

The Polecat (*Mustela putorius*)

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In the spring of 1900, a single polecat was caught in a trap at Bradley, near Ashbourne in south west Derbyshire. The unlucky animal managed to escape, leaving one of its feet behind in the trap. It would be another 93 years before this once common and widespread predator was recorded in the county again. Following years of persecution by gamekeepers, the polecat was on the verge of extinction in England.

Return of the native

Once found right across Britain, by the start of the 20th century the polecat was restricted to the hill country of west Wales. With the loss of so many gamekeepers during the two World Wars, the level of persecution had dropped significantly by the middle of the century. Then, during the 1950s, myxomatosis arrived in Britain and quickly destroyed the last commercial rabbit trapping industries and with it the need to control rabbit predators. The polecat has been slowly but surely making its way out of the Welsh hills and into the lowlands of the English Midlands ever since.

Polecats in Derbyshire

On 27th June 1993, an adult male polecat was found dead on a road in the south west of the county, the first record of a wild polecat in Derbyshire for almost an entire century. Since then, polecats have spread back in to the county, moving slowly northwards and eastwards. Records held by Derbyshire Biological Records Centre still seem to show a population centred in the south and west, along the Staffordshire borders, but records have come from as far north as Glossop and as far east as Ripley.

The majority of these records have been of road traffic casualties. Up to 90% of polecat mortality in Britain is due to road traffic. The polecat's habit of feeding on carrion may partly explain why they are so often hit by cars.

'Our' polecat is the western polecat, a widespread animal across much of western and central Europe. It is replaced in eastern Europe and across Russia by the steppe polecat *Mustela eversmanni* and in south eastern Europe and central Asia by the marbled polecat *Vormela peregusna*.

In England, polecats are found mainly in lowland wooded country, especially in wet woodland and marshy areas. They are also particularly attracted to farm yards, where they hunt rats and rabbits. They are solitary, nocturnal animals and so rarely seen. Polecats breed during the summer; after mating in March, each female produces a litter of around five young during May-June. These young are weaned within one month and leave their maternal territory during the autumn.

The polecat is perhaps best known for its ability to produce a powerfully unpleasant smell as a defence against predation. The Latin name *Mustela putorius* means 'foul smelling musk bearer' while the old English name for the animal is 'Foul Mart'.

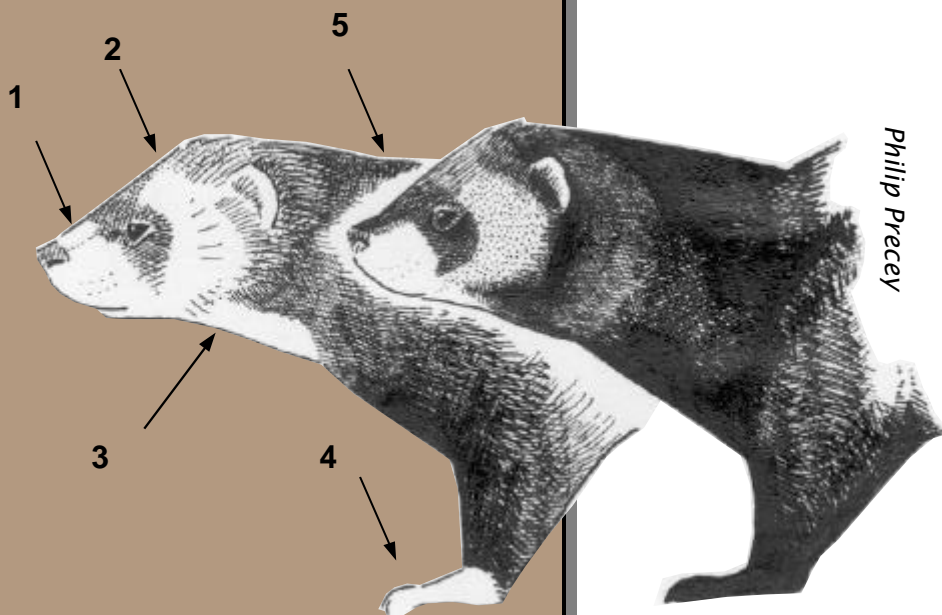
Polecats and Ferrets

While the polecat has long been persecuted, a close relative, the ferret *Mustela furo*, has been domesticated for hunting rabbits for even longer, since at least Roman times. In some areas, domestic ferrets have escaped (or been deliberately released) and both feral ferrets and hybrid polecat-ferrets have been recorded in the wild. While the most familiar ferrets tend to be white, albino animals, the darker polecat-ferrets can look extremely similar to 'true' wild polecats.

Ferrets (below, left) are best distinguished from polecats (below, right) by using a suite of five characteristics. If any animal possesses any of these five characteristics, it is a sign of ferret parentage and the animal is either a ferret or a hybrid.

Ferret Characteristics

- 1- Dark fur on the face does not reach right down to the nose.
- 2- Pale cheek patches and forehead often very extensive and do not contrast very much with the dark 'bandit' mask.
- 3- Pale throat patch longer than 5cm.
- 4- One or more pale paws.
- 5- Some scattered white guard hairs over the body, particularly towards the tail.



Phillip Precey

The majority of a polecat's diet will be made up of rabbits, rats and amphibians, although they will eat anything from a hare to an earthworm. Polecats have a particular reputation for killing frogs and toads. In spring, these may be collected in large numbers and stored in food caches. There are accounts of these caches being made up of live frogs, paralysed with a bite through the spine.

Protecting polecats in Derbyshire: what can you do?

- Look out for any signs of polecats. Contact the Wildlife Trust if you know of any places where polecats occur or used to occur, or if you see a dead polecat.
- If you own or manage land it may be possible to restore or create wetland habitats. Ponds, ditches and wet woodland are all valuable for polecats as well as a wealth of other wetland wildlife. Financial support may be available through local and national agri-environment schemes. Contact us for further information and advice.
- Join Derbyshire Wildlife Trust: your support will help us to manage our nature reserves to benefit polecats.



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