

European Squirrel Initiative

The Pine Marten

The European Squirrel Initiative (ESI) has been actively involved in the potential role of the pine martens to help control grey squirrels for a number of years. It was one of the early funders of Emma Sheehy's work. ESI has always taken the view that its position will be guided by evidence and science. To that end it organised a symposium in London in June 2016 at which a range of scientists, conservationist, foresters and landowners presented their views.

In April 2018 ESI organised a "field trip" to Northern Ireland to examine the impact of pine martens on the ground taking evidence from landowners, gamekeepers, conservationists, scientists and others.

ESI is of the view that while there is a considerable amount of scientific debate surrounding the potential of pine martens it thought it important to consult with those people who experience them first hand in their environment. Pine Martens have been present in Ireland for a number of years, and by talking to those who experience their impact, not only on grey squirrels but also other fauna, first hand would help ESI inform its position.

While there is evidence that pine martens eat grey squirrels (and red squirrels), it is as yet unclear how significant this predation might be. Therefore, while recognising that there is clear evidence that grey squirrel numbers significantly decline when pine marten populations reach a certain level, it also recognised that concerns remain regarding the potential negative impacts that they may have on other fauna, such as wild birds, poultry or game.

The Northern Ireland experience clearly indicated that while pine martens may have an impact on other fauna, on balance it may not be significant. It is also recognised that grey squirrel, themselves, do have an impact on wild birds and that a reduction in grey squirrel numbers through pine marten predation would on the whole be potentially beneficial.

ESI believes that pine martens have a role to play in controlling grey squirrels in certain geographical locations within the UK. Upland, or semi-upland, areas are clearly best suited, while their presence in lowland Britain may be less effective, or indeed not tolerated, for a number of reasons. Part of the concern is that as pine martens are heavily protected, there must be mechanisms in place to control populations should their numbers get out of control or if there is a problem individual causing significant collateral damage. The control mechanisms must be easily accessible and quickly applied.

ESI supports the natural spread and further releases of pine martens on a local and specifically targeted basis providing adequate protocols and controls are in place to ensure that researchers and landowners can control problem animals and stop any unintended collateral damage or other consequences.

ESI does not support any illegal releases of wildlife or the widespread release of pine martens in an uncontrolled way.

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