



MAMMALS

Status: Common, Native Resident

LONG-TAILED WEASEL

(*Mustela frenata*)

Description

The long-tailed weasel belongs to the Mustelid family, a group of mammals known for their long bodies, short legs, and strong scent glands. The Latin name, *Mustela frenata*, refers to a bridle-like mask that is characteristic of weasel populations in the southern United States. But this feature is lacking in South Dakota weasels. The Lakota word for weasel is (h)itunkasan.

In summer the long-tailed weasel is brown with white underparts and brownish feet. The tail, the longest of any North American weasel, is brown with a black tip. This black tip confuses predators into mistaking the tail for the head, thereby drawing the focus of an attack away from the vulnerable portion of the body. During the winter, the weasel changes from the brown summer color to entirely white, except for the black of its eyes, nose, and tip of the tail. The color change in weasels occurs gradually from early October to early December and then again from February to late April. These changes seem to be genetically controlled, not environmentally influenced. Experiments have shown that if a weasel from the northern regions is moved to the south, its coat will continue to change color according to the northern seasons.

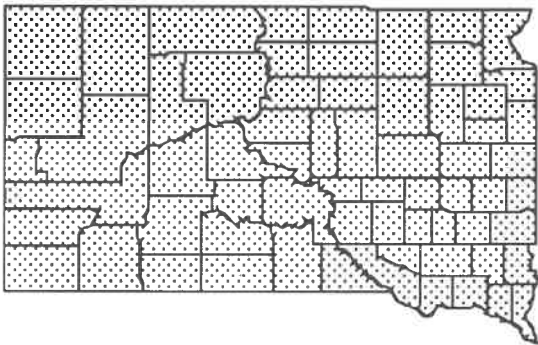


The body of the long-tailed weasel is long, slender, and sinuous, with a long tail and short legs. They range from 11 to 22 inches (28-56 cm) in length with the tail measuring an additional 3 to 6 inches (8-15 cm). The long-tailed weasel weighs between 3 and 9 ounces (85-267 g) with males being about twice as large as the females. The weasel has 34 teeth with long, sharp *canines* that it uses to deal the killing blow to a victim with a sharp bite to the back of the neck.

Distribution

Long-tailed weasels range across much of the United States, southwestern Canada,

and as far south as northern South America. In South Dakota the species is found throughout the state in 3 recognizable subspecies: *M.f. alleni* is the smallest in size and is *endemic* to the Black Hills; *M.f. spadix* is the darkest in color and is found only in the eastern one-fourth of the state; and *M.f. longicauda*, the most common and largest in size, occupies the remaining areas in the state. The long-tailed weasel shows a preference for open areas covered with brush or tall grass near water. Weasels live in dens in hollow logs, tree stumps, among rock piles, or in burrows that they have taken over by killing the former occupants.



Natural History

The long-tailed weasel is an aggressive carnivore, preying primarily on mice, but also attacking animals much larger than itself. Prey species include rabbits, chipmunks, shrews, rats, snakes, frogs, and birds, especially poultry. Weasels have even been known to attack humans when being handled or when cornered. Not only is this species aggressive, but it displays great agility and determination. In order to capture a squirrel, weasels have been known to climb 20 feet (6 m) up a tree.

The weasel is prone to violent killing sprees. Weasels are notorious for killing entire coops of chickens. The killing instinct in the weasel is thought to be brought on by the smell of blood. Nothing that is injured and in its vicinity is safe from attack. Siblings and even their own young can be killed and eaten. It is a common misconception that weasels will

suck the blood out of its victims. This fabled ability stems from the fact that weasels have been seen with blood on their snout after they have killed.

The long and slender body of the weasel allows it to move, almost flow, over terrain. This body design makes it an effective predator, able to follow its prey into the narrow tunnels of its den. Sometimes the weasel takes over the den of its prey and will line the den with the fur of its victim. The long-tailed weasel can swim and climb quite effectively, but not with the proficiency of its cousins, the ermine and the fisher. Because of its slender body style, the weasel has a high metabolic rate. In winter months it will use almost half of the food that it eats to maintain body heat. Weasels at rest will coil up head to tail in the shape of a circle in order to conserve heat by reducing the amount of body surface exposed to the cold air.

Female long-tailed weasels reach sexual maturity at 3 to 4 months of age, while males usually don't reach maturity until their second year. Weasels may drag their rumps during mating season. This behavior is thought to be a way of leaving scent trails for members of the opposite sex. Males also use this scent to declare their territory to other males. Long-tailed weasels usually breed in July or August and show the ability to delay the implantation of the embryo into the uterus for about 7 months after fertilization. This delay is thought to be an adaptation to giving birth when conditions are at their most favorable. Litters, from 1 to 10 pups, are born in underground nests that are lined with rabbit or rodent fur. The young are born without fur and are essentially blind. Although nests can be above ground among rocks or in logs, they usually are part of an elaborate underground den. The den has several branches, some serving as latrines and others as food storage areas. The pups do not remain with the mother long. At 7 to 8 weeks, the male pups are already larger than their mother and the young leave the den not long after.

Significance

Weasels do not pose a serious threat to humans other than threatening the poultry industry. Weasels are in fact beneficial in that they destroy much of the rodent population that harms crops. Although weasels are furbearers, there is little demand for their fur.

Conservation Measures

Weasels are uncommon, but widespread in North America. The main threats to weasels are often predators such as the gray fox, red fox, coyotes, hawks, large snakes, and owls. Predators, disease,

starvation, and parasites kill far more long-tailed weasels than people do. Habitat conservation is the key to maintaining weasel populations. As long as there is plenty of good habitat and an unpolluted environment, even significant mortality will not affect weasel populations to any great degree.

It is legal for South Dakota residents with a basic hunting license and furbearer stamp to hunt and trap weasels throughout the state. Hunting season runs from November through January.

Glossary

Canines - the eye teeth found next to the incisors.

Carnivore - those animals that primarily eat meat.

Endemic - known only from a particular locality.

Subspecies - is a population of a species that is physically or behaviorally different from other populations of the species but still capable of interbreeding with them.

References

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