



Notes for Teachers

Irish Animals - Hunters

Ireland has only around 35 species of land mammal. They range from tiny Pygmy Shrews to large Deer and Seals.

Here we shall look at just 12 species - the common predators. In another lesson, we shall look at the herbivores.



What Age Group?

The Powerpoint slideshow can be used for any age group. Older children can investigate each species in more detail. But even infants will appreciate the different birds.

We have different optional activities to follow the slideshow - colouring in sheets, crosswords, identification posters and more.



Fox - Sionnach / Madra Rua

Vulpes vulpes

Slide 2



Foxes are members of the dog family (Canidae).

They are common throughout Ireland, in every habitat including in towns.

Protection

Foxes are a native species. They are considered a pest of farm animals. Foxes are not protected by law, and may legally be hunted.



Family Groups

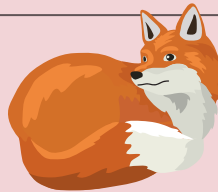
Foxes live in small groups. Family size ranges from a pair with cubs, to one dog with several vixens.

Dog

The male is called a dog.

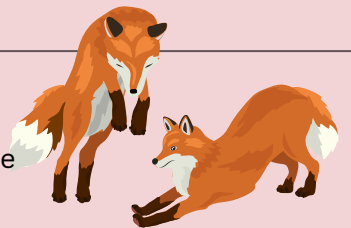
Vixen

The female is called a vixen.



Cubs

The young are called cubs.



Life Cycle

Foxes sleep in a hole underground called a den.

The vixen gives birth to a litter of cubs in March or April. Usually there are 3 to 5 cubs. Like puppies, they are born deaf and blind. The vixen stays with the cubs while they are very young, keeping them warm and feeding them milk. The dog fox brings back food for the vixen.

The cubs are weaned when they are a couple of months old.

Diet

Foxes are omnivores. They eat both animals and vegetables. They eat rabbits, poultry, earthworms, berries, and much more. They will eat dead animals if they find them, including dead sheep.

They also eat human scraps. In towns, they may raid bins. Some people feed foxes.

Foxes hunt alone, not as a pack.

Disease

Foxes are prone to mange. This disease, caused by a tiny mite, makes them lose their fur.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of a fox in the rain.

Slide 3

Badger - Broc



Meles meles

Slide 4

Badgers are common throughout Ireland. Their main habitats are woodland, hedgerows and farmland.

Protection

Badgers are a native species. They are protected by law and cannot be hunted.

However, badgers can carry TB, a serious disease of cattle, and the Department of Agriculture is permitted to kill badgers.

Diet

Badgers are omnivores. In Ireland, they mostly eat worms and beetles. But they will also feed on berries, carrion (dead animals that they find rather than kill themselves) and even frog spawn.

Badgers are NOT fierce!

There is a common myth in Ireland that badgers are fierce. An old wives' tale says that badgers will bite your leg and hang on until the bone breaks. Supposedly, a stick down your wellie will trick them into letting go when they hear the stick snap.

In fact, badgers are very shy. If they hear or smell humans, they will run away. It takes a very quiet, still person to sit and watch badgers.

Life Cycle

Badgers are nocturnal. They live in family groups. They dig a large system of tunnels called a sett. Badgers have big claws for digging.

Each badger family holds a territory. They mark their territory with special toilet areas called latrines.

A male is called a boar.

A female is called a sow.

The young are called cubs.

A litter of up to five cubs are born between mid January and mid March.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of a badger foraging for food.

Slide 5

Mustelids

Five of Ireland's carnivores belong to the Mustelid family. Mustelids have long bodies and short legs.

Badgers, otters, stoats, pine martens and mink are all mustelids.



Badger

Our heaviest mustelid.



Otter

Our most aquatic mustelid.



Stoat

Our smallest mustelid.

Stoat - Easóg



Life Cycle

Stoats are solitary. The young, called kits, are born in a den in April. They remain with their mother for about 12 weeks.

Mustela erminea hibernica Slide 6

The stoat is our smallest mustelid. (We do not have weasels in Ireland. Weasels are even smaller than stoats.)

Ireland has its own unique subspecies of stoat (hence 'hibernica' in the scientific name). Our Irish stoats do not turn white in winter. In Europe, where there is more snow, stoats turn white. The white fur is called ermine.

Protection

Stoats are a native species. They are fully protected by law.

Diet

Stoats hunt small animals including mice, rats, shrews, and even rabbits that are five times larger than stoats. They also eat eggs & bugs.

Pine Marten - Cat Crainn



Life Cycle

Pine martens are solitary unless they are raising young. The female gives birth to two to three kits in March or April. The den may be in a hollow tree, a rocky hole, an old burrow, or even the attic of a house. The kits stay with their mother for 6 to 12 months.

Diet

Small mammals including squirrels, birds, eggs, berries and fruit.

Martes martes

Slide 7

The pine marten is the size of a cat, although it is a mustelid, not a cat. It climbs well, hence the Irish name cat crainn.

Protection

The pine marten is a native species. It was once persecuted and hunted for its fur. It had become Ireland's rarest mammal. However, with protection, it has spread back across Ireland. It is now fully protected by law.

Saving Red Squirrels

Red squirrels have become rare in Ireland. Introduced grey squirrels are bigger animals, and are taking over the woodlands.

Pine martens are a natural predator of red squirrels. However, as pine marten numbers increase and they return to the woods where they were wiped out, the numbers of red squirrels goes up and the numbers of greys goes down. It is believed that the pine martens find it easier to hunt the bigger greys.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of two young pine martens eating peanuts at a feeding station.

Slide 8

Mink - Minc



Life Cycle

Four to six kits are born in May.
Mink like water and swim well.

Neovison vison

Slide 9

Mink are smaller than otters. They are dark brown, but often look black. They usually have a small white patch on the chin.

Invasive Species

Mink are native to North America. In the 1950s, they were imported to be farmed for their fur. At one stage there were 125,000 mink in farms. Over time, some escaped or were released.

Mink are now found wild throughout Ireland. They are classed as an Invasive Species because they kill ground nesting birds, fish and crayfish, causing them to decline in numbers. Invasive species are not protected, and may be hunted to try and eradicate them.

Otter - Dobharchú / Madra Uisce

Lutra lutra

Slide 10



Life Cycle

Each otter holds a territory. They mark their territory by placing droppings, called spraints, in prominent places, for example, on a rock.

Otters sleep in a den called a holt. The holt is often beside a river, with several entrances.

Two to five cubs are born in the holt in Spring or Summer. They stay underground for two months.

The otter is a large mustelid. It is aquatic. It has webbed feet, dense waterproof fur, and a long tail to act a rudder - all features that make it a superb swimmer.

Otters are found around our coasts and inland in lakes and rivers.

Protection

The otter is a native species, fully protected by law. Otters have declined throughout Europe. Ireland still has good numbers and is regarded as a stronghold for the species.

Diet

Mainly fish and shellfish. They will also eat small mammals and frogs.

Playtime

Otters are playful creatures, especially cubs. They use muddy slides, and appear to enjoy playing in water.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of an otter in the snow.

Slide 11

Grey Seal - Rón Glas

Halichoerus grypus

Slide 12



Life Cycle

Grey seals form large breeding groups called rookeries on sheltered beaches from August to November. The bulls fight for cows.

The cow gives birth to a single, fluffy white pup in autumn or winter. The mother feeds her pup a very rich milk, and the pups grow fast.

Protection

Grey seals are a native species. Because they eat fish, some fishermen consider them a pest and would like to see them culled. However, they are fully protected by law.

Seals live in the sea. They feed on fish.

A male is called a bull. A female is called a cow. The young is a pup.

Which Seal Is It?

Check the face shape to identify the species.

Grey Seal

Straight or
Convex face
(Roman nose)



Harbour Seal

Concave face
(Dished face)



Walrus

Tusks
A rare visitor to Ireland



Harbour / Common Seal - Rón Beag

Phoca vitulina

Slide 13



Despite the name, Common seals are less common than Grey seals. They are smaller and live in small groups rather than large rookeries. They also prefer sandy beaches, whereas Grey seals prefer rocky shores.

Life Under Water

Seals are well adapted for their aquatic life. They are streamlined in shape, to enable them to swim easily and quickly through the water. They have thick blubber to keep them warm. They have big eyes to see their prey. If the water is murky, they can use their big whiskers to feel for food. They can close their nostrils under water. And on deep dives, they can slow their heart rate.

On Land

Seals are not very agile on land. They flop along. For safety, they stay close to the water.

Hedgehog - Gráinneog

Erinaceus europaeus

Slide 14



Diet

Hedgehogs are insectivores. They eat worms, slugs and other invertebrates.

Never feed bread and milk to hedgehogs. It makes them sick. Dog food is a safe food if you want to welcome hedgehogs to your garden.

Life Cycle

Most hedgehog babies are born in June. A litter has 3 to 6 young. They are born with soft spines. After six weeks with their mother, the young hedgehogs disperse and become independent.

Hedgehogs live in farmland, gardens, hedgerows and woodland edges. They are believed to have been brought to Ireland by the Normans in the 13th century.

Hedgehogs are fully protected by law.

Spiny Protection

Hedgehogs have up to 5000 spines. Strong muscles enable them to curl into a tight ball when danger threatens.

However, it can be a tough life for a hedgehog.

Hedgehogs are preyed on by badgers. Badgers can use their big claws to open a curled up hedgehog and eat it.

Many hedgehogs are killed by cars each year.

Slug pellets used by gardeners often kill hedgehogs when they eat the poisoned slugs.

Hedgehogs can be accident prone. They can drown in ponds if the sides are steep. They can get stuck in cattle grids. Sometimes hedgehogs hide in piles of garden cuttings that are destined for a bonfire. Many hedgehogs suffer strimmer injuries each year.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of a hedgehog feeding on wood ants.

Slide 15

Hibernation

Hedgehogs and bats are the only Irish mammals that undergo true hibernation. Other species, such as squirrels, only sleep for short spells during bad weather.

A hedgehog needs to eat lots of food, and put on lots of weight before hibernation

During hibernation, body temperature decreases and all body functions slow down. The heart hardly beats, and they only take a breath every few minutes.



At the start of winter, each hedgehog moves into its hibernaculum. This is a safe, hidden place, usually with a thick bed of dead leaves.

During hibernation, a hedgehog will lose over a fifth of its body weight.

Pygmy Shrew - **Dallóg fhraoigh** *Sorex minutus*

Slide 16



The Pygmy shrew is our smallest mammal. They only weigh about 4g. That's about the same as 4 paperclips!

They live wherever there is vegetation - hedgerows, bogs, grassland, woodland.

Protection

Pygmy shrews are a native species. They are fully protected by law. However, they appear to be under threat from introduced White-toothed Shrews.

Life Cycle

A female Pygmy shrew may have two or three litters each year. A litter may contain up to nine young.

Pygmy shrews are very territorial. Once the young are reared they must quickly disperse and find their own territory.

Diet - Life in the Fast Lane

Like hedgehogs, Pygmy shrews are insectivores. They eat invertebrates.

Pygmy shrews have a very fast metabolic rate. They need to eat more than their own weight every day. In fact, if they don't eat every two hours, they will die.

White-toothed Shrew - **Dallóg Bhánfhiachlach**

Slide 17



Crocidura russula

White-toothed shrews are not native to Ireland. They come from mainland Europe.

White-toothed shrews are bigger than Pygmy shrews. They weigh 11g. They have visible ears (a pygmy shrew does not appear to have ears). They also have white teeth, whereas Pygmy shrews have yellow teeth.

New Arrivals

White-toothed shrews were first discovered in Ireland in 2008. They were found in owl pellets. Owls cough up pellets of bones, fur and feathers after a meal. Scientists study these pellets to see what the owl has eaten.

The shrews are thought to have been accidentally introduced to Ireland, in cargo imported from Europe.

The Problem for Pygmy Shrews

For thousands of years, Ireland has had only one shrew - the Pygmy. Studies show that Pygmy shrews disappear when White-toothed shrews arrive in their area. We don't know why this is, but scientists are worried. More research is needed.

Bats - Ialtóg



Diet

All Irish bats eat flying insects such as moths and biting midges. Some other bat species around the world eat fruit, but no Irish bat is vegetarian.

Echolocation

Bats are not blind! They can see as well as we can, which of course, is not perfect in the dark. Bats use echolocation to find their way around and to hunt. Echolocation is a form of sonar. The bat emits a very high pitched call. The sound waves hit off obstacles and echo back, telling the bat exactly what is there.

Various species

Slide 18

Ireland has nine species of bat. We also have a couple of extra species that have only been recorded occasionally. Perhaps they were just visiting from abroad?

Bats are nocturnal. They fly at night.
All Irish bats are very small.
Bats are fully protected by law.

Life Cycle

Bats hibernate through the winter. In spring, when they wake up, the females get together in a safe place called a nursery roost. There each female gives birth to one baby called a pup. Bats often use attics for their nursery roost.

Mother bats feed their pups with a rich milk. After 6 or 7 weeks, the pups become independent and can hunt.

Flight

Bats are the only mammals that can fly. Some other mammals around the world can glide, but only bats can truly fly.

Bat wings are really just very big hands, with very, very long fingers. Their skin stretches between these long fingers, forming wings.

Video Clip

Watch a short clip of a Pipistrelle bat.

Slide 19

Our Nine Bats

Long-Eared Bat

Leisler's Bat



Lesser Horseshoe Bat

Common Pipistrelle

Soprano Pipistrelle

Nathusius' Pipistrelle



Daubenton's Bat

Whiskered Bat

Natterer's Bat

Glossary - Gluais



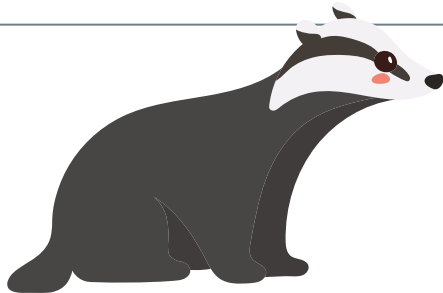
Invasive Species

An Invasive Species is one that has been introduced from another country, and that causes harm to native plants, animals and habitats.

In Ireland, examples include Grey Squirrels, Zebra mussels, and Japanese Knotweed.

Native Species

There are several definitions of exactly what is a Native species. In Ireland, most people accept that a Native Species is one that has been in Ireland since the Ice Age. This is about 10,000 years.



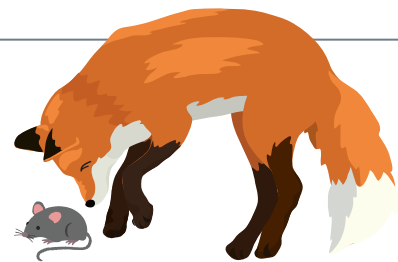
Omnivore

An omnivore is an animal that eats both plants and animals. Are you an omnivore?

Badgers and pine martens are omnivores.

Predator

A predator is a hunter. All predators eat other living creatures.



Territory



A territory is an area of habitat that an animal defends from others.

Having a territory ensures a supply of food and a safe place to live and to breed.

Not all species hold a territory. Some species are only territorial in the breeding season. Many form wandering flocks outside of their breeding season.

Protect Nature

We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to learn, love and protect Nature.



Learn

Learning to recognize our native plants and animals



Love

Growing to love Nature.
We love what we know.



Protect

Protecting Nature.
We protect what we love.

Follow On Activities

Each of our lessons have a toolkit of other activities, designed for various ages.

These include colouring-in sheets for the younger children, crosswords, quizzes and other activities for the older ones.

Why not take your children out into nature? We have notes to help you lead a nature walk.

What Next?

If you and your children enjoyed 'Irish Animals - Hunters', you may also enjoy our other lesson:

Irish Animals - Herbivores

This lesson looks at deer, rabbits, and more - Irish animals that eat plants.

We also have lessons that focus on specific mammal species and groups, such as:

Irish Bats
Hares & Rabbits

We would love to hear from you

We hope your class enjoyed this lesson, and that you found the resources easy to use.

If you have any suggestions on this lesson, or ideas for future lessons, please email us.

