

## BRITISH MAMMALS

### THE POLECAT IN WALES

By WILLIAM CONDRY

Like that of several other British mammals the distribution of the polecat has not yet been fully investigated. For one thing, being a creature of the night and mainly haunting sparsely inhabited uplands or the wilder parts of the lowlands, it is a difficult and often inaccessible subject for study. There is the further complication that ferrets, which are apparently not descended from *our* polecat but, some authorities say, from a North African species, have for many centuries been escaping and crossing with wild polecats so that perhaps nowhere can the polecat be claimed to be a "pure" species. Besides, rabbiters frequently interbreed tame polecats with ferrets. The resulting polecat-ferrets, usually piebald creatures, have been used for rabbiting in various parts of Britain, where many have escaped and formed local populations of "polecats". This spread of polecat-ferrets has been much accelerated by the intensification of rabbiting which has taken place since 1939 and accounts for the many recent "polecat" records from areas known not to hold true wild polecats: the Home Counties, the Isle of Man, Mull, etc. Since these hybrids usually show much cream on back, head, or flanks, it might be thought that, being easily separated from genuine polecats, they would not complicate the distribution-map. Unfortunately some of these hybrids, and we do not know how numerous they may be, are all dark and indistinguishable from wild polecats. There are several apparently reliable accounts from central Wales of white female ferrets going wild for a few weeks and eventually returning to captivity leading families of absolutely dark young "polecats". And since these may quite easily be sold elsewhere in Britain, it is not surprising that very genuine looking "polecats" turn up in unexpected places.

Where then can polecats be safely said to be genuinely wild? The answer appears to be only Wales and the Marches, probably Devon and Cornwall, and possibly the Lake District. Formerly common, they have now gone from Scotland and the rest of England. But mid-Wales is undoubtedly their stronghold. Put a compass-point on Aberystwyth and draw a semi-circle forty miles in diameter and you would include most of the real polecat country. There the animal is really common almost everywhere: that is in the counties of Cardigan, Merioneth, west

Montgomery, Radnor and Brecon. Outside that rough half-circle the population thins out: there are polecats in Caernarvonshire and Pembrokeshire and in the western parts of some of the English counties bordering mid-Wales, but they are fewer. About the situation in the four corners of Wales—the north-east, the south-east, the Lleyn Peninsula and west Pembrokeshire—very little appears to be known. From conversations I have had with naturalists, keepers, farmers and rabbit-trappers I would say that the polecat has been steadily common in at least the centre of its present range throughout living memory. I therefore find it difficult to accept the statement by L. Harrison Matthews in his *British Mammals* (1952) that the polecat was “nearly extinct” in “the early years of the present century”, though it may have been rather local. It seems probable that the polecat is most numerous at the centre of its Welsh stronghold: in north Cardiganshire and south Merioneth. It is in that district that are to be found remarkable colour varieties—which have nothing to do with polecat-ferrets—varying from a light straw to a rich, red brown, and summarily known as “red” polecats. Records of the “red” polecat were collected and summarized by F. S. Wright in a paper in *The Zoologist* in 1916. All were in mid or north Cardiganshire. After that time there was a general increase of polecats and eventually the “red” variety began to appear on the north side of the Dovey estuary, seventeen being killed by keepers near Aberdovey up to February, 1932. The “red” variety still persists—I saw a beautiful fox-coloured specimen at Ynyslas, north Cardiganshire, in 1953—but no further extension of its range has been authentically reported.

A remarkable feature about the polecat is the great variety of habitats it can flourish in. Polecats are found in Wales from the coast right up into the hills, and are as much at home in sand-dunes and sea-cliffs as they are about lowland farms, wild wooded gorges, or the margins of bogs. Rabbit-meat is their staple food but some live quite independently of it, for there are polecats but no rabbits in some of the moorland plantations of the Forestry Commission near the head of the Severn. In such places voles are perhaps their commonest prey.

Polecats seem to be most numerous in that rough, semi-upland, marginal farm country of which there is so much in mid-Wales and which is so often overrun with rabbits. For it is in ground honey-combed with warrens that polecats thrive best, where they find plenty of food and endless underground galleries in which to lie up in the daytime and where they can have their

litters in comparative safety. Rabbit holes in the earth banks round fields are much favoured by polecats. There their hunger must be fully satisfied by rabbit meat, for although they are often found very close to farms they very rarely attack poultry, despite the reputation as chicken killers which they have had since medieval times.

An often repeated belief about the polecat in Wales is that it is particularly common on Tregaron Bog, Cardiganshire. This, I am sure, is misleading. It is true that the area round Tregaron Bog is excellent polecat country but the bog itself is unsuited to polecats: much of the ground is too wet and what is dry offers very few holes or other possible retreats. So the bog is probably a feeding-ground and not more so than is any other stretch of rough country where voles, frogs and small birds are plentiful. Indeed frogs, which are said to be much sought after by polecats, are not so very common on Tregaron Bog.

What can be said about the prospects of the polecat in Wales? At first sight the species looks safe enough. Yet it is not at all certain that it will remain so.

Though it has profited enormously from the diminution in game preservation, it has suffered greatly from the intensive rabbit trapping of recent years. Polecats are very easily trapped in gins and, as they have not the rabbit's power of speedy reproduction, may be exterminated over wide areas by repeated trapping. The same must apply to areas holding polecats and rabbits which are subjected to extensive gassing. Fortunately for the polecat, intensive rabbit trapping has been confined to areas where it is most profitable and there are very large areas of Wales, especially the wooded valleys and uplands, which have not been affected.

It is certain that the polecat's future is, to a large extent, tied up with that of the rabbit; for although polecats can live independently of rabbits, they thrive best where rabbits are plentiful. Probably at present the polecat is still increasing and, where rabbit trapping is on a small scale, even extending its range.