

**DEER**

There are three species of feral deer in Northern Ireland today, the red, sika and fallow. The red deer is the largest species. It has a red-brown coat with no spots and a cream-coloured rump. Japanese sika and fallow deer are both smaller. Sika may vary in colour from chestnut to yellow with spots which are less noticeable in winter. Most fallow deer are reddish fawn colour with white spots. Both sika and fallow deer have white rumps but the fallow has a black stripe down its tail. The antlers of the males are different in each species. Red stags have large branched antlers with up to 6 points on each side while those of sika stags are smaller with no more than 4 points. Fallow stags have flattened antlers with small prongs.

The red deer is the only native species. Fallow deer were introduced by the Normans for hunting on their parks and estates while sika deer were first released in County Wicklow in 1860. Red deer prefer open thickets or moorland while sika favors dense scrub. Fallow deer are usually found in and around mature woodland. Sika and fallow deer are most active at dawn and dusk while red deer are active throughout the 24 hours. Deer are herbivores and will feed on a wide variety of vegetation including grasses, heather, brambles, tree shoots, lichens and even seaweed when available.

There are no predators in Ireland large enough to tackle adult deer. Most fatalities are due to starvation, severe weather or culling to control numbers.

**CONSERVATION OF MAMMALS**

In Northern Ireland 12 species of terrestrial mammal are fully protected by law under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. These animals may not be intentionally killed, injured or caught nor may their place of shelter be damaged or obstructed. There are a few exceptions to this law, for instance where an animal is injured accidentally or where a license has been issued.

The remaining mammals are not specifically protected as they are not threatened. In fact some species like rabbits, rats and foxes are considered to be pest species whose numbers need to be controlled. However only certain humane methods can be used to kill or trap wild animals.

The law regarding wild animals is described in more detail in the booklet "The Wildlife Law and You".



DEER

**WILDLIFE****FOXES**

The red fox is present throughout most of the Northern Hemisphere. It is also widespread in Australia to where it was introduced in 1850 for the hunt. Foxes are very dog-like in appearance but have a more slender muzzle and a bushy tail. They are about the size of a small dog. Most are a rusty brown colour with paler belly, black ears and socks and a white tip to the tail, though colours can vary enormously.

Most habitats in Northern Ireland have a resident population of foxes, for example open moorland, sand dunes, farmland and city streets. Surprisingly foxes tend to be more numerous in urban areas than in the countryside because food is more plentiful in towns. They are omnivorous and will happily scavenge from rubbish dumps, litter bins and bird tables. In the countryside they will take rabbits, rats, birds, carrion, insects, earthworms, fruit and berries.

Adult foxes are generally nocturnal and sleep above ground during the day. They only retire into earths when the weather is bad or when rearing cubs. Earths may be dug in banks or rabbit warrens or under sheds. Old badger sets, rock crevices, drains and ditches may also be used. Road traffic accidents are the main cause of fox deaths. Many are shot or trapped though these control measures rarely reduce fox populations.

**PINE MARTENS**

The pine marten, the most elusive of all Irish mammals, belongs to the same family (Mustelidae) as stoats, badgers, otters, and mink. It is larger and more cat-like than stoats or ferrets and has a bushy tail. The fur is a rich chocolate brown with a cream patch over the throat and chest. The inside of the ears is also cream while the legs and tail tend to be black.

During the 19th Century habitat loss and trapping drastically reduced pine marten numbers and today they mainly occur in Fermanagh and Armagh. Pine Martens prefer open woods with plenty of shrubs and undergrowth although they can also be found on pasture, moorland and coastal sites. They are generally nocturnal emerging from their dens at sunset to hunt for small mammals, birds, insects, berries and fruit.



FOX



PINE MARTEN

Dens may be found in any sheltered site including rock falls, hollow trees, squirrel dreys or nest boxes.

Pine martens are well adapted to climbing trees but they prefer to travel and hunt on the ground. Most pine martens are killed by man, either on the roads or by shooting and trapping despite legal protection.

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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## OTTERS

After deer and badgers, otters are the largest Irish mammal, bigger even than cats and foxes. Their bodies are long, thin and sinuous like a stoat but they are more powerfully built and have a long tapering tail. Their coats are dark brown with a cream patch on the throat and chest. The otter's streamlined shape, powerful body and webbed toes make it very agile in the water.

Otters can be found throughout Ireland but are scarce in England due to pollution of water courses. Lakes, rivers, streams, marshes and coastal areas are all suitable habitats but pollution, river management and human interference can reduce their range. They are rarely seen but their presence can be detected by their droppings (called spraints) on stones or tree stumps along a river bank. Spraints often contain recognizable fish remains such as bones and scales.

During the day otters lie up in dense cover or burrows called holts. Most of these are natural cavities in the river bank formed by spreading tree roots. Otters feed mainly on fish but will take any available prey such as frogs, waterfowl, rabbits and seashore crabs.

In the past otters were hunted for their skins or for sport. Today they are protected throughout the United Kingdom. The main causes of death are from road traffic or becoming caught in fish traps or lobster pots.



OTTERS

## MINK

The mink is one of the most recent additions to the fauna of Ireland. They were imported from North America in the early 1950s to stock fur farms from where some escaped to establish feral populations. Mink can now be found along waterways throughout the Province. Mink can be distinguished from otters by their dark brown fur, slightly bushy tail and smaller size (smaller than a cat).

Like otters, mink are normally associated with aquatic or coastal habitats. They prefer lakes and river banks with thick vegetation but may move away from the waters edge after prey such as rabbits. Mink are mostly nocturnal and spend the day hidden in dens below water-side trees, in rabbit burrows or among rocks. They will take whatever prey they come across including rabbits, fish, rats, frogs and birds.

Mink have successfully colonised Ireland without seriously affecting the numbers of prey species or competitors which suggests that they are exploiting an ecological niche which was previously unoccupied.



MINK



STOAT

## STOATS

The stoat has a long slender body, short legs and a long tail. The coat is red-brown or ginger-brown above with whitish undersides and the tip of the tail is black. Irish stoats do not turn white in winter like their relatives in colder countries. Stoats are present across most of the Northern Hemisphere and have been introduced in to New Zealand. Stoats can be found in any habitat which offers cover and prey such as farmland, woodland, moors, marshes and mountains. They avoid open land and fields by travelling along hedgerows and stone walls. They are very agile and can swim and climb trees well.

Stoats do not make their own dens; they simply take over those of their prey or utilize a natural hole or crevice. The stoat is a small but ferocious predator that can kill prey much larger than itself. Rabbits, rats, mice, birds and eggs are regularly taken while earthworms, insects and berries may be eaten when food is scarce.

Stoat numbers tend to be cyclical, peaking when prey is abundant and then crashing when it becomes scarce. Many stoats are killed on the roads or fall victim to other carnivores and birds of prey. Trapping of stoats is less common today than in the past. The weasel, which is very similar to the stoat except that it does not have a black tip to its tail, does not occur in Ireland though in some areas stoats are often called weasels.



BADGER

## BADGERS

Badgers are the largest member of the Mustelidae family in Ireland. They can be found throughout the British Isles, Europe and temperate Asia as far east as Japan. A badger is about the size of a small dog. It has a stout, rounded, bear-like body with short powerful legs and a comparatively small head. The head is white with two distinctive broad black stripes down over the eyes. The ears are small and black with white tips. The body and tail appear grey while the under-parts and legs are black.

Underground badger dens called setts may be dug in woodland, hedgerows, embankments and even under roads or buildings. They prefer sites where woodland and pasture occur side by side. Badgers are mainly nocturnal emerging from the sett around dusk. They are omnivorous and feed on a wide range of animals and plants. Earthworms are their most important food, but insects, small mammals, carrion, cereals, fruit, roots and frogs are also taken when available.

Most badgers in Northern Ireland die as a result of road traffic accidents. Some are killed illegally for the barbaric sport of badger-baiting.