

Wildlife Vets International aid pine marten recovery in UK

British charity Wildlife Vets International (WVI) is embarking on its first major UK project - providing the veterinary expertise for the Vincent Wildlife Trust's Pine Marten Recovery Project to reinforce populations of increasingly rare pine martens in England and Wales.

After two years of extensive research and feasibility studies by the project leaders, Britain's first carnivore recovery scheme on a nationwide scale got underway this week.

Native pine martens have been translocated from their strongholds in Scotland to begin a new life in mid Wales, with more on the way.

From being the second most common carnivore in Britain some 6,500 years ago, the distinctive pine marten is now the second rarest after the wild cat.

Reinforcement of the existing UK population is the only way to restore a viable pine marten population in southern Britain, according to Pine Marten Recovery Project organisers Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT). The Trust's research and survey work have defined the causes of the pine marten's decline, requirements for its survival and opportunities to create new populations.

Health and disease assessment is a fundamental part of a successful translocation project and, with its successful record of carrying out health surveillance in endangered species across the world, WVI is well placed to take on this role. As well as taking into account the health and welfare of each individual pine marten, it is important to consider the potential impact of disease on other species in the release ecosystem.

As WVI vet and specialist in wildlife population health Alexandra Tomlinson explains: "We have already undertaken a comprehensive disease risk analysis in order to safeguard the health and welfare of not only pine martens, but of other wildlife, livestock, pets and human beings.

"The health and welfare of the pine martens at all stages of the translocation will be closely monitored," she said.

The martens are captured from pre-selected well-populated sites in Scotland, health-screened and fitted with radio-collars prior to translocation to Wales. Following an

acclimatisation period in purpose-built large pens prior to release, they are then released at pre-selected sites.

To ensure ongoing disease risk management, there will be a proactive disease surveillance strategy in collaboration with partners including the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre in Cornwall, Edinburgh University Veterinary School and private veterinary practices in both Scotland and Wales.

"We are proud to be part of such an exciting programme. As WVI'S first UK project this will illustrate the importance of disease risk analysis and management in the translocation of rare and endangered species" says Development Manager Olivia Walter.

WVI is a key player in similar translocation schemes from the Indian Ocean to the Russian Far East, working with Seychelles flycatchers, echo parakeets, lizards and snakes in Mauritius and has produced the first comprehensive Disease Risk Assessment for a big cat reintroduction: the Amur leopard.

WVI Veterinary Director Andrew Greenwood points out: "Small fragmented populations have ever weakening gene pools and are thereby susceptible to disease. Our expertise in boosting and creating new populations can quite simply mean the difference between a species going extinct and surviving."

The VWT has worked with many partners and experts to make the translocation project a reality. Scottish Natural Heritage has given the Trust a licence to catch the pine martens, Forestry Commission Scotland has permitted access to its land and the animals are being released under permit on land owned by Natural Resources Wales. The release pens in Wales have been designed and built by staff from Chester Zoo, a major partner in the project. The Woodland Trust and the People's Trust for Endangered Species are also key funding partners and many other parties are supporting the project in a number of ways.

The project is likely to cost in the region of £1.2million over five years of which £110,000 is required for veterinary field costs and support, and fundraising is ongoing.

New healthy pine marten populations will not only restore a rare and charismatic animal, says VWT, it could also help bring additional rural income through ecotourism, as is the case in Scotland.

In addition, recent research in Ireland has indicated that in areas where the pine marten is recovering there has been a decline in the non-native grey squirrel population, so benefiting the native red squirrel.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

Useful facts - The pine marten

The pine marten (*Martes martes*) had become extinct throughout much of Britain by the early part of the 20th century. Small populations survived in Wales and the Marches and in areas of northern England, but relatively strong populations were still to be found only in some parts of the Scottish Highlands where persecution pressures were less. Recent studies show that the pine marten in Scotland is making a good recovery. South of the Scottish border the situation is different; there has been no convincing evidence of natural recovery. The pine marten is now the second rarest carnivore in Britain after the wild cat and is seen as a priority species in urgent need of conservation action.

Pine marten facts

- A native mammal of Britain and Ireland, the pine marten is a medium-sized mustelid (the weasel family) and is related to the mink, polecat, otter, badger, stoat and weasel. Adult pine martens are similar in size to a small/medium-sized domestic cat, with males about a third larger than the females.
- The pine marten has a slim body and a long tail that is thick and bushy in its winter coat. Rich brown fur contrasts with a creamy-yellow 'bib' on the throat and chest, with pale fur within the prominent, rounded ears (the bib varies in size and in some individuals is almost absent).
- The pine marten probably arrived in Britain and Ireland soon after the end of the last glaciation, about 9,500 years ago. An animal of woodland, it would have been most numerous when Britain and Ireland had greater tree cover. It has been suggested that 6,500 years ago, pine martens were the second most common carnivore in Britain!
- Pine martens are solitary for most of the year, and each adult occupies a home range that varies from 20 to 3000+ hectares depending on the quality of the habitat.

Wildlife Vets International

www.wildlifevetsinternational.org

Wildlife Vets International (WVI) is a British registered charity, created in 2004 by a group of highly experienced zoo and wildlife vets to give conservation workers the specialist veterinary support and skills they need. WVI delivers veterinary expertise to endangered species conservation projects worldwide and works at the centre of field operations saving threatened and endangered animals. A particular strength is the education and training of local staff working hands-on in an animals' natural range. This capacity building ensures that

WVI delivers long-lasting benefits to projects, thereby contributing to sustainable solutions for protecting endangered species. Through working closely with zoos, conservation charities and governments, WVI is uniquely placed to provide help where it is needed most. WVI is currently providing veterinary expertise to the Pine Marten Recovery Project. For further information about WVI, please contact: Penny Cusdin: Tel 07497 813 516 | Email: p.cusdin@wildlifevetsinternational.org

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

The Vincent Wildlife Trust is a national charity engaged in mammal research and conservation. For more than 30 years, the Trust has made major contributions to the conservation of many of our rarer mammals, including the pine marten, otter, dormouse, water vole, polecat and the bats. Today, the Trust continues to concentrate on the needs of British and Irish mammals of conservation interest, with current work centred on the pine marten, polecat, stoat and the bats. The Trust also manages nearly 40 nature reserves in England, Wales and Ireland, most of which are horseshoe bat roosts. Read more at: www.vwt.org.uk

For more details, please contact The Vincent Wildlife Trust's CEO Natalie Buttriss or Lizzie Croose, Mustelid Officer on 01531 636441 or email enquiries@vwt.org.uk

Read more at: www.vwt.org.uk and www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk