific name)

POLECAT (MUSTELA PUTORIUS)



Ecology

Appearance

Polecats have long bodies and short legs with a buff to black coloured coat and black face with a distinctive white mask around it. During winter the coat is thick and glossy, but appears thinner and faded in the summer. They can reach up to 51cm in length and weigh between 0.7-1.4kg.

Food

Polecats hunt on the ground for rabbits, frogs, shrews, mice, rats, hedgehogs, small birds, toads, spiders, slugs and snails.

Habitat

Polecats can be found in meadows, moorland, woodlands, open mountains and coastal areas and sometimes found close to farm buildings.

Predators

Many become road casualties or die in traps or from poisoning. Dogs also occasionally kill polecats.

Lifestyle



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Polecats are nocturnal, with activity levels peaking at dusk. In summer they become more active and emerge during the day less than they would in winter. Mating occurs between March and May. Typically 3-7 young are born per litter and a second litter can occur if the first is lost. They dig burrows under trees or occupy old rabbit burrows and line their nests with leaves and grass.

Current status

The polecat is a species "of some conservation significance" (Birks 1997). Historically, it has experienced conflict with poultry and game keeping bodies since the Middle Ages, but now enjoys legal protection from killing and trapping under Schedule 6 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981).

The polecat is a native British mammal, the species found in Britain being the European or Western polecat. Despite its name, the polecat is a member of the weasel family, the Mustelidae. Up to the middle of the last century they were reported as common and widespread throughout the British mainland. The advent of game shooting and its management led to a sharp decline in the status of the polecat, reducing its population to a small isolated area of Mid Wales.

Due to a decline in trapping during the 20th century, the polecat population in Britain has increased. It has become more common in Wales and now populates every Welsh county, apart from Anglesey, and is starting to recolonise border counties, including the Cheshire region where it has not lived since the 1890s. The Cheshire Wildlife Trust have been closely monitoring the population. The Polecat was added to the UKBAP priority list in 2007.

Threats

- * Polecat-ferret hybridisation.
- * Road traffic accidents.
- * Loss of habitat.
- * Intensification of agriculture.
- * Illegal poisoning, gassing and trapping.
- * Secondary rodenticide poisoning.
- * Lack of awareness of the public and landowners.
- * Lack of awareness of the interaction between a polecat and its habitat.

How are we helping to conserve polecats in the Cheshire region?

- * Currently carrying out survey of farmers in Cheshire to glean further information on status of polecats in Cheshire.



- * Production of interpretative leaflet for the Cheshire area on the polecat
- * Monitoring and data collation
- * Further survey work on population status and habitat usage

Objectives, targets and actions

The objectives, targets and actions to help conserve Polecats in the Cheshire region can be found on the [Biodiversity Action Reporting System \(BARS\)](#) along with full details of our progress so far

How to find out more about polecats

Results of the last Mammal Society Polecat survey - www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/polecat_survey.shtml

Vincent Wildlife Trust - www.vwt.org.uk

BBC Wildfacts website - www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles/274.shtml

Cheshire Wildlife Trust 2006 Polecat report

Cheshire Wildlife Trust article 'The return of the Bandit'

Contact details

LBAP Chair Sue Tatman, Cheshire Wildlife Trust

Phone: 01948 820728

References and Glossary

Birks, J. (1997): Mammal Society Conference Talk, St Andrews, (draft copy).

Birks, J. (1993): The Return of the Polecat, British Wildlife.

Birks, J. (1996): The Rise of the Polecat, Natural World.

