

SMALL CARNIVORE CONSERVATION

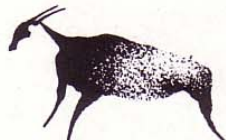


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Stripe-necked Mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis* - Photo: M. N. Jayakumar, IFS, ARPS, AFIAP



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Is the European Mink *Mustela lutreola* a longstanding member of the Iberian fauna or a mid-twentieth-century arrival?

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Since the first report, in 1951 (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955), of European mink *Mustela lutreola* in the Iberian Peninsula there have been two hypotheses in order to explain the lack of data before 1951. The first suggested that European Mink had just recently reached Iberia, whilst the second proposed that it is an ancient, but overlooked, member of the Iberian fauna. Most authors supported the first hypothesis (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955; Youngman, 1982; Senosiain & Donazar, 1983; Illana, 1994; Aihartza *et al.*, 1999). However, recently, in relation with a paper dealing with the distribution of European mink in the Iberian Peninsula, both referees observed that there is still no answer for the question in the title of this paper. Therefore, we would like to make here some comments on this point, and try to clarify it.

As is widely known, the first data of European Mink in the peninsula date back to Rodríguez de Ondarra (1955), who describes mink (*Putorius lutreola* in his work) captured in 1951 (one animal) and 1952 (two) in Gipuzkoa. Two were caught in Tolosa, and the third in Villabona (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955). Both villages lie in eastern Gipuzkoa. Before this there are no data on the species in the Iberian Peninsula: no data in (the scarce) scientific literature; no animals in taxidermists' collections; no knowledge among trappers; no road kills; and no observations of river-dwelling mustelids (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955; Castián & Mendiola, 1985; Aihartza *et al.*, 1999). Since then, there have been numerous records of European Mink in Iberia: one in 1951, three in 1952, three in 1954, two in 1956, one in 1958, one in 1959, one in 1962, and three more mink captured at an unknown date (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1963), and so on. Most of these mink were captured (presumably by farmers) and several of them stuffed. Afterwards, road kills and sightings have both become important data sources (Arambarri *et al.*, 1997), especially in densely populated areas (like Biscay or Gipuzkoa) where these methods have detected the

species in areas where photographic devices and live trapping failed to do so (Zabala & Zuberogoitia, 2003). Finally, our personal field experience showed us that in areas where European Mink is present locals (at least some of them) notice them: we also met some European mink watchers, especially in medium populated villages.

It can be argued that the lack of data before 1951 does not prove the absence of mink, as, indeed, negative or absence data can never be considered sure. However, as stated by Youngman (1982), commercially valuable furbearers are among the first species to be recognised by local hunters, trappers and naturalists. In Iberia, both naturalists and taxidermists were surprised with the first European Mink individual, because they had not seen the animal before. They did not know what species it was, even though they knew all the other mustelids of the region (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955; Elozegi, *pers. comm.*). Twenty years later, Senosiain & Donazar (1983) reported that trappers from Navarra also claimed not to know the species when they first captured European Mink. Because trapping (without scientific purpose) was more common in the past, we should expect European Mink to be known, if they were present. The prior lack of road kills also suggests an earlier absence, although this could be due to the lower degree of road traffic in the past. In the same way the lack of stuffed animals, or cranial samples in museums and particular collections (well documented now) strongly bears out the hypothesis of mink absent from the area before 1951 (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955; Belamendia, 2001). There is little old material from the area available for study nowadays, and some collections date only back to the 1990s (Belamendia, 2001). However, the distribution of data in both time and space is really suggestive, because the first Iberian data are from near the French border, just after a period of high mink population density in France judging from the large amount of specimens from France deposited in museums during the 1940s

Youngman, 1982). In the next year, 1952, mink is found in an area near Araba, and by 1958 in the border area between Gipuzkoa and Biscay. Unfortunately, Rodríguez de Ondarra (1963) gave no date for the mink found little more westwards in Biscay. However, overall this pattern suggests colonisation from the border south and westwards.

Rodríguez de Ondarra (1963) described as “captured” every mink found until 1963. But for the first three he gave more detail (Rodríguez de Ondarra (1955): two were killed (one by a hunter and another one by children when they saw it swimming), and the third one was captured, probably because it was causing damage to household poultry. Therefore, these first records, obtained almost simultaneously, were not a result of scientific investigation. Indeed, the same is probably true of all data obtained until the late 1980s. Therefore, even if heightened scientific interest has yielded a considerable amount of data in the area during the last decade, it cannot have been the reason underlying records of European Mink between 1951 and the late 1980s.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that the European Mink has always been part of the Iberian fauna, but was only discovered last century through increased research, is not supported by any data. Indeed, every circumstantial line of reasoning suggests colonisation of the Peninsula shortly before 1951, as stated by most authors (Rodríguez de Ondarra, 1955; Youngman, 1982; Senosiain & Donazar, 1983; Illana, 1994; Aihartza *et al.*, 1999).

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