

Comment & Letters

An Irishman's Diary

Frank McNally

BEING SHY of humans and mostly nocturnal, the pine marten is arguably the least well known of Ireland's wildlife species. But a good way to find out more about these beautiful creatures is to have one move into your attic, set up home there, and start a family.

That's what happened early this summer to Richard and Wendy Ward, whose attic is in Maam, Co Galway. First they noticed strange noises upstairs, then the smell. Or maybe it was the other way around. At any rate, the new lodgers soon reminded the Wards of the saying about fish and visitors going off after three days.

Not that martens are of themselves smelly, unlike their polecat cousins.

In fact, where the polecat used to be called the "foulmart", the pine marten was known as "sweetmart" in recognition of its aromatic inoffensiveness. It does, however, carefully mark its territory, using all available emissions. So after a few weeks as a marten maternity unit, the Wards' attic was well and truly marked.

Happily, the lodgers did emerge from it eventually: a nuclear unit of mother, son, and daughter. This is typical. The daddy marten, being somewhat bigger than his mate, might have struggled to make it through the fist-sized hole in a guttering board where the mother invaded. But in any case, males and females keep separate territories when not procreating.

After fertilisation, the female can delay implantation of the egg until it suits her – family planning marten-style. His job done, meanwhile, the male disappears into the night. And any sons will not be far behind him.

The male kit hung around the Wards' garden just long enough to be christened "Tommy" (in honour of a visiting welfare inspector, who called recently to means-test the couple for the pension and inquired in passing whether they had any dependants, causing them to wonder if they could claim for the family in the attic). Then, only a few months old, Tommy



How do you know if pine martens have moved into your attic? Richard and Wendy Ward found out when their new lodgers (above) made their presence felt.

too vanished into the wild.

The females continue to linger; warily in the case of the mother (named "Queen Maeve" after the woman who kept a pet pine marten until Cú Chulainn killed it in revenge for the Cooley cattle raid); fearlessly on the part of her daughter ("Peggy Sue"), described by Richard as "a brazen little hussy who has taken to following me around looking for food".

This situation leaves him somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, martens are wild animals and you don't want to make them dependent. On the other, they can be hard to refuse, especially when they stand upright and stare at you with unblinking eyes, like meerkats. So Peggy Sue has not gone hungry. In common with two-legged children, baby martens are particularly fond of peanut butter. But apples (chopped), boiled eggs, and raspberry jam have been gratefully received as well.

As a species, martens have a very wide-ranging diet, eating – as Richard says – everything from "blackbirds to blackberries". Queen Maeve has even brought frogs home to her offspring: common garden frogs, of which she can carry three in her mouth simultaneously. And martens have been known to take down bigger quarry too.

My copy of *Complete Irish Wildlife* informs me that the species is an excellent climber, whose "ability and confidence [are] shown to best effect when in pursuit of red squirrel prey among tree-tops". Oh dear. So the poor red squirrel can number the pine marten among its oppressors. But on the plus side, martens have also been credited with persecuting the

ubiquitous grey, the main cause of the red's decline. Maybe it balances out.

The pine marten is sometimes blamed for other depredations too, with or without proof. I fear it may be among the list of suspects for a horror scene discovered by my auntie in Cavan earlier this summer, when she visited her poultry shed one morning to find that all her chickens had been rendered headless during the night.

But in the absence of proof, I prefer to blame that atrocity on another terrorist of the natural world, the feral mink, now thought to be wreaking revenge for the years its ancestors spent in fur-farm slavery. Or maybe the chicken rampage was the work of a rogue ferret. Anyone with information is asked to contact the incident room at my e-mail address below.

Although now confined mainly to the south and west, the pine marten is resurgent, in both numbers and geographic spread. And despite the species' shyness, temporary co-habitation in the homes of humans is not, apparently, unusual. Even so, the expectant mother of Maam made a particularly good choice when she moved in with the Wards.

Richard Ward is an accomplished artist, whose stunning portraits and landscapes can be seen on his website (www.richardward.ie). But it so happens that wildlife is one of his specialities, a fact recognised by An Post when, in 1992, he was commissioned to create a series of stamps featuring one of Ireland's lesser-spotted wild animals. Which one? The pine marten, of course.

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