

WEASELS

(*Mustela erminea*) (*Mustela frenata*)

Mustelidae Family/**Carnivore**/Weasel Family



NPS Photo



The ermine/short-tailed weasel is distinguished from the long-tailed weasel by its smaller size, shorter tail, white feet, longer fur and more northern distribution.



The weasel is solitary except during mating season. It marks its territory and sprays when alarmed with a strong smelling scent from musk **glands** under the base of its tail.

It has a very high metabolism and eats nearly 40 percent of its body weight every day. An efficient killer, it will engage in **surplus killing** and **cache** the extra meat in **burrows** for future use.

Newborns are furless and weigh about 14 g. Their eyes open at 5 weeks and they are **weaned** by the time they are 6 or 7 weeks old. **Kits** hunt on their own by 7 or 8 weeks and leave the family unit by four months of age.

Special features: Its long, thin body makes it easy for the weasel to follow prey into underground **burrows** and snow tunnels. Weasels have short legs, triangular shaped heads with long whiskers, and small rounded ears and eyes. Males are 10-15 percent larger than females. Ermine can reach 33 cm in length and 170 g in weight. Long-tailed weasels can grow to 45 cm in body length and up to 340 g in weight.

For camouflage, the weasel's coat changes from dark brown with a light-coloured throat and underbelly in summer to white for the winter. The fur on the tip of the tail stays black year round and flashes in the white snow to distract and confuse predators.

Weasels have relatively large sharp teeth and strong jaws. Their sight is not as well developed as their excellent senses of smell and hearing. Their paws have five toes with sharp curved claws.

Good swimmers and climbers, weasels often survey their surroundings by standing on their hind legs. As with all members of the weasel family, they are bold and ferocious fighters.

This skilled predator moves swiftly both above and below ground. It hunts on the ground in a zigzag pattern, moving in leaps of up to 50 cm. Ermine can run easily over snow.

Females hunt in tunnels more than males, which may explain the higher number of males that are trapped.

Food: Mice, rats, voles, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, shrews, frogs, lizards, small snakes, birds, eggs, bats, insects.

Denning: Abandoned **burrows** of other animals or dens in hollow logs, under tree roots, brush or rock piles or in abandoned buildings. Dens are lined with the hair of their prey.

Predators: Large hawks, owls, foxes, wolverines, large snakes, coyotes.



The brown summer fur of weasels turns white in winter.

NPS Photo

SHORT-TAILED WEASEL/ERMINE (*Mustela erminea*)

LONG-TAILED WEASEL (*Mustela frenata*)

Mustelidae Family/Carnivore

Weasel Family

Distribution:

Short-tailed weasel (ermine) in all Provinces and Territories. Long-tailed weasel in southern Canada.

Maturity:

Female: 3-4 months,
Male: 12-14 months

Average life span:

5 to 6 years

Mating:

July and August

Young born:

Mid-April to Mid-May

Gestation:

240-270 days due to **delayed implantation**

1 litter a year/Average 6 to 7 kits

Habitat:

Forest edges, **tundra**, meadows, riverbanks and marshes, hedges and fence rows

Management Issues:

A beneficial predator, eating mice and other rodents that can cause problems, it is also a threat to poultry and rabbit farmers.

