

Among the potential excitements of opening up one's holiday house in any conifered corner of Ireland this Easter may be a sense of other presences upstairs, together with a whiff of something musky or worse and a muffled miaowing that doesn't quite sound like cats. The pine marten is, indeed, the *Ócat crainn* of Irish tradition, but in exchanging the treetop for the second-home roof-space, it can become something other than a pet. Martens can pass through a hole just five centimetres across, and as the island's most beautiful wild mammal makes a comeback from near-extinction, some difficult choices could multiply.

From Easter onward, the conservation rangers of more forested counties, especially west of the Shannon, are braced for appeals to assist in evictions. Some are promptly withdrawn or put in abeyance by the discovery that Mrs Martes martes [itals] is nursing three or four kits in a hollow of the cosy fibreglass insulation, surrounded by vital electrical wiring.

Martens have their young in late March or April and only begin to wean them after two months or so, when they are starting to wander from the den. The kits are, of course, sable-soft, fluffy and adorable and stay with their mother until August or September. Any benevolent eviction needs to keep the family together for a safe release elsewhere, and rangers have been exchanging notes on methods and devices: a spring-door trap baited with sardines and raspberry jam brings good results. Some, no doubt, have consulted American pest-removal websites, where long experience in evicting raccoons is matched with pledges to handle the babies with tenderness. The dramatic restoration of the pine marten's fortunes in recent years has been confirmed by the national survey carried out in 2005 for Coford, the National Council for Forest Research and Development. It matches the spread of conifer forest, from 420,000 hectares in the mid-1980s to more than 700,000 hectares. The pine marten, holed up in a last stronghold in the Burren as late as the 1970s, and threatened with extinction by persecution and the use of fox-bait farm poisons, is spreading silently and nocturnally to a distribution unprecedented for several centuries.

It is still Ireland's rarest native mammal, but sightings are increasing in the south-east, south-west, the Slieve Blooms and parts of the west. Even in the east, as Crann, [itals] the tree magazine, currently notes, a marten was reported killed last year on a road near Enfield, Co Meath. In Fermanagh, where martens were evicted from the rafters of the Marble Arch visitor centre, conservation workers have put up hospitably dry wooden denning-boxes on the wall of a nearby quarry.

The UK's Mammals Trust has funded a marten survey in Northern Ireland, and at both ends of the island researchers are using DNA sampling to get some idea of the densities of population. In Fermanagh, this is coming from marten droppings. In Co Waterford, the UK's Wildwood Trust has established a breeding group of pine martens so that researchers at Waterford Institute of Technology can take DNA from fur left behind on sticky tabs in baited tubes fixed to tree branches. In England and Wales, the animals are a priority in species recovery programmes, and such research could help in restoration strategies.

Martens are also of keen interest to the organisers of the current Irish squirrel survey, part of a campaign aimed at wiping out the alien and destructive grey squirrel, so far as is practicable, and conserving or restoring what is left of the native reds. The survey, involving all the wildlife, conservation and tree organisations as well

& as Teagasc and the Golfing Union of Ireland want observers to include pine marten sightings in their reports (details from irishsquirrels@gmail.com).

One very good reason for wanting to know the mix of squirrels and martens is the fascinating proposition that martens can catch and kill grey squirrels much more easily than the reds (which, being lighter, can retreat right to the ends of branches, where the martens cannot follow). One report from a County Monaghan estate to the European Squirrel Initiative suggests a marked decline in grey squirrels over the past decade as sightings of martens increased.

The animal is almost as omnivorous as a predator gets - from berries, birds and carrion to frogs, rats and mice. Farmyard poultry too, of course, where it can, along with gamekeepers' pheasants and golf-club rubbish bins. But the thought of it helping to restore the red squirrel does make up for other depredations, including the dosing-down in the rafters of bungalow bliss.

end.

EYE ON NATURE

For Saturday March 31st 2007

Trolling through a diary I kept as a teenager in 1959 I found that I had seen a kingfisher on the Dodder at Beaver Row, between Clonskea and Donnybrook. I wondered if one could still see them in Dublin today??

Ann Serff, Waterford.

There have been kingfishers on the Dodder continuously for hundreds of years and they are still there. They are also found on other Dublin waterways.

Wandering in local woods I came across a fallen tree, underneath the trunk of which an animal had scraped a hole and was using it as a latrine. What was it?

Bernard Brewer, Tullamore, Offaly.

It was the latrine of a badger.

A cock pheasant came to visit around my bird table in a heavily built up area. He stayed for several hours and I was worried that next door's cat might pay a visit. Is this normal for pheasants?

Joe Hynes, Portadown, Co Armagh.

Your visiting cock pheasant probably came from a reared flock that was hand fed before being released and so got used to humans and human habitation.

Michael Viney welcomes observations at Thallabawn, Carrowniskey PO, Westport, Co Mayo; e-mail: viney@anu.ie. Include a postal address.