

Revealing the early

life of a stoat family



■ Wildlife cameraman Martin Hayward Smith has filmed the lives of new-born stoats in a custom-built warren at his home.



Pictures: MARTIN HAYWARD SMITH



■ Early days for the young stoats.



■ The stoats get bigger by the day.

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Curled up in a nest with their protective mother, these tiny, wrinkled baby stoats have no concept of the world outside – let alone the idea they would one day be TV celebrities.

Although their home looks for all the world like a repossessed rabbit warren, the 10 kits were actually born in a purpose-built chamber, constructed at the Norfolk home of experienced wildlife cameraman Martin Hayward Smith.

And the never-before-seen footage he captured of these youngsters being fed and groomed during the first weeks of their lives will be shown to a national audience tonight.

BBC Two series *The Burrowers*, presented by Chris Packham, will shed light on the extraordinary subterranean world of creatures including voles, badgers and moles. In order to contribute footage of stoats, Mr Hayward Smith built an enclosure for a pair of the animals in the garden of his home at East Barsham, near Fakenham.

Nature took its course, and the female gave birth to 10 youngsters in March. With three cameras linked by



■ Martin Hayward Smith and his daughter Megan with some of the equipment he

used to film the stoats. The camera angles were OK and that it was the correct temperature for her."

Mr Hayward Smith said the young carnivores were given their first taste of meat at the age of five weeks, before they had even opened their eyes. Aided by his 15-year-old daughter Megan, he scoured the roads for dead birds and rabbits to ensure the larder remained well stocked.

Last year, he spent two months in the Brecks filming stoats hunting in the wild. "I have learned so much from these adorable rogues, for they are killing machines," he said. "To see them bring down a rabbit three times their own size and drag the kill into some cover is quite something."

which has not been covered before. "People normally only see stoats when they are driving along in their car and see a flash running across in front of them, so to be able to study them like this is absolutely remarkable."

The nesting chamber included tunnels sculpted from wire mesh and covered in earth and plant roots.



used to get amazing photographs of a stoat family from birth to leaving the nest.



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Mr Hayward Smith said the stoats were released at a secret location when they were 16 weeks old.

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