

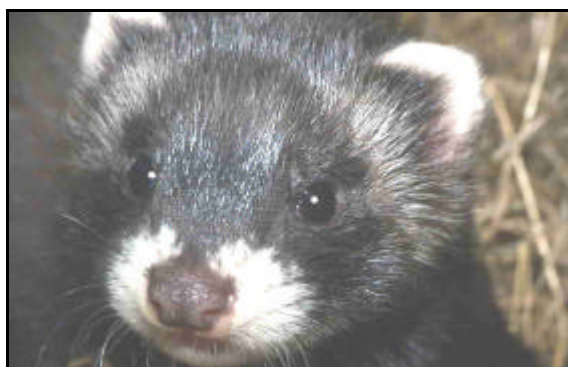
# POLECAT & MINK ABUNDANCE MONITORING FEEDBACK FOR RECORDERS FROM THE VINCENT WILDLIFE TRUST

**Number 5, August 2007**

*Sadly Johnny Birks, the VWT's carnivore expert, has moved on to pastures new, although he will still be contributing to this project. Our thanks go to Johnny for his great vision in setting up this important monitoring work. We also thank all who contributed to the 2006 monitoring – without you we would have no scheme! We are always keen to enlist more volunteers for the coming autumn, so please ask any potential new recorders to contact us before September 2006 if you feel they would be interested. Apart from needing to be drivers, they must be able to identify polecats and mink with confidence.*

## 1. Number and distribution of recorders

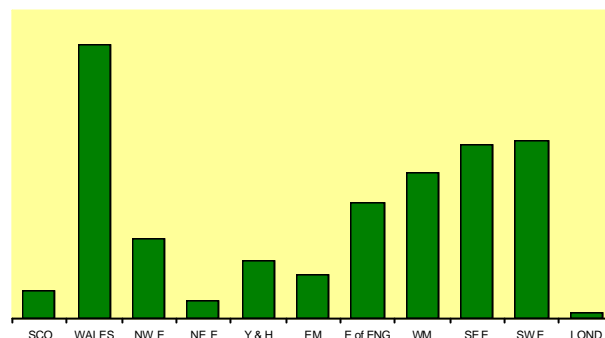
76 recorders returned forms for the 2006 season, one more than last year. **We are extremely keen to recruit new recorders who live in the following under recorded regions: Scotland, NW England, NE England, Yorks & Humberside, E Midlands and London.**



*Young polecat (photo - Johnny Birks)*

## 2. Distribution of observer effort

Recorders covered 292,306 kilometres over the two target months, slightly more than last year. Wales continues to hold the lead in terms of total distance travelled, although even here the overall figure has declined by about 50% since the project started in 2002. In some areas, such as Scotland, the reduction has been nearer to 75%. In other areas, most notably the East of England, the distance travelled has increased substantially since 2002. The main reason for these trends is the changing number of recorders from year to year. We adjust for variations in observer effort when we produce our abundance indices, so this isn't a big problem for us. However, the more recorders we have and the more miles travelled, the more representative and reliable our results are.



*Variation in observer effort (kilometres driven) during 2006 across the 11 regions.*

## 3. Numbers of polecats and mink

57 polecats (86 in 2005) and 20 mink (10 in 2005) were recorded as road casualties during the two-month window. The distribution of all these is shown on the map overleaf. In addition, three live polecats were seen, one on roads in Wales and two on roads in the West Midlands. Polecats were recorded in 7 (8 in 2005) and mink in 7 (4 in 2005) of the 11 regions.

## 4. Abundance indices

From the outset our 'measure' of change has been an abundance index, based on the number of road casualties recorded per 5000km driven by all observers in each region. This has its problems in that for many regions the number of animals seen is quite small, and changes of even one animal between years can make a large difference to the index. As well as the index for 2006 and the change from 2005, we now show the mean index for previous groups of three years (a moving mean) to try to even out yearly fluctuations. This makes any trend easier to see by 'smoothing out' big annual swings.

Region	Index 2002-4	Index 2003-5	Index 2004-6	2006 index	2005-6 change
Scotland	1.05	1.05	1.05	0	0%
Wales	1.94	1.96	1.96	2.11	-12.0%
NW Eng	1.36	1.34	1.13	0.49	-65.9%
NE Eng	0.49	1.61	1.61	0	-100%
Y & H	0.25	0.12	0.12	0	0%
E Mids	0.81	0.78	0.78	0.81	+86.4%
E of E	0.53	0.57	0.33	0.20	-40.0%
W Mids	3.60	3.85	2.58	1.46	-55.9%
SE Eng	0.64	0.90	0.56	0.41	-62.8%
SW Eng	0.75	0.70	0.63	0.36	-33.0%
London	0	0	0	0	0%
All	1.04	1.17	0.98	0.97	-28.6%

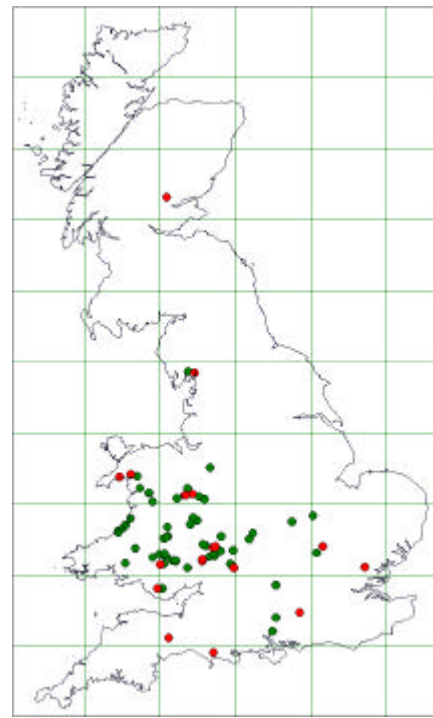
*Polecat indices for 2006 and three-year moving means.*

The combined index for the whole country over both months was 0.97 for polecats (1.48 for 2005) and 0.34 for mink (0.17 for 2005). Whilst for polecats these bare figures suggest a decline, when compared with the three-year 'moving means' no great change is evident. For mink, the picture is different, as the index has exactly doubled and twice as many animals were recorded. If this trend continues it should be possible for us to present meaningful abundance indices at a regional level.

Predictably there were some marked regional variations. The large increase in the index for the east Midlands (86% from 2005) could be more evidence of the polecat's establishment in this region. Elsewhere the picture appears to be less encouraging, although in many of these regions the number of recorders is fairly small and this can lead large annual variations. However, some regions have many recorders, with high mileages driven and (usually) good numbers of polecats seen. The west Midlands is one of these and the big decline here (-42% from 2005) is not easily explained. It is possible that this represents a real decline in the species.



*Litter of young polecats (photo – J. Birks)*



*Locations of road casualty mink (red) and polecats (green) recorded during 2006.*

## 5. 2007 and beyond

We shall repeat this monitoring exercise every autumn (September and October) in order to provide data on long-term changes in abundance. The more recorders we can involve over a wide area, the better those data will be! So please consider passing this newsletter on to a friend or two and ask them to get in touch with us here at the VWT by email to [jmessenger@vwt.org.uk](mailto:jmessenger@vwt.org.uk).

As ever we welcome comments from recorders on how the exercise is working from your point of view. We hope all existing recorders will participate again. Please tell us if you have changed your postal or email address and don't forget we are still offering free VWT publications (up to the start of the 2008 monitoring) for recorders who return their completed forms.

## 6. The 2004-2006 Polecat Distribution Survey.

The recording period has finished now and Johnny Birks is writing-up the report.

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