



*A rare pine marten foraging for food. It took four years from first sighting of the marten in the woods round my remote loch-side home to get him tame enough to come to me for food.*





*I made a complicated log run and bird table complex on which to feed the birds and the marten, who later brought his mate and families along too. Pine martens date from the Eocene period. They survived the last Ice Age and their remains have been found in forty million years old deposits. When much of Scotland was covered with ancient Caledonian pine forests, and there were far more woods in England, Wales and Ireland than there are today, they were both common and widespread. For centuries, however, they were highly prized for their fur and were heavily trapped. They were also regarded as vermin and were trapped and shot because of their alleged deprivations on game-bird chicks and poultry. By the turn of last century pine martens were almost exterminated over their main ranges, surviving in small pockets in the Lake District, in the Snowdon area of north Wales, in south-west Ireland, with their main last stronghold confined between Ardnamurchan and Cape Wrath, mainly in west Sutherland and Wester Ross. The slaughter relaxed in the First World War when most able bodied men were after targets of a different kind. In the late 1920s and 1930s they began to multiply again slowly, gaining another respite in the Second World War when they spread to Loch Ness and were found south of it by 1961. The new conifers planted by the Forestry Commission and private interests later helped martens considerably so their numbers slowly swelled in other isolated pockets too. Today they are found in all counties of the north and west Highlands. They were also helped by being protected, along with otters and wildcats, in the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, for which I and other conservationists had long been campaigning.*





*I was delighted when I took my first flash-light photo of the marten on my bird table. Martens are omnivorous feeders but the bulk of their food consists of field voles and mice. Small birds and their eggs are next and a few young hares and rabbits are also taken. They eat large quantities of berries in summer and autumn, as well as beetles, large insects, small fish and carrion from dead deer in winter. But the one food they cannot resist is raspberry jam on buttered bread! At first I put out whole slices which the marten quickly grabbed and ran off before I could push the camera button. I learnt to cut the slices into small squares so the marten had to hang about to go from one to the other.*



*I also put heavy rooted welts of moss over the bird table, to make a more natural looking background.*





*In the end the marten became so tame he came through my study window and took food from my hand and, after the first year, even from my mouth.*

