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OBSERVATIONS ON THE POLECAT (*PUTORIUS PUTORIUS*  
Linn.) IN NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

In August, 1949, Dr. R. W. Balham brought five living, adult polecats, four males and one female, to the Dominion Museum. They had been caught at Levin. On arrival the animals were in full winter pelage. As little appears to be recorded of the habits of polecats, they were kept under observation.

Dr. Balham had had them in captivity for some time, and although captured as adults, they were comparatively docile and could be handled with safety. In time the males became quite tame but the female remained snappy. Eventually, she, too, submitted to handling more readily.

By September the female entered her oestrous cycle, which lasted about three weeks, during which time she was crossed. Soon after she showed signs of pregnancy, but by the end of October all such signs had abated. At the time, I thought that owing to the presence of so many males she had aborted. However, the following month, November, she entered a fresh oestrous cycle, lasting the same period as the one before. Once more she showed signs of pregnancy, and again without result. I now decided to do away with the surplus males and retain a single pair. The observations recorded below refer mainly to the activities of these two animals.

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NAME USAGE \*

The names polecat, ferret, and polecat-ferret are variously used in New Zealand for feral animals which are the descendants of several introductions. The name "ferret" seems better restricted, as is customary, to domesticated strains of which the commonest is the well-known albino. It is derived undoubtedly from some form (or forms) of wild polecat. It seems quite unlikely, for reasons advanced later in this paper, that the uniformly patterned parti-coloured form now feral in New Zealand has descended entirely from escaped domestic strains. The evidence is that introductions included wild polecats liberated directly and becoming basically the ancestors of the present feral population. The name "polecat" seems entirely appropriate and its general use is recommended.

INTRODUCTION INTO NEW ZEALAND

Thompson (1922) referring to the introduction of Mustelids into the Dominion states that in 1867 the *Canterbury Acclimatization Society* introduced "five ferrets" and the following year one more. The fate of these importations is not clear nor are we apprised as to whether they were wild or domestic forms. In 1882 and 1883 the Agent-General in London made thirty-two shipments of "ferrets" from London, totalling 1,217 animals. Only 678 of these were landed. Sub-

\*The name *fitch* is a trade name for the pelt.

sequently, 198 were landed from Melbourne. In 1884 "nearly 4,000" ferrets were turned loose; over 3,000 in Marlborough alone, and about 400 in Otago. Again there is no mention of the country of origin. As most of the specimens appear to have been shipped from London, there is good reason to believe that the animals originated from Britain and the Continent. It does not appear likely that the collectors in London went further afield to obtain the requisite number of animals for export. Under the circumstances it is reasonable to exclude the Asiatic race, *P. evermanni*.



FIG. 1. *Putorius putorius* (Linn.) —Photo, C. Hale  
An adult male in full winter coat.

If all the animals had been the domesticated form, the ferret (it seems doubtful if such large numbers would be available for export at one time), it is questionable whether they would have survived in the wild state, for according to some authors, the domesticated animals have not the stamina to survive an independent existence. Again, wild polecats are comparatively rare in the British Isles today and have been so for a considerable time in the past. This circumstance also suggests that the exporters very probably got some of the animals outside Britain.

#### TAXONOMY

Pocock (1936) regards the Continental form as the typical race of the species *P. putorius* and the Welsh specimens as a separate race, *P.p. anglicus*. Tetley (1939) described yet another race from the British Isles, *P.p. caledoniae* from Sutherland. Differentiating this race from the Welsh race Tetley (1945) writes: "These differ from the typical Welsh Polecats only in the constriction in the skull." This constriction behind the orbits is also present in the Asiatic forms (Pocock, 1936, Text-fig. 1, p. 709). However, Pocock distinguishes the European races from the Asiatic races by cranial characters, in particular, the configuration of the hamular processes, which are markedly hooked in the former and not hooked in the latter. In New Zealand examples that I have examined I find that the post-orbital constriction may be present or almost absent, but in all instances the hamular processes are distinctly hooked. The last character alone would consign the New Zealand examples to the European races. These characteristics will be dealt with under the proper heads.

There is usually a marked disparity in size between the sexes of all races of polecats, but as far as our present knowledge goes, there