

## Polecats are Back in the Hitchin Area...<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteenth century and before, wild polecats were to be found in this part of the world. They were less than popular, indeed there was a price on their heads; the earliest records of these creatures in Hertfordshire are not from notes by naturalists, but churchwarden's accounts, which record payments made for captured or killed animals. The earliest is from 1687:

Pd for six poulcats . . . . . 00 02 00<sup>2</sup>

That's 4d a piece, a reasonable price for the time. The records show polecats and sparrows both had a pretty lean time of it, as they appear together, for example in 1748:

Paid for Poulcats 5s 4d and for Sparrows  
7s & 10d in all 0 13 2

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the animals were getting pretty scarce, and were eventually wiped out.

I suppose we'd better make clear what a polecat is. It's the wild carnivore from which domesticated ferrets are descended. There are differences, but ignoring colour – some ferrets are albino - they most too subtle for my eye.

And there the story would end. But... (there had to be a "but"). Over the last couple of years I have seen some dead animals in the area, at the side of the road. One was on the Wymondley Bypass; another on the Old London Road, about a mile outside Hitchin; and the third on the Priory Bypass.

My first thought was, "These are mink." When I looked more closely at the last victim of our busy roads, I realised that it WASN'T a mink at all. Its face was too rounded, and it had a light coloured muzzle and light eyebrows. It was a lighter brown on its sides, too.

It was then I did what I should have done much earlier: I looked up mink in Michael Clark's excellent book, *Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of Hertfordshire*. And right next door to the entry for mink was the solution: a section on

polecats. They've been reintroduced to the wild in Hertfordshire.

And they seem to have been breeding very successfully, because they've reached us already from one of their release points:

1981-2	Tewin, Bramfield, Broxbourne Woods and Essendon
1992-4	Watton-at-Stone, Ashridge, and again at Broxbourne Woods

So next time you think you see a mink, consider the possibility it might be a polecat. Mink follow watercourses, so if it's in a dry area, it might well be our indigenous carnivore. And mink have sharper faces, all one deep brown colour, with the exception of a white chin; polecats have the light patches above their eyes and on their muzzle already referred to, and are rounder of feature.



Above: A fine polecat. (Jane Parsons, Gem Ferret Care Group)

I can't help thinking the reintroduction of this indigenous mammal is good news, except perhaps for the polecat's prey animals – rabbits, rats, voles, frogs, toads, small birds, insects and the like; the same sort of prey as stoats and weasels, to which they are related (though it's worth noting that polecats will also take advantage of carrion)."

Simon Walker



<sup>1</sup> Much of the background information for this short article comes from *Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of Hertfordshire*, by Michael Clark, TPL, 2001 (ISBN 1 84019 012 4).

<sup>2</sup> The sums given are in pounds, shillings and pence, but they're given in different formats. 00 02 00 is no pounds, two shillings and no pence. There were twelve pence to the shilling, and twenty shillings to the pound. For those of us who remember the old currency this isn't that confusing, but for younger people...