

A New Record of Pine Marten (*Martes martes* L., 1758) (Carnivora: Mustelidae) from Lowlands in Northern Bulgaria

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Abstract: European pine marten (*Martes martes*), a species with mosaic distribution in Bulgaria and mostly in mountain areas, is recorded outside its known range, i.e. in a lowland habitat in Kaylaka Protected Area, Pleven Region.

Key words: pine marten, new record

Introduction

The European pine marten (*Martes martes* Linnaeus, 1758) occurs throughout Europe (excluding Southern Spain), the Caucasus Mts. and Western Siberia (POPOV & SEDEFICHEV 2003). The species is with mosaic distribution in Bulgaria, occurring mostly in mountain regions with wide areas covered by mature forest (POPOV & SEDEFICHEV 2003, SPASSOV & SPIRIDONOV 2011). It is probably extinct from the Ludogorie Region, regardless the fact that it can persist in old-growth forests in lowlands (SPASSOV 2007). The abundance of *M. martes* has been declining rapidly in the last 30 years (PESHEV et al. 2004, SPASSOV & SPIRIDONOV 2011). The pine marten is listed as Endangered [EN, C2a(i)] in Bulgaria and is included in the National Biodiversity Law (Appendices II and III) (SPASSOV & SPIRIDONOV 2011). The species is rare in lowlands and has never been recorded in the region of Pleven. The present note reports the first record of the pine marten from the central part of North Bulgaria.

Materials and Methods

During the annual common-birds monitoring in the surroundings of Kaylaka Protected Area at Pleven (43.3893N, 24.6334E, altitude 150 m; Fig. 1), the

alarm call of a pair of tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*) notified the presence of an individual of pine marten. A series of photos were taken from 8-20 m by DSLR camera with 300 mm lens. The species was identified using these photographs and following identification keys based on external morphology (SPASSOV 2007).

Results

The observation was made at 9:44 a.m. on 06 May 2014. The pine marten (Fig. 2) was moving on an Elm tree (*Ulmus minor*) above the gravel road surrounded by orchards, small vineyards, artificial conifer plantation and patches of broad-leaved trees and bushes. For some time, the individual was laying on a branch. It was aware of being observed and kept the observer in eye-sight. However, it did not seem disturbed by the human presence.

Discussion

The pine marten is understudied in Bulgaria. Very little is known about its behaviour and habitat selection in the country. The present observation is made outside the currently known distribution (which is also

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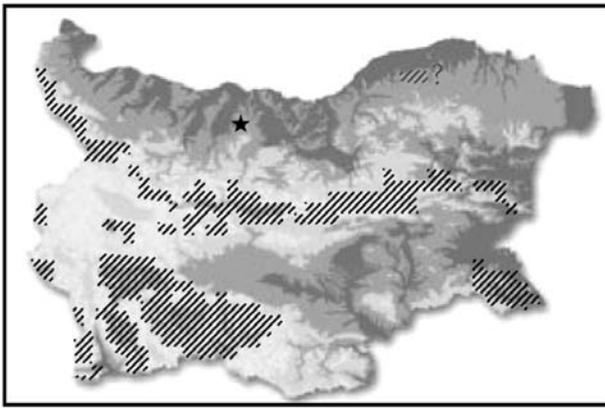


Fig. 1. Location of the observation site (marked with star) and the currently known distribution of *Martes martes* in Bulgaria (according to SPASSOV & SPIRIDONOV 2011)

understudied), although the possible presence in the lowlands has been supposed by SPASSOV (2007). The present observation is the first documented record of the species in lowland habitats in the central parts of northern Bulgaria. Another similar record has been reported from the Danube Delta, Romania (KISS *et al.* 2012). The occurrence of the pine marten in Kaylaka Protected Area can be explained by the presence of old coniferous forests in the area, which is supporting a viable population of rodents, especially red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*). The latter species is an important item in the pine marten's diet (O'MEARA *et al.* 2007). The natural vegetation of Kaylaka Protected Area has drastically changed in the mid-20th Century when, in 1946-1961, coniferous forest plantations were established. Currently, the spruce (*Picea abies*) stands are more than 50-years old and have a good seed production. These orchards, plantations and the nearby Kaylaka Park, together with fruit availability, facilitate the abundant populations of squirrel and other rodents, thus providing a viable food source for this omnivorous carnivore (BALESTRIERI *et al.* 2010).

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Fig. 2. Pine marten observed in Kaylaka Protected Area on 6 May 2014. Photo Boris Belchev

The behaviour of the pine marten to allow being observed by humans is congruent with the findings of BALESTRIERI *et al.* (2010) confirming the adaptable nature of *M. martes* to the agricultural landscape matrix.

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