

COMEBACK KITS

They're fiercely shy, but pine martens are peeping once again in the woods of southern Britain. **Fiona Collins** reports

I'VE BEEN HUNTING for martens for four years now, and the closest I've come is a scarpering rear-end!" Matthew Davies is Snowdonia's top pine marten tracker – he's been monitoring the spread of these woodland wraiths since they returned to Wales in 2015. It is proving a challenge: "A couple of times I've glimpsed what looks like a chocolate-brown cat legging it into the undergrowth, but they're lightning fast. It's blink-and-you-miss-it."

Elusive they may be, but sightings of Britain's largest tree-dwelling mammal seem likely to become more common, as new colonies spread out across Wales and England. Eighteen Scottish pine martens arrived in the Forest of Dean this September – the latest salvo in a bid to reintroduce a creature that was driven to the brink of extinction south of the border.

Vincent Wildlife Trust's Pine Marten Recovery Project began in 2015, when with Woodland Trust help, the first of 51 martens were released around Devil's Bridge, near Aberystwyth. Motion-sensor cameras have been tracking them since, and each fortnight Matthew journeys high into our woods at Cwm Mynach, in the Rhinog Mountains, on their tail.

"The old boys in the pub recall seeing pine martens up here in the 1970s – it's the perfect habitat for them," he says.

"They tell stories of farmers hunting 'brown racoons'. But prior to this project, the last recording of a Welsh marten was as roadkill near Newtown in 2012."

These bushy-tailed nocturnal ninjas hide away in tree-holes by day, and their territories can stretch across 25 square kilometres, so Matthew's got his work cut out. He tackles the final ascent on foot, clambering steeply among primeval oaks to retrieve data from his two cameras.

The aim is to gain insights into the health and habits of the burgeoning population, and so far he has captured footage of eight martens, told apart by their unique cream bib patterns. He now has three males, two females and three kits on his books.

This autumn Matthew recorded his first kill – a marten leaping from a tree to catch a vole. "It was magical, and payback for all the hard work. If I find droppings in an area, I'll leave eggs or other bait a few feet up a tree, beyond the reach of foxes and badgers. I wait for repeat raids, then rig up my camera and cross my fingers."

Matthew returns his footage to VWT HQ, where project officer Dave Bavin says the team is cautiously optimistic: "The Welsh martens are still very vulnerable, so it's too early to relax. We know they have bred, which is fantastic, but we're not sure how many have died. We reckon the population might be up to about >>



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the Forest of Dean

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SNIFFING THEM OUT

The closest you'll likely get to a pine marten is its scat, or poo – they use it to mark their territories. Look out for droppings on paths, rocks and tree stumps. If they smell sweet with a hint of Parma Violets, you're on the scent! Martens are bottom-wigglers too, so their scats tend to be wriggly. Report any encounters at vwt.org.uk/report-a-sighting.

60, and we're waiting for the results of a Wales-wide scat survey for a clearer picture."

As the Welsh martens bed in, all eyes turn to the Forest of Dean. Martens disappeared from this ancient hunting forest 200 years ago, and this autumn's reintroduction drive, led by Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and Forestry England, is backed by £65,000 from the Woodland Trust.

"We spent five weeks on old-fashioned fieldwork in north-east Scotland," says Dave. "It was up at 5am and out all day in the forests, tracking, trapping and assessing animals' suitability for translocation. You feel incredibly privileged to see these exquisite creatures up close in the wild, but the weight of responsibility for their welfare is stressful."

Meanwhile, project chiefs in Gloucestershire have been preparing locals and landowners for the arrival of these arboreal hunters. "People want to know what impact they might have on other wildlife," says Dave, "and there are worries about livestock and commercial shoots. But martens are very risk averse: they steer clear of open fields that expose them to predators like foxes and raptors. And they're fiercely territorial and live in low densities, so their numbers are self-limiting."

One likely loser in this pine marten influx is the non-native grey squirrel. Studies in Scotland and Ireland have shown that when pine martens move into an area, greys move out, allowing once-abundant red squirrels to retake old stomping ground. This could be

down to the evolutionary instincts of native reds: perhaps they are better equipped to escape the clutches of their old foes than the North American greys. Other theories suggest greys are more vulnerable than reds because they feed on the ground, or because they are heavier and can't scramble to safety in the spindlier upper branches.

Cat McNicol from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust has researched the meal plans of the new Welsh martens since they moved south. "Quite swiftly grey squirrels were making up about 14% of the martens' diet," Cat reports. "Meanwhile the greys' home ranges expanded, maybe because there was less competition for land. Some hope those shifts in behaviour could leave the door open for reds to return."

For now though, Cat's focus is firmly on the new Dean martens. "There are more potential conflicts here than in the Welsh project: more people, more roads, and greater exposure to other protected species like horseshoe bats and pied flycatchers. The incomers have scattered far and wide, and they will all wear radio collars for the first year, so we can keep an eye on them."

Bat roosts can be protected with climb-proof sheeting, and Cat says: "We know the chance of a marten repeatedly preying a roost is extremely low, but we are taking no chances. We want to ensure this project is held up as the gold standard."

Martens on the map

Where to find Britain's pine marten renaissance

Scotland Once widespread, pine martens are now most prevalent in northern Scotland, where around 3,700 adults thrive. Look for signs in the Trust's woods at Ledmore and Migdale, or in our pinewoods at Loch Arkaig.

Northern Ireland As one of Northern Ireland's rarest mammals, pine martens have clung on in isolated colonies: surviving strongholds include Londonderry's Faughan Valley and the Ards Peninsula, County Down.

Wales Wales's new pine martens have made a run for the hills, from the Brecon Beacons to Snowdonia. They can cover up to 20km a day, so you'd be lucky to see one in the flesh. Keep eyes peeled in woods like Cwm Mynach, or Wentwood in Monmouthshire.

England Hunted to extinction across England, martens have been sighted fleetingly in Cumbria and Northumberland. If the Forest of Dean project flourishes, it's hoped Trust woods in the Wye Valley could soon become new strongholds.

JAMES MOORE/ALAMY

