

Have you seen the elusive Irish stoat?

Researchers turn to ‘citizen science’ for information on protected mammal



The stoat is an important element of Irish biodiversity but relatively little is known about it. The protected species is the focus of a new research project at NUI Galway. Photograph: Dermot Breen.

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The [Irish stoat](#) is the focus of a new research project just launched by the [Animal Ecology and Conservation group](#) at [NUI Galway](#).

It will rely on “citizen science” inputs to gather crucial information on the ecology of this elusive mammal.

In some parts of the world, stoats are bred for their white winter coat, the ermine. The Irish stoat (*Mustela erminea hibernica*) need not worry about that particular problem, as the absence of sitting snow here ensures it can retain its brown-orange colour on its back all year round.

“They are quite distinctive animals, especially in how fast they hop and turn. They have a white underbelly and a thin tail, ending with a black tip,” explains Dr Colin Lawton, lecturer in mammal ecology at NUI Galway.

The Irish stoat is often confused with a weasel, which in fact is not found in Ireland. “They don’t have to compete with weasels for catching rabbits and small rodents. In a way you could say that they have found a real niche here,” says Dr Lawton.

Biodiversity

The native stoat is an important element of Irish biodiversity and a protected species, and yet relatively little is known about it. There is no population estimate available and there is a real need for information on their distribution, genetics, dietary habits, ecology and habitat requirements, the research group said.

The surveying research project is being conducted by Dr Lawton and PhD student Laura O’Flynn, in collaboration with the [Vincent Wildlife Trust](#), a charity at the forefront of mammal conservation in Ireland and the UK.

Citizen science is a key element of their research. This is an opportunity for the public to pass on their sightings and experiences of the animal, using an online survey or by phone.

Information on the locations where stoats have been seen, their habitats and behaviour will be of great use to the research team.

‘Great success’

“We have had great success using citizen science in the past to determine the most up-to-date ranges of grey and red squirrels in Ireland, and in tracking down the dormouse, a new mammal species to the country,” says Dr Lawton.

“Now we hope to find out what we can about one of our true native species, the Irish stoat, and see if they are in need of any conservation help, or indeed if they are causing any problems to farmers or gamekeepers. The Irish stoat seems to be present all over the island, and some have been spotted in woodlands outside urban areas, such as in Barna Woods near Galway city.