



Pine martens and farms

Pine martens and the law

The pine marten is protected in Ireland by national and international legislation. Under the **Irish Wildlife Acts** it is an offence, except under licence, to capture or kill a pine marten, or to destroy or disturb its breeding or resting places. For further information on licences please email: wildlifelicences@ahg.gov.ie

The **European Union's Habitats and Species Directive** further obliges Ireland to maintain the favourable conservation status of the pine marten throughout its range.

Important note

If setting traps for species such as grey squirrels or rats, precautions should be taken to reduce the likelihood of pine martens entering traps. If using spring loaded traps, these must be installed inside a tunnel with excluder bars fitted across the entrance to exclude larger, non-target animals, such as the pine marten. A pine marten can squeeze through a 45mm gap, so the space between the bars should be smaller than this. Live capture traps should be checked at least once every 12 hours and more frequently (every four hours) if set between March to June, as this is the time when female martens may have dependent young (kits) and any extended periods of time spent away from their kits could be detrimental to their survival.

Pine martens and farm animals

Pine martens are nocturnal, solitary and shy, and will generally avoid farms with livestock, dogs and machinery. They also like to stick to woodland cover where possible, as they are vulnerable to fox predation in the open.

Despite claims from some farmers in Ireland, there is no evidence to suggest that pine martens currently pose a threat to the sheep industry in Ireland. In the north-west highlands of Scotland, where the pine marten is thriving and where millions of sheep occur on thousands of farms, the diet of the pine marten has been studied and found to consist of small rodents, birds, insects, earthworms and fruit.

The marten is an opportunist and will feed on the carcasses of dead animals, including dead deer and sheep, which are commonly found during the autumn and winter months. The main threat to sheep and lambs continues to be that posed by dogs and foxes.

Local farmers accept there is no risk to livestock from pine martens, though keepers of poultry are advised to shut poultry into marten-proof huts at night. Martens will, however, scavenge on dead animals and they might be seen feeding on a sheep or lamb carcass near the edge of woodland.

Pine martens prefer safe den sites off the ground. If there are no suitable tree cavities or natural sites nearby, then they might try and use old buildings and barns in their search for suitable safe places. In the early spring, females might choose built structures to give birth in if there are no secure natural sites available. Pine marten den boxes can be used to create artificial dens in a woodland and are used by the female to give birth to her kits. Providing suitable safe denning sites in the woodland as an alternative to attics and buildings helps to keep martens in their natural habitat.

The pine marten's main prey includes small mammals such as mice, voles, rats and squirrels. They therefore play a role in controlling pests, though it is unlikely they will hunt on a busy farm.

Pine martens and rodent predation

Pine martens are skilful hunters of rats, mice and grey squirrels, and so the recovery of the pine marten population in Ireland will help to control these animals in a natural and sustainable way. The North American grey squirrel was introduced to Ireland in 1911 and soon spread, quickly displacing the native red squirrel and causing serious damage to broadleaf trees grown commercially for the timber industry. Research conducted in the years 2010-2012 by Emma Sheehy in Laois & Offaly for her PhD at National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) revealed that grey squirrels were absent from areas with pine martens, and that red squirrels had returned to woods now vacated by the grey squirrel.

It is still unclear how the pine marten is causing the decline of the grey squirrel, but it may be that by spending more time foraging on the ground, grey squirrels are easier for a pine marten to catch and kill. It is also possible that the presence of the pine marten is raising stress levels in the grey squirrel and affecting its reproduction. In contrast, red squirrels have lived alongside the pine marten for thousands of years and they return to woods with pine martens quite quickly after the grey squirrels disappear.

Making grain stores safe

Pine martens will enter grain stores in search of shelter or to prey on rodents, which may occur in and around the buildings. Therefore, to reduce the likelihood of attracting a pine marten, the most effective approach is to ensure a site is rodent free. Usually this will involve rodent proofing by repairing holes in buildings, removing rubbish and weeds that provide cover, as well as removing spilled grain and covering food sources.

Preventing rodent access is a much more effective way of protecting buildings and grain stores, rather than relying on rodenticides, which can cause harm to other wildlife and to the environment, and which do not guarantee that rodent infestations will always be completely eradicated.

Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use www.crru.ie for further information on rodent control