

A friend, who lives on a windy hilltop in a house nestled in trees, called to tell of a strange smell in her woodshed. There was something, perhaps, going on in one corner, behind a pile of tools. She had glimpsed a furry tail.

This is the season when furry animals have babies and a leafy hilltop adjoining conifer forestry made the pine marten, notorious for siting its nursery in a human attic or shed, the likely candidate.

A listen at the the door was rewarded by sounds of mewing from the corner, as of kittens. The scatter of droppings on the floor matched that of *Martes martes*, or the Irish cat crainn. We retreated, happy that Ireland's rarest mammal, long in slow revival after centuries of decline, was staking out a new domain above the western shore.

What might have clinched the matter was the distinctive smell of the scat, so often decribed as "like Parma violets", even by people without great experience either of flower or the scented English sweet of the same name.

As a connoisseur of the musky, unmistakable aroma of otter spraint - sampled from the greenest, best-fertilised tufts of grass on stream banks - I was quite looking forward to a new olfactory exprience. The overwhelming fragrance of the shed, however, was that of Jeyes' Fluid, my friend being one of many householders repelled by the alternative odour, redolent of violets or not.

I did not have to go far online, indeed, to find a blog complaining of "having to move downstairs" to escape the pong of a pine marten's den in a roof space. So mixed, indeed, are

responses to these intrusions that the Vincent Wildlife Trust has put a special leaflet online: "*The pine marten in Ireland: a guide for householders*". It could be prudent reading for people now returning to their rural holiday houses.

The shortage of natural den sites in Ireland - notably in trees old enough to have big holes - has made houses and sheds attractive to female martens seeking seasonal warmth and safety. They are a long-protected species, and will abandon their kits if disturbed.

The two or three young themselves will want to play by night - martens are largely nocturnal - so that their noisy skittering on bedroom ceilings can be unwelcome. But from March to July, action to evict a family could bring prosecution under the Wildlife Act.

The Vincent trust readily admits that martens "do not make good house guests" and urges making the house proof against invasion. But the animals are superlative climbers and can squeeze through gaps as big as their head (five centimetres for females)

A second leaflet, supported by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, addresses more of the martens' misbehaviours: "How to exclude pine martens from game and poultry pens". It describes, in detail, electric fencing to protect the gun clubs' pheasant chicks and ways of making a hen house marten-proof.

All this may stir questions as to what pine martens are "good for" and reinforce the wilder concerns for new-born lambs and babies left out in their prams.

The predatory diet of this much-abused native mammal does not include either (except, at times, bits of dead lamb) and embraces even frogs, snails, beetles and blackberries. More

helpfully to humans, it is a control on rodent populations and its hunting of rats and mice, bank vole and white-toothed shrew, extends even to grey squirrels.

This, as recent Irish research has shown, can help restore numbers of the native red squirrel. The red is lighter and more agile, and can retreat to the far ends of branches, while the bigger grey also spends more time on the ground and is easier to catch.

This study, carried out in Co Wicklow woods by Dr Emma Sheehy, found the fur of grey squirrels, but not of reds, in marten scats. It has had wide attention in Britain, where restoration of the marten in Scotland, Wales and northern England and conservation of red squirrels are a priority. The title to one paper by Dr Sheehy reads: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend . . ." (at doi:10.1098/rspb.2017.2603).

In Ireland, meanwhile, the research has been intensive, including genetic study of DNA from marten hairs left in sticky tubes baited with raw chicken. This helped the large-scale assessment of the marten population published last year by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Irish Wildlife Manual No 97 at www.npws.ie).

Led by Dr Declan O'Mahony of Northern Ireland's Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, it identified 134 individual martens at sites spread across the island, with an average low density of around one animal per square kilometre of forest. Combining this with other data, the total population in Ireland was estimated at 3,043. This confirmed *Martes martes* as a settled and stable resident, but still one of the rarest mammals in Ireland.

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