

Welsh rare kits

David Bavin is part of a team that is bringing pine martens back to Wales and is amazed by how the animals have taken to their new home.

I'm heading over to the Elan Valley this morning. I'm tired but happy, despite the fog of endless mist and drizzle. I'm cheerful because the previous day, for the fifth day in a row, we failed to catch one of our pine martens. This might seem odd, given that our aim is to catch her. But it never fails to improve my mood when I take a step back and appreciate the point we've reached in our work for the Pine Marten Recovery Project.

It was less than a year ago that we translocated 20 pine martens from Scotland to Wales and spent a thrilling, anxious winter tracking their movements and fretting over their fate. We've learnt an awful lot during the past 10 months: where they den, their home-range behaviour, how far and fast they can move, and much more. In truth, though, we've only glimpsed mere fragments of their lives.

We're currently re-trapping the martens to remove their radio collars and give them a visual health check, before releasing them as truly wild 'bele' (the Welsh word for martens). To our great relief, they're all in excellent condition and certainly appear to be finding adequate food. With the exception of two individuals (one male, one female) that have lost a negligible amount of weight, the other martens have all gained; some of them have put on an additional 15 per cent of their 'start' weight and won't be at their heaviest until the autumn.

PATIENCE IS REWARDED

The greatest yardstick in terms of the martens' acceptance of their new home, however, has undoubtedly been the arrival of kits – the first generation of Welsh-born martens from our founders. It's a sign that the females have found the environment suitable for fulfilling their biological imperative, and not simply adequate for their survival. But they made us wait to confirm our suspicions.

To be precise, we waited six weeks and 11 hours. Forty two days because the suspected young would be too small

IT'S THE TENTATIVE BEGINNING OF A RETURN, ALBEIT ONE MADE WITH OUR HELPING HAND.

Photos by **Nick Upton**

Top right: the forested Welsh landscape could provide a suitable habitat for the translocated pine martens. **Above right:** David uses peanuts as bait to attract the newly introduced pine martens to a nearby trail camera. **Right:** David hangs a den box that would later become home to newborn pine martens.



to expose before then, and 11 hours because we had an excruciating wait in the woods until the mother left her den site to forage. When she finally did leave, we were able to scramble up the precipitous wooded slopes of the Rheidol Valley and access the artificial den box she'd chosen for her birth site. I was so nervous that my hands were shaking as I put up the ladder. What if I opened the box and the kits jumped out? What if we found nothing, or worse...?

We all took a deep breath before I went up and settled myself before easing the roof off the den box. The kits didn't jump out. They barely stirred, in fact, despite the loud squeak the box's roof made as it came off. The daylight that flushed into their den must have been the first they'd ever experienced, but the two velvety kits didn't seem to care at all about the intrusion of the world outside.



And I know I'm biased, but they were gorgeous. Roughly the size of a three-week-old domestic kitten, they each had a chocolate-brown pelage with a bib of pure snow white, unlike the yellow-orange bibs of the adults. There was a big one and a little one, and the big one was wrapped around its smaller sibling. We all had a brief look and took some pictures before Jenny MacPherson, our project manager, gently removed a couple of hairs from each of the kits so that we would identify them in the future by DNA fingerprinting field signs. Then we replaced the lid and left, elated.

MORE TO COME

It turns out that four of our females have given birth, though it's likely that only half of the kits will survive their first year. It's the tentative beginning of a comeback for pine martens in Wales, albeit one made with our helping hand. The news has been greeted with pleasure and enthusiasm by the local community, many of whom follow the animals' progress. We're certainly a visible presence in the area, frequently updating the clientele of the Cwtch tea house.

From the outset we made a big effort to transfer a feeling of ownership and participation to the local community. Indeed, we're indebted to a handful of students and

Above: the newly introduced pine martens had to be captured for a health check and have their radio collars removed. **Below:** one of four sets of kits born to pine martens recently introduced to the Welsh landscape.

residents that have given much of their time to assist us in our daily monitoring. There have been reasonable concerns from the local hunting fraternity and some of the farmers, but by sitting down and discussing the project's aims, the species' ecology and the wider context of our work, we have engendered a mutual respect and working dialogue. This has paid dividends: marten sightings are reported regularly and we're kept abreast of any issues to which we may need to respond.

The team and myself are now getting ready to bring down the second tranche of 20 animals to consolidate the first releases in our mid-Wales study region. I'm sure it will be another rollercoaster ride, but one that we now have experience – not to mention a few battle scars – of facing. What then? Our priority is ensuring the success of our Welsh operation, but our overarching goal is to see the pine marten restored to its former range throughout the UK, wherever appropriate.

It's still early stages, but we aim to assess sites in England in the near future. We'll also be providing advice based on our experiences in Wales to the team at Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, which is undertaking a feasibility study to restore pine martens to the Forest of Dean. There's a long way to go – but the future is looking brighter for our pine martens. 🐾

DAVID BAVIN is the project officer for the Vincent Wildlife Trust Pine Marten Recovery Project.

FIND OUT MORE

Visit www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk to learn more about the pine marten's return to Wales.



Kit: The Vincent Wildlife Trust