Stoatily out of place

This magnificently lithe little mammal is one of our national treasures, but must be kept in its place

WORDS POLLY PULLAR

I have long admired the stoat as one of the most impressive predators in the British Isles. The first time I witnessed its strength and adaptability was whilst watching one catch an adult rabbit by the throat and drag the floundering creature, many times its size and weight, to a nearby puddle where it proceeded to hold its head underwater to finish it off.

This ingenious little mustelid is a powerhouse of muscle and sinew; lithe and acrobatic, its behaviour often hardly credible. Watching a family at play will always be memorably mesmerising, for this is a buoyantly electrifying mammal with a body that seems elasticated as it leaps and dances with astonishing aerial manoeuvrability. These vigorous displays hone the vital skills each young stoat requires to eventually equal the hunting prowess of an adult.

Stoats are fascinating. Beautifully streamlined, they are adept arborealists, swim well, though usually not through choice, and have courage that simply does not equal their diminutive size. In colder parts of the country their pelts usually turn pure white in winter and are then referred to as 'ermine'. As far back as 1138 this sleek white fur was used to adorn ceremonial robes for royalty and nobility. Today a substitute trims the robes for members of the Houses of Parliament, with black dots to represent the stoat's distinctive black tail tip.

Stoats are deadly opportunists. They have a long history of conflict with man, and have been persecuted and trapped for centuries. Fiends in the henhouse, or pheasant-rearing pen, they are as adept at taking adult birds as nestlings, eggs,

Image: Stoats have a delayed implantation reproductive system, whereby males can impregnante kits in the nest.

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RIGHT - BILDAGENTUR ZOONAR GMBH/SHUTTERSTOCK

and small mammals. Operating equally well under or over-ground, rabbit warrens provide a perfect subterranean haunt for unseen bloodshed. As stoats are superb ratters and can soon clear an unwanted infestation, having them around a farm can be beneficial, despite the risk to poultry. One cannot help but marvel at their guile, strategy, athleticism and ability to pass almost through the eye of a needle in search of the next repast.

The undesirable arrival of stoats to the Orkney Isles, however, has brought major concerns. First thought to have put in an appearance in 2010, there is speculation that they may have been unwittingly introduced with deliveries of winter livestock fodder such as hay or straw. But there are also sceptics who reckon that they may have been introduced intentionally to help control the rabbit population.

Either way, since the first sightings they have dramatically increased in number and are now regularly seen. And even more worryingly it's not only on Orkney mainland. There have been sightings on several other Orkney Islands, and a special Facebook page has been established to monitor stoat numbers, hoping to raise awareness to the gravity of the problem as sighting details and grid references are posted. A brief look at this page shows how common they are becoming: the problem is escalating fast.

Orkney and its 70 islands and skerries are of global importance for a wide range of threatened wildlife. It is a vital breeding area for a host of ground nesting birds, including seabirds, waders, red-throated divers, short-eared owls and hen harriers. There are 13 important RSPB reserves on the islands, as well as numerous other wildlife reserves and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). In simple terms, like the presence of the hedgehog in the Uists, the stoat is out of place here, and its colonisation will only be to the detriment of Orkney's valuable wildlife.

As well as the threat to ground nesting birds and seabird colonies, another creature is also jeopardised by the stoat's presence. Orkney is home to a sub-species of the common vole, known as the Orkney vole. This unique little mammal has no origins in the British Isles. Perhaps it arrived accidentally from Europe secreted away in supplies brought to the islands by Neolithic man. Remains of the Orkney vole found during archaeological work have revealed that it has been a resident here for over 5,000 years. It is also a vital food source for rare birds of prey and owls.

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Though the stoat is a native of the British Isles, it is important to recognise that it is not native to Orkney. The cost of invasive species to our economy grows, and is currently thought to be in the region of £245 million annually. Though nature is not there for our convenience, and should never be viewed as such, we must also accept that depletion of any species is not only catastrophic in general, but it also has a huge knock-on effect for the future of valuable wildlife tourism. This is currently estimated to be worth over £14 million each year to Orkney. Seabirds all around our shores are struggling badly. Failing fish stocks, pollution, marine detritus, and global warming all play into the downward spiral. There is no doubt the presence of a family of stoats in a struggling seabird city will prove nothing but detrimental and further increase hazards for beleaguered wildlife.

The stoat was introduced into New Zealand in the late 1800s to help control non-native rabbits that were threatening crops. Despite warnings from conservationists and wildlife experts, little heed was taken and time lapsed before serious steps began to endeavour to remove the animals. They have since caused immeasurable damage and a massive drop, and in some cases total loss, of many bird species, and continue to threaten the world's most rare parrot, the kakapo. Huge efforts are on-going to remove stoats from New Zealand, with doubtful outcome. Think mink – we are still battling to rid our shores of this pestilence, and probably now never will.

Scottish Natural Heritage has their work cut out to help rectify the Orkney stoat issue. Stoats are fecund, can raise between 6-12 kits, and trapping them is not always straightforward: they are shy, do not easily take bait, and can travel over very large distances. Endless monitoring exercises will do nothing to sort this out, merely wasting valuable and all too short resources to gather facts, when one glimpse of the Facebook page, Stoats in Orkney, or a conversation with any of the islands' many conservationists and informed locals confirms that the stoat population is rapidly growing.

Doubtless there are welfare issues, and there will be a barrage of criticism about removing one species in order to protect others. But in this case surely there is no argument?

The facts are simple: the stoat was never previously in Orkney, and should definitely not be present now. It's time for serious measures, and I say this as one of the stoat's greatest fans. I have lived in close proximity to them all my life and love and admire them. But please not in Orkney. Funds may be lacking but it appears that volunteers are desperate for action and are only too keen to help before Orkney's stoat population gets even more out of control.

We have surely learnt hard lessons with the grey squirrel and mink. Once stoat numbers get out of hand, there really will be no going back. SF

Top left: Short-eared owls are known as 'catty faces' in Orkney and nest on the ground. **Top right:** The Orkney Archipelago is a vital breeding area for many ground nesting bird species, and is home to the unique Orkney vole, which the influx of stoats is threatening. **Below right:** Stoats are bigger than weasels and have a distinctive black tail tip.

TOP RIGHT AND LEFT - HAROLD STIVER, BELOW RIGHT - ARTO HACKOLER

‘Xxxxx’

Above: Donnie Broad caption. **Top left:** Another lynx caption