

Technical Guidance Series



Chartered
Institute of
Ecology and
Environmental
Management

In association with



Competencies for Species Survey: Polecat



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to set out the knowledge, skills and experience required to survey, disturb or to carry out research works (hereinafter referred to generically as 'survey') for the polecat *Mustela putorius* in a professional capacity. To be undertaking such work, CIEEM would consider attainment of the criteria outlined in this guidance to be a minimum for an individual to competently survey for polecats. The Institute aims to drive up standards in the ecological profession for the benefit not only of ecologists but also of the public.

This document does not provide guidance on the techniques to be employed in carrying out survey activities: references to published sources of guidance on survey methods are listed in Section 5.

2. Status

Polecats are habitat generalists with a restricted distribution in Britain following major range contractions due to historical persecution. Currently the main areas of distribution are throughout Wales and south and central England. However, populations continue to expand and there are also introduced populations spreading out of north-west England and parts of Scotland. Polecat-ferrets can be found from the north of Scotland down to south-west England and everywhere in between, although they are less common in the historic heartland of true polecats in Wales and central England. Polecat expansion may be limited by traffic and road densities in the future. Poisoning from an accumulation of rodenticides may also play a significant factor in the species distribution in some parts of the country. The polecat was added to the list of UK BAP priority species in 2007.

Polecats are absent from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

3. Legislation and Licensing

Legislation

Polecats are protected under the following legislation. This outline of legislation is not comprehensive and the appropriate legislation should always be consulted for a definitive list of offences.

COUNTRY	LEGISLATION GIVING PROTECTION	SCHEDULE OR ANNEX LISTING
<i>England</i>	Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)	Schedule 4 Schedule 6
<i>Wales</i>	Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)	Schedule 4 Schedule 6
<i>Scotland</i>	Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended)	Schedule 3

Licensing

The following Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations (SNCOs) are responsible for issuing licences to permit actions that would otherwise be illegal under the relevant legislation:

COUNTRY	SNCO
England	Natural England
Wales	Natural Resources Wales
Scotland	Scottish Natural Heritage

A licence *is* required: for work on polecats if the animals are to be trapped or taken with the use of an artificial light, such as a torch or spotlight.

A licence *is not* required: for polecat field sign surveys (although these are rarely used because of the inability to determine polecats from polecat-ferrets and ferrets) or for habitat appraisal or general ecological survey purposes.

It is the role of the appropriate licensing authority to define the criteria for issuing such licences as may be required for survey work, therefore, attainment of the skills set out is no guarantee that a licence will be obtained; other criteria will be need to be considered.

4. Knowledge, Skills and Experience

To independently and competently undertake survey involving polecats an individual would be expected to possess all of the following knowledge, skills and experience.

A surveyor needs to recognise their level of attainment along a continuum. Those without the breadth and depth of the knowledge, skills and experience that CIEEM consider a minimum, should always work with, or seek advice from, an adequately experienced individual.

Knowledge

Individuals should have a knowledge and understanding of:

- a. conservation status;
- b. distribution;
- c. threats to populations (including conflict issues), species range (including reintroduced populations) and species survival;
- d. polecat ecology, breeding biology and behaviour;
- e. known ecological requirements;
- f. legal protection;
- g. licensing and permissions;
- h. optimal survey seasons in terms of animal numbers, species behaviour and welfare concerns associated with breeding;
- i. current relevant guidance on survey methods and standards;
- j. survey methods used to survey for polecats (including trapping, marking/tagging and non-invasive surveys such as scat surveys, hair tubes, footprint plates) and the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of these methods;
- k. appropriate equipment, methods and licensing requirements for humane live-capture, handling and sedation¹ of polecats (if intending to use these techniques) and the legal issues surrounding potential by-catch;
- l. identification issues with polecats, ferrets and polecat-ferrets and the difficulties in separating the species by field signs;
- m. range of live traps available and their strengths and weaknesses;
- n. range of factors that might lead to bias in the survey results, and false negatives;
- o. sources of information on known occurrence and distribution of polecats (including NBN Gateway, national surveys, local biological/environmental records and local contacts/species groups);
- p. metadata standards / data sharing; and
- q. health and safety issues commonly associated with surveying for polecats.

Skills

Individuals should have skills and experience enabling them to:

- a. identify polecats, especially the distinguishing features between polecats and polecat-ferrets;
- b. assess habitat potential for polecats;
- c. scope fieldwork appropriately;
- d. plan and implement sound scientific surveys;
- e. analyse and interpret survey data; and
- f. take appropriate health and safety precautions.

If trapping is used, individuals should also be able to:

- a. deploy and monitor live traps effectively;
- b. legally and humanely handle live polecats;
- c. effectively record biometric data from live polecats;
- d. legally and humanely mark/tag polecats (if using this technique); and
- e. correctly handle and identify a range of potential by-catch from live-traps (with due regard to relevant legislation).

Practical Experience

Whilst some of the knowledge and skills set out in this guidance can effectively be gained from personal study, vocational training and structured education, applicants for polecat survey licences would also be expected to have gained the following practical experience, under the direct supervision of a licensed polecat surveyor:

- a. at least 7 trapping sessions where polecats or polecat-ferrets are caught. A cumulative total of at least 100 trap-nights should be expected;
- b. experience in the processing of catches, taking of biometric data, identification of animals in the field, recording of data and, if relevant, insertion and reading of PIT tags (in addition to the active survey time above); and
- c. completion of a specialised training course on mustelid (including polecats) ecology and survey techniques, or an equivalent level of training (e.g. through an in-house training programme).

5. Reading

The following references are essential reading for those wishing to gain the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to survey for polecats.

¹ Anyone applying sedatives to animals for research purposes must be a vet or licensed under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986

Birks JDS (2008) *The Polecat Survey of Britain 2004-2006: A report on the Polecat's distribution, status and conservation*. The Vincent Wildlife Trust, London.

Birks JDS and Kitchener AC (eds) (1999) *The Distribution and Status of the Polecat Mustela putorius in Britain in the 1990s*. The Vincent Wildlife Trust, London.

6. Acknowledgements

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