

Feral Ferret, *Mustela furo*

Overview

Short description of *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

The ferret is descended from the European polecat, with which it may be conspecific, although the steppe polecat may also be an ancestor. It is a large mustelid, larger than a stoat. Colour may range from dark brown to yellowish-white (albino). Some show the polecat's masked face and distinctive pelage pattern.

Description of *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret status in GB

Feral ferrets are established on Jersey, the Isle of Man and on many islands of the Hebrides. Apparently viable populations also occur in scattered locations in northern mainland GB. The GB population in 1995 was thought to number around 2,500 animals.

Habitat summary: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Feral populations occur in a range of lowland habitats in GB including moorland, heathland, and shores. In New Zealand, the species is abundant and widespread in a range of lowland habitats.

Author's name:

John Marchant

Last updated:

May 29th, 2012

We try to keep these factsheets up to date, however if you notice any issues please contact us

Overview table

Environment:	Terrestrial
Species status:	Non-Native
Native range:	Asia-Temperate, Asia-Tropical, Middle Europe, Southwestern Europe, Southeastern Europe, Eastern Europe, Only known in cultivation, Cultivation
Functional type:	Predator
Status in England:	Non-Native
Status in Scotland:	Non-Native
Status in Wales:	Non-Native
Location of first record:	first record is unknown (ancient)
Date of first record:	Unknown

Invasion history: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Origin

The origin of the ferret is as a domestic animal, descended from wild polecats in southern Europe, used to help catch rabbits and farmed for fur.

First Record

Ferrets have been kept in GB since early Norman times. A mixed population of ferrets and introduced polecats became established on Mull (Scotland) in the 1930s.

Pathway and Method

Many occurrences of ferrets in the wild in GB probably result from escapes from captivity or are unwanted pets. In the 1950s, when the GB rabbit population fell

sharply and ferreting became less viable, large numbers of ferrets were abandoned in the wild. As recently as 1986 they have been released onto Scottish islands in attempts to control rabbits.

Species Status

The feral ferret is the most abundant introduced mustelid in New Zealand, where it was introduced for rabbit control. It now preys partly on rare native birds there and acts as a reservoir for bovine tuberculosis. In GB, escapes and releases on the mainland have apparently had low rates of survival and have not generally formed viable populations.

Ecology & Habitat: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Dispersal Mechanisms

There is little evidence of dispersal among feral ferrets in GB.

Reproduction

Feral ferrets are more social than polecats and often live in family groups.

Known Predators/Herbivores

None known.

Resistant Stages

None known.

Habitat Occupied in GB

Feral ferret populations occupy a range of lowland habitats including moorland, heathland and shores.

Distribution: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Viable populations existed in the 1990s on Shetland, the Outer Hebrides, Islay, Bute, Arran, the Isle of Man and Jersey.

Impacts: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Environmental Impact

Feral ferrets on the Isle of Harris are reported to have been responsible for the loss of ptarmigan from the Outer Hebrides. Predation occurs on rare ground-nesting birds on Shetland and other Scottish islands. Interbreeding with the native European polecat has apparently been widespread in GB, with potentially important consequences for polecat conservation.

Health and Social Impact

None known.

Economic Impact

Polecat x ferret crosses on Mull were reported to have taken a toll on domestic poultry.

References & Links: *Mustela furo*, Feral Ferret

Identification

Harris, S. & Yalden, D.W. (2008) *Mammals of the British Isles: Handbook*. Fourth edition. The Mammal Society, Southampton.

Wilson, D.E. & Mittermeier, R.A. (eds) (2009) *Handbook of the Mammals of the World*. Volume 1: Carnivores. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.

Biology, ecology, spread, vectors

Cowan, D.P. (1984) The use of ferrets (*Mustela furo*) in the study and management of the European wild rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). *Journal of Zoology, London*, **204**, 570–574.

Davison, A., Birks, J.D.S., Griffiths, H.I., Kitchener, A.C., Biggins, D. & Butlin, R.K. (1999) Hybridization and the phylogenetic relationship between polecats and domestic ferrets in Britain. *Biological Conservation*, **87**, 155–161.

Howes, C.A. (1980) Aspects of the history and distribution of polecats and ferrets in Yorkshire and adjacent areas. *Naturalist*, **105**, 3–16.

Medina, F.M. & Martín, A. (2010) A new invasive species in the Canary Islands: a naturalized population of ferrets *Mustela furo* in La Palma Biosphere Reserve. *Oryx*, **44**, 41–44. doi: 10.1017/S0030605309990743

Management and impact

Jeffares, R. (1986) The feral ferret in New Zealand. *New Zealand Wildlife*, **10**, 43–46.

Spurr, E.B., Ogilvie, S.C., Morse, C.W. & Young, J.B. (2005) Development of a toxic bait for control of ferrets (*Mustela furo*) in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Zoology*, **32**, 127–136.

General

Lever, C. (2009) *The Naturalized Animals of Britain and Ireland*. New Holland Publishers, London.

Whisson, D. & Moore, T. (1997) *An annotated bibliography on the ferret (Mustela putorius furo)*. Bird and Mammal Conservation Program Report 97-3. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, CA. [full text](#)