

Polecats and Ferrets

how to tell them apart





About the polecat

The European polecat (*Mustela putorius*) is a small, native carnivore related to weasels and otters. It has a long, slender body and a distinctive eye mask. Polecats are shy, mostly nocturnal animals and are rarely seen. They are solitary, although mothers and kits may be seen together during the summer months.

Polecats are expanding their range in Britain, while ferrets (*Mustela furo*) occur in some areas as escaped or feral animals. Because polecats are the wild ancestors of domestic ferrets, the two can interbreed and produce fertile offspring known as polecat-ferrets

or hybrids. Hybrids are more often found where polecat numbers are low. However, studies have found some wild polecats also have hybrid genetic makeup and so visual identification is not definitive, but it is pragmatic.

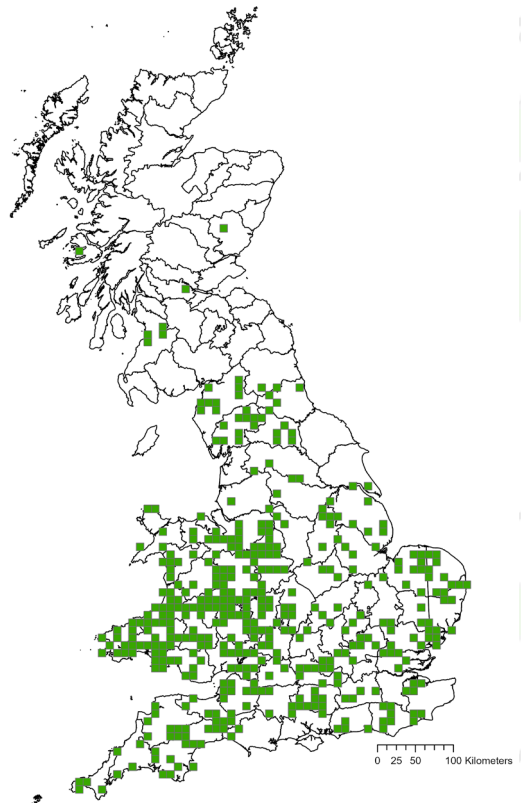
The only reliable ways to distinguish polecats from ferrets are by DNA analysis or close examination of the coat (pelage) and skull. This is not usually feasible, so behaviour and physical features can help with identification. This leaflet outlines the key characteristics used to distinguish polecats, ferrets and hybrids.

Polecats in Britain

Following centuries of persecution that resulted in extinction across much of its British historical range, the European polecat has been naturally recovering and re-colonising Britain.

Beginning in 1993, Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT), with the help of citizen scientists, has carried out National Polecat Surveys at around ten-year intervals. These surveys have shown a continual and gradual expansion in polecat distribution across Wales and areas of central and southern England—however it is still absent from most of Scotland, where it is classed as Endangered on the UK Red List.

The true distribution of polecats may be masked by the presence of hybrid polecat-ferrets, which can easily be misidentified as polecats. Polecats can also be easily confused with the invasive American mink.



Map showing the distribution of verified polecat records from the 2024-2025 National Polecat Survey.

Polecat coat (pelage) character

Pale cheek patches and possible frontal band contrast with dark facial 'mask'

Dark fur on face extends to nose



No white throat patch or less than 50mm long

Dark fur on all paws

No scattered white guard hairs over body

Seasonal variation

Polecats and ferrets moult twice a year, once in the spring and again in the autumn. Summer polecats and ferrets have a darker and shorter pelage than winter animals. In winter, the pale underfur on the flanks and back shows through more to give a paler appearance. The frontal band and cheek patches may also be more extensive in winter, but always are highly contrasting with the facial mask in polecats.

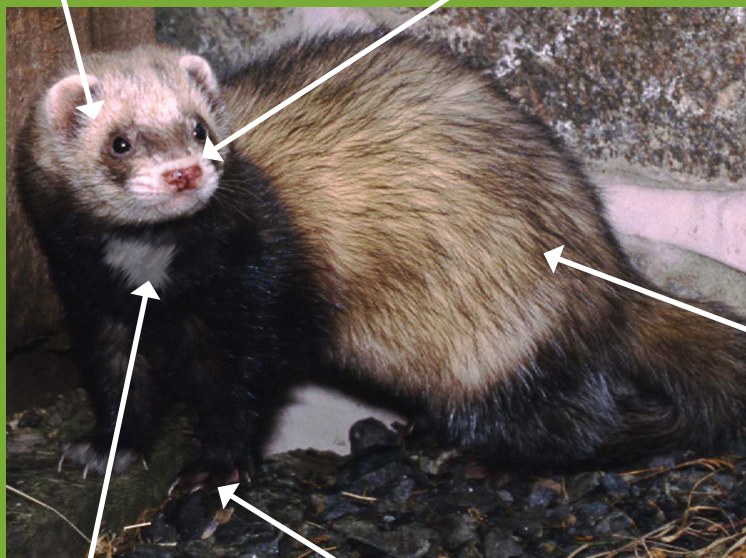
Erythristic polecats

There is a reddish coat colour mutation, known as erythrism, which has been occasionally recorded in polecats in Wales and Oxfordshire, but which could potentially occur anywhere.

Ferret coat (pelage) character

Pale cheek patches and frontal band often extensive and contrast poorly with dark facial 'mask'

Dark fur on face does not reach nose



Scattered white guard hair on body especially hindquarters and tail

White throat patch present and 50mm or more in length

White fur on one or more paws

Any animal with a mixture of polecat and ferret characters is usually by definition a hybrid. These are often bred deliberately in captivity and are often known as polecat-ferrets.

Ferrets may vary considerably in colouration from creamy white to dark brown like polecats – and polecat-ferrets are equally varied and therefore may be very difficult to distinguish from true polecats in the field. However, there are several distinguishing characters that may be used to tell them apart. Note that not all ferret pelage characters shown here are present in every ferret.

Where do polecats live?

Polecats live in a mix of habitats, including woodlands, farmland, hedgerows and wetlands. They shelter in dens such as burrows, tree roots or old rabbit holes, and prefer areas with plenty of cover.

What do polecats eat?

Polecats are opportunistic hunters and will eat what is available, including the following.

- Rabbits (a key food source)
- Rodents, including rats and mice, and other small mammals
- Common birds and their eggs
- Amphibians (like frogs)

Polecats can help to control pest species such as rabbits and rodents.

When do polecats breed?

- Mating happens in spring (March-May)
- Females give birth to 3-10 kits in early summer
- Young kits stay with their mother for 2-3 months
- The young disperse in autumn to find their own territories

How long do polecats live?

In the wild, polecats typically live for 3-5 years, though some can live longer. Many are killed on our busy roads.

Are polecats legally protected?

Yes. Polecats are protected under Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is illegal to intentionally kill, injure, or trap them without a licence.







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