

New locality records of Pine Marten *Martes martes* from Iran

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Abstract.

Pine Marten *Martes martes* is a relatively common small carnivore across most of its Eurasian range, but few verifiable occurrence data on this species are available from southwestern Asia. In Baradarani & Moqanaki (2014), we provided a baseline review of the current distribution and conservation status of Pine Marten in Iran, together with two new confirmed records of presence after a period of about 50 years. Here, we report five new specimens from Mazandaran and Golestan provinces, within the Caspian region of Iran. Pine Marten appears to be amongst the rarest of mammalian carnivore species in Iran however, more specimens may have gone undetected because of misidentification with the broadly-distributed and supposedly more abundant Stone Marten *Martes foina*.

Keywords: distribution range, Hyrcanian deciduous forest, Alborz Mountains, Caspian Sea region, museum specimen, *Martes martes*, Iran.

The Pine Marten *Martes martes* ranges across the western Palaearctic from Fennoscandia eastward throughout most of Europe to western Siberia (Kranz *et al.* 2008). Contrary to the species' wide distribution range and relatively high abundance in northern and western Europe (Kranz *et al.* 2008), southwestern Asian populations of Pine Marten are often small and isolated in highly fragmented mosaic habitats. Iran is one of the latter range countries.

We previously reviewed the historical records of Pine Marten in Iran, and updated the species' distribution range with new locality records over the last 50 years (Baradarani & Moqanaki 2014). We showed that although there are no verifiable records of Pine Marten occurrence in north-western and western Iran across the Caucasus Landscape and Zagros Mountains, respectively, it is likely that this species is present throughout the remnant Hyrcanian deciduous forests in northern Iran (Figure 1). We stressed that because of poor knowledge and/or misidentification with the supposedly much more abundant Stone Marten *M. foina* (Ziaie 2008) among local biologists and wildlife authorities, confirmation of Pine Marten presence is difficult to ascertain in Iran. We therefore recommended a survey of natural history collections and local biologists to determine the actual geographical range of Pine Marten in Iran. Here, we report such range clarification

attempts by providing new locality records of this species from northern Iran via contact with local taxidermists and visiting private collections.



Figure 1. Map showing confirmed presence records of Pine Marten *Martes martes* from Iran (black circle; after Baradarani & Moqanaki 2014) and the new locality records we reported here (star). The shaded dark grey area shows the Hyrcanian forests along the southern Caspian Sea coast in northern Iran.

Following our previous publication, the first author (KB) initiated contact with regional taxidermists about the presence of Pine Marten specimens within their stock. In September 2015, another author (AM) informed KB that a local taxidermist from Chalus County, Mazandaran province, had contacted him about a Pine Marten specimen approximately one year ago. The local taxidermist had informed AM about a somewhat weird "samour" (a Farsi equivalent of marten, but is commonly used by the public for calling several members of Iranian Mustelidae; Ziaie 2008) with a yellow neck-patch, which the local taxidermist had considered unusual given his previous experience with "samour" specimens. AM consequently inspected the specimen and identified it as a Pine Marten. As the Pine Marten specimen was in poor condition, AM and the local taxidermist decided not to proceed with preparing it for taxidermy and only stored it in a freezer.

We inspected the specimen again in October 2015 (Figure 2). The local taxidermist only let us measure and weigh the Pine Marten. The specimen was a female weighing ca. 570 g, and morphometric measurements were: body length= 36.5 cm, tail length= 26 cm,

and shoulder height= 14 cm. The local taxidermist explained that a villager from Hachiroud (36°40'N, 51°21'E), a small town in Kelarestaq-e Gharbi Rural District of Chalus County (Figure 1), had delivered this specimen to him in autumn 2013. Hachiroud is a collection of several villages that stretch around 4 km in length between the Caspian Sea coast to the north (-15 m asL) and a large area of little disturbed Hyrcanian deciduous forest in the south (<60 m asl). The town itself is dominated with mosaics of human development, agriculture lands and riverine vegetation communities. However, the villager's property was believed to be close to the edge of the forest. The villager had claimed that he shot this "samour" after experiencing several occasions of chicken predation by an unknown predator. The villager had been raising some domestic chickens in a yarding system inside his property, as is common practice in many parts of the Caspian region of Iran. Chickens were kept in a simple handmade coop made from chicken wire and a few concrete blocks to secure it on the ground. Within a short, but undetermined period of time, the villager experienced several occasions of chicken predation inside the coop. No chicken was removed from the coop, nor was the coop damaged. In one night, he heard unusual disturbance from the chicken coop. As he was alerted about the predation, he quickly grabbed his hunting firearm and rushed to the coop. He could detect an invader inside the coop and shot it. The villager had claimed that he had no idea about the creature, and later found out that the predator had been a "samour".



Figure 2. Carcass of Pine Marten killed in Hachiroud, Chalus County of Mazandaran province in autumn 2013 (Photo: K. Baradarani).

In the second incident, in August 2015 the third author (AMM), who is managing a taxidermy supply, received mutilated carcasses of an adult female Pine Marten (Figure 3) with one sub-adult cub from an unidentified location in vicinity of Sari (Figure 1), Mazandaran province, via the Provincial Office of Iran Department of Environment. These Pine Martens were killed in traps that were set by local people as a retaliatory response to the predation of their domestic fowl by mesocarnivores. The adult Pine Marten was 1010 g, with measured body and tail length of 60 and 30 cm, respectively. The cub was neither sexed nor measured because of the extremely poor condition of the carcass.



Figure 3. The female Pine Marten killed in a trap in vicinity of Sari, Mazandaran province, in August 2015 (Photo: M. A. Adibi).

During our semi-directive interviews with local taxidermists, we were also shown photos of two previously not reported museum specimens of Pine Marten collected from Golestan Province, which are now in the possession of two private collections. The first specimen was claimed to belong to the royal collection of Abdorreza Pahlavi, a former prince of Iran prior to the 1979 revolution. The second specimen was an adult male which was killed in a trap in an unidentified village in vicinity of Gorgan (Figure 1) in October 2013. We could not verify the exact geographic locations of these specimens.

The new localities we reported here include the first verifiable presence record of Pine Marten from the west of Mazandaran province (Baradarani & Moqanaki 2014; Figure 1), supporting the extension of Pine Marten range throughout the Alborz Mountains along the Caspian Sea coast. Surveys of taxidermists and local informants such as hunters have proven to be very useful for assessing the distributional range of rare and elusive carnivores of Iran (*e.g.*, Moqanaki *et al.* 2010). As long as no biological surveys are directed towards small carnivores in Iran, the collection of sporadic occurrence data and key informant surveys (Huntington 2000), as we reported here, are cost-effective methods to at least partially overcome the lack of a comprehensive review of the current distribution and conservation status of small carnivores in Iran.

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