

One of the duties of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, as ordained by the EU's Habitats Directive, is to keep a tally of the wildlife killed on the roads, or at least of those mammals whose welfare might concern us. As sightings flow in to the biodiversity website www.biology.ie, little flags are hoisted on the excellent interactive maps of its major domo, Paul Whelan.

At this point in the year, the flags crowd the routes of the nation's motorways; on some maps, they blanket whole regions of the island. As I write, the tolls for 2012 run as follows: badgers, 967; hedgehogs, 682; foxes, 597; hares, 171; otters, 99; pine martens, 133. Cats, for comparison, 249, and dogs, 33.

My image, of a young pine marten, celebrates one that got away from a road kill and was snapped a week or so ago peering down from a big Sitka spruce in Letterkeen Forest, at the edge of Co Mayo's national park. His story – it is a male - introduces a happier, and largely unsung development in Ireland's wildlife conservation.

Back in June, a Limerick ecologist, Gavin Fennessy, spotted a furry disaster at the edge of a road near Castlebar. A litter of pine marten kits were scrambling about their mother's dead body, crying and trying to suckle her. He rang the Irish Wildlife Rehabilitation Trust for help and the eight-week-old kits were captured, with the help of a local NPWS ranger, and taken to the Kildare Animal Foundation. This centre cares mostly for dogs and cats, but is open to other wild animals in trouble.

Here, wildlife rehabilitator Dan Donoher reared the young martens on milk substitute, and later a mixed diet of dead young chicks, quail, fruit, insects, raw eggs and small dead rodents (a painstaking match for the marten's omnivorous appetite). Then the kits returned to Mayo for the rare opportunity of releasing them to the wild, then tracking their ranges, movements and feeding habits through VHF radio collars. These were fitted to two of the three surviving kits on September 8th and they conveniently escaped from their forest enclosure a few days later.

The tracking project is led by Dr Derek McLoughlin, an ecologist with Sligo Institute of Technology who has already used telemetry in tracking north Mayo's last rare colony of breeding twites, finches so small as to leave little purchase for any

transmitter. For his marten trackers, he recruited and trained two students, and a volunteer team of amateur and professional enthusiasts (one of them, Ger Rogan, took the photograph used for my illustration). Their stealthy progress through the lofty but prickly Letterkeen forest may be monitored in a daily log at www.iwrt.ie/pages/News-pinemarten.html.

The IWRT, based at Duleek, Co Meath, is a young organisation, out to upskill and focus Ireland's somewhat scattered efforts at rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife casualties. Battered or orphaned on the roads, caught in barbed wire fences, flying into turbines or cables, oiled or stranded on beaches, or just brutally mistreated, they will benefit from the expert, practical advice laid out in www.irishwildlifematters.ie, the website mounted by the IWRT in 2010.

Nearly all the people who currently take animals for rehabilitation are, as the trust says, self-taught, and their procedures "vary widely". Many vets approached for help can be reluctant to act, partly through lack of experience with wildlife, sometimes because would-be benefactors are reluctant to pay for the treatment.

The group forming the IWRT, all with a background in animal rehab, found their website aroused enormous interest, not only from the public, but from vets themselves, many eager for practical training and contact with experts in the different species. From this came the design of annual conferences and workshops to meet every level of interest. The second one, with continuing support from the NPWS and Heritage Council, was held in Ashbourne, Co Meath, last week-end.

The "Irish Wildlife Matters" website gives due respect to existing rehabilitation centres with experience (the Irish Seal Sanctuary, for example), and puts firm limits on amateur enthusiasm ("Does it need rescuing?" is question number one). Serious injuries need serious skills, and frightened animals can bite hard, not lick your hand in gratitude. From otters and badgers to hedgehogs and bats, the simple first-aid options are there on the website, together with guidance at veterinary level.

Wild mammals get sick, have accidents and die at varying rates: how much should we care? Saving species from extinction is one thing: intervening in natural mortality perhaps another. But such humane concern speaks of a bond with the rest of natural world that is under dire pressure on a planet with too many people. And sometimes intervening can have secondary spin-offs in helping biodiversity. The

presence of pine martens, we are discovering, can check the expansion of alien grey squirrels that threaten our native reds. The Mammal Ecology Group at NUI Galway is looking into it, as are Letterkeen's new recruits.

End.

Eye on Nature

For Saturday October 6th 2012

While walking along South Circular Road at Rialto, I observed a male sparrowhawk diving into hedging and dislodging some blue tits. He then chased them at a low level for a number of metres, eventually giving up the hunt when his path became blocked by pedestrians.

Enda Fahy, Drimnagh, Dublin 12.

On September 21 a friend and I saw a red squirrel with a snow white tail in Djouce Woods in Co Wicklow.

Lena Strom, Bray, Co Dublin.

In summer coat the tail of the red squirrel can vary from chestnut to pale buff. After the late summer and autumn moults the tail becomes dark red or brown.

Recently on a glorious sunny day I saw my first peacock butterfly fluttering into the garden with its tell-tale, four big eyes at the top and bottom corners of its wings. It rested on one of the few remaining dandelions virtually owned by hundreds of small tortoiseshells in recent days.

Justin Doyle, Virginia, Co Cavan.

Peacock butterflies are common, and usually abundant, all over the country. This year there has been fewer than normal for various reasons. Yours will hibernate soon in outhouses, wood piles and other crevices.

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