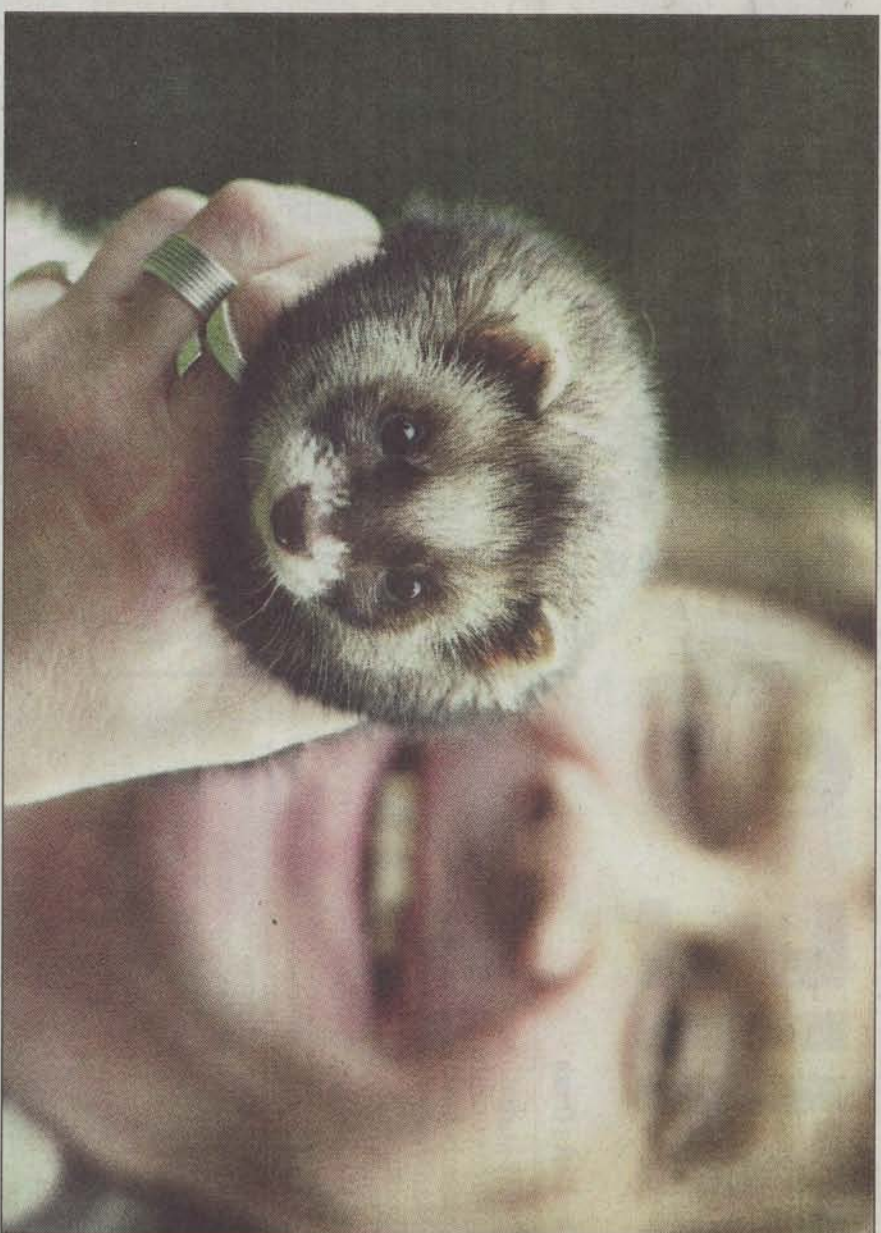


**Once on the
brink of
extinction,
the polecat is
making an
urban comeback**



by Chris Osuh

URBAN polecats could soon be a regular sight in Manchester.

This is the belief of Wilmslow-based wildlife expert Martin Turner, who dedicates his life to rehabilitating sick and endangered animals and releasing them back into the wild.

Martin is particularly fond of the polecat – the mammal from which ferrets evolved – and over the past two years he has rescued 10 injured polecats and then sent them back into their habitat to breed.

Last century the European polecat was virtually extinct and was given “partial protection” status. The carnivores found themselves under threat from gamekeepers, myxomatosis and trends in the fur trade.

But over the past two years, a growing number of polecats, although uncommon to the North West, have been sighted in Crewe, Alderley Edge and into Wilmslow – and seem to be heading north towards Manchester, prompting speculation that they could follow the pattern of the urban fox.

Animals in back gardens

Martin, said: “Polecats and urban areas don’t tend to mix, but they can survive. Over the past couple of years I’ve been getting calls from people who thought they had found mink in their gardens, but I could tell they were polecats.

“Five months ago I rescued a two-month-old polecat which had been out hunting and playing with its family from drowning at Monks Heath. He was in a bad way so I took him home to nurse him and planned to bring him back when he was independent at three months old.

“I didn’t want him to bite me or bond with me so I always wore a leather gauntlet when I was handling him. But one day I forgot, and when I went to feed him, instead of biting my hand, he licked it. It was then I knew he’d lost some of the traits of wild polecats and he’d be better off with me. He’s very large and tame now,

and he gets on well with my ferrets, apart from the alpha ferret, which bullies him. He’s my companion now.”

Because of his understanding of animals, Martin has been likened to Doctor Dolittle, the fictional character who can talk to beasts. At the moment he is tending to a number of bats, ferrets, and a concussed wood pigeon.

Martin said: “I rehabilitate animals for the love of it – even vets ring me for advice these days! I don’t claim to be a vet but I know wildlife and to see a polecat or any other creature that’s been injured running back into the wild where it belongs is amazing.

“The survival rate with any injured creature is only about 20 per cent so there’s a lot of heartache, you never get used to losing them. It’s all about giving that 20 per cent a second chance though – that makes it all worthwhile.”

● The Vincent Wildlife Trust is asking Metro News readers to keep their eye for any dead polecats they find at the roadside. Anyone who finds one is asked to put in a plastic bag and keep it in a freezer, so the trust can DNA test it and find out if it is genuine polecat or ferret/polecat hybrid. Contact Dr Jonny Birks on 0151 636 441.