

# Good Practice Guide: protecting Pine Martens during woodland management and forestry operations

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If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, then you:

- **must** take [reasonable avoidance measures to protect Pine Martens](#)
- **should** follow as many of the [Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Pine Martens](#) as you can.

## Introduction

The Pine Marten is a member of the mustelid family and was once widespread across Wales. Historically, its decline was driven by predator control and deforestation during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This led to functional extinction in Wales.

A major recovery effort led by the Vincent Wildlife Trust saw 51 individuals translocated from Scotland to mid-Wales between 2015 and 2017. These animals were released into suitable woodland habitats in Ceredigion and surrounding areas, and successful breeding has been recorded annually since the release. The population is now considered viable and expanding, with individuals dispersing far beyond the original release sites. However, the Pine Marten is classified as Critically Endangered in Wales as numbers remain low making the population vulnerable.

Pine Martens typically inhabit woodlands, but they are highly adaptable and have been recorded in upland montane areas, semi-natural grasslands, heathlands, and even coastal habitats.

Pine Martens require a habitat with diverse tree species and dense ground flora or scrub that supports small mammals, birds, invertebrates and fruits to provide a range of food throughout the year. They use a range of features such as denning sites, for example cavities in trees, squirrel dreys, windthrow and up-turned root plates, rock faces and old buildings. Natural den sites can be a limiting factor, and installing den boxes to create artificial denning sites can support breeding and population establishment.

The recovery of the Pine Marten in Wales is regarded as one of the most successful carnivore reintroduction efforts in Britain. Continued habitat protection, monitoring, and public engagement are essential to ensure the long-term viability of this charismatic woodland species.

## How are Pine Martens protected?

Pine Martens are a UK protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This means you must take reasonable measures to avoid harming them in a way that would be an offence, such as intentionally killing or injuring them, or intentionally or recklessly damaging, destroying or obstructing access to their dens, or disturbing Pine Martens whilst they are using their dens.

Whilst you should always aim to avoid any harm to protected species, a defence is available if harm occurs as the 'incidental result of a lawful operation' and 'could not reasonably have been avoided'. To rely on this defence, you will need to be able to demonstrate you took all reasonable measures to minimise the impact of your operation on the species. Showing that you followed the measures in this Good Practice Guide is one way to demonstrate that you did this.

Appropriate woodland management has an important role to play in maintaining the habitat conditions required by Pine Martens. However, forest operations can also be harmful if not managed sensitively.

If you cannot avoid an offence by following this guidance, a competent ecologist may be able to develop alternative, site-specific, ways of working to enable you to keep within the law.

NRW does not have the power to issue licences permitting harm to UK protected species for the purpose of forestry.

## Are Pine Martens using your woodland?

With the Mammal Society, we have produced a guide [Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#), containing specific advice on how to carry out surveys to check for protected species.

## Checking for records

If your site is within 10km of a Pine Marten record that is less than 10 years old, it is much more likely that Pine Marten will be using your woodland, and you will need to be particularly vigilant for evidence of their presence when you carry out your walkover survey.

If you apply for a felling licence, NRW will check for records. If we find records that suggest the presence of Pine Martens, we will usually add an environmental condition to your felling licence requiring that you follow the measures in this guide.

## Walkover survey

Surveying a woodland for Pine Martens will involve looking for signs of their presence and identifying and assessing any denning sites. Even if you have not found records, you should still keep a look out for evidence that suggests they are present.

[Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#) will assist a competent person to do this.

Signs of martens, include searching for scats (droppings) and footprints. Trail cameras can also be used to confirm presence, although it may take an extended period of time before conclusions can be made. These may confirm the presence of Pine Martens but they may not be reliable techniques to demonstrate absence.

You will need to identify potential denning sites and assess them for evidence of use, bearing in mind that legally you cannot disturb a Pine Marten without a survey licence. The clearest evidence of a denning site being in current use is the presence of multiple scats on top or around the site, particularly den boxes. These can be seen from a distance, without the need for a licence.

If your woodland has Pine Marten den boxes, you should contact the organisation responsible for putting them up for advice as early as possible. They are likely to have been monitoring usage and will be able to help you.

Before you can implement the preventive measures in the next section, you will need to have established the following:

1. Whether records, field signs or other evidence indicates that Pine Martens are using the woodland, if so:
  - a. the location of any denning sites, and
  - b. which (if any) of those denning sites show evidence of use as a natal den.

If you find that an historic record of a denning site relates to a feature that is no longer evident on the ground (such as an artificial den that has been lost), you may be able to discount these. However, to protect yourself, you should carefully record the evidence before you carry out any work, and you should still anticipate that martens will be using other potential denning sites in the area.

## Reasonable avoidance measures to protect Pine Martens

If you are relying on following this good practice to keep within the law, you will need to adhere to the following measures. If you cannot do this, a competent ecologist may be able to suggest site-specific mitigations that may allow you to deviate from these standard measures without causing an offence. If this is not possible, you may need to change your plans.

If you unexpectedly find evidence of the species during work, you should consider whether you are able to apply the measures in this guide or seek advice from a competent ecologist.

When working in a woodland where evidence indicates that Pine Marten may be present the following should be adhered to:

### **1. Protect active natal dens**

- You should not destroy, damage or disturb any active natal den between 1 March and 31 July.
- You should leave a 100 metre undisturbed protective buffer around active natal dens during this period

### **2. Protecting other denning sites**

- You should retain as many denning sites as possible, ideally with a buffer of undisturbed vegetation, even if they do not appear to be currently in use.

## **Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Pine Martens**

Managing your woodland in line with the UKFS can deliver significant benefits for wildlife. The actions below would be particularly valuable for Pine Martens, and will also support many other species:

### **1. Maintain diverse forest structures**

Retain a mix of tree ages and species. Retain some permanent open ground with dense ground cover for wildlife. Enhance woodland margins with berry-bearing shrubs like Vaccinium, bramble, and wild raspberry.

### **2. Plan restocking with native, fruit-bearing species**

Prioritize native species that produce edible fruits and seeds. Enhance food availability for a range of woodland species.

### **3. Retain deadwood and trees with cavities**

Keep standing and fallen deadwood, veteran trees, and cavity-bearing trees. These provide essential nesting and roosting sites.

### **4. Designate long-term retention and minimum intervention areas**

Continuous Cover Forest (CCF) and Long-Term Retention (LTR) management areas are particularly beneficial for Pine Martens as they provide improved foraging and denning opportunities. Manage some stands as long-term reserves to maintain structural complexity. Reduce disturbance and allow natural processes to develop.

### **5. Protect key habitat features**

Retain old buildings, caves, mine adits, rock outcrops, upturned root plates, large stumps, brash piles, and windthrow.

## Further information

You can find more useful information on survey techniques and positive management approaches for Pine Marten:

[Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#)

Managing forest and woodlands for Pine Martens Practical measures to protect and benefit the Pine Marten: [Pine-Martens-and-Forest-Management-Leaflet.pdf \(vwt.org.uk\)](#)