



**The Eating Habits of Pine Martens, and Other Matters** publication date: Mar 1, 2008

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author/source: Polly Evans

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Pine martens have a bit of a thing for crunchy peanut butter, but they won't touch the smooth. They love sultanas, but turn their noses up at raisins. 'Their taste is very refined,' says Alan, my guide from Speyside Wildlife.

We're sitting in a hide in the Cairngorms National Park. Bill Oddie has been here more than once. Apparently he was grumpy. Alan lives in the house just next door and this wildlife hide is his great passion. He's constructed a rudimentary CCTV system which monitors the animals' pathways around the hide so he can see when something's coming. And, every night, he puts out tidbits for the animals – pine martens, badgers and red deer – that live in the surrounding woodland. 'The food is to entice, but not to sustain,' he tells me. I've never seen a pine marten. They're rare – there are only about four thousand of them left in Britain. We have a chance though: they need to feed at least every 48 hours and, as well as crunchy peanut butter and sultanas, Alan has left them a number of eggs.

'The pine marten will come and take one, and then it'll run off,' he explains. 'Then we'll wait about eight minutes. It'll come back, grab another egg, and disappear again. Wait another eight minutes and the pine marten will reappear at the hide – and this time it will start to feed on the peanut butter and sultanas. It's like when you take your packed lunch to work – you like to know you've got something to eat at midday. The pine marten's got the whole night to get through, and it's keen to have some eggs hidden away.'

We sit and wait, while Alan explains the habits of badgers. They have outstanding senses of hearing and smell but are almost blind. Because of their awful sight, badgers never deviate from the trails laid down by generations of badgers before them.

'If a young badger veers from the trail, the mother will come up from behind and boot it back onto the right path.'

We wait in the darkness; just low lights illuminate the ground outside the hide's wide windows. It's a cold February night – Alan tells me he still has some improvements to make to the heating system. We look out through the glass, and study the TV screen for movement. Tiny bright spots weave across the screen – these are the eyes of mice.

Then we see two spots beaming much brighter.

'That's a pine marten,' Alan exclaims. You see how it's standing up on its hind legs like a meercat. It'll be here in a second.'

And sure enough, the pine marten soon appears. It's a beautiful creature, with a glossy coat and bushy tail. It takes its egg and runs off as predicted. We wait, counting the minutes. Exactly eight pass before, as predicted, the pine marten scampers back and takes another egg.

'Next time she'll stop to feed,' says Alan. We wait and wait some more. But something has happened out there. Something has spooked her. And, for that night at least, this elusive creature is never sighted again.

**Getting there:** Speyside Wildlife organizes wildlife holidays and excursions in the Scottish highlands and abroad. For more information, go to [www.speysidewildlife.co.uk](http://www.speysidewildlife.co.uk)

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