Long-tailed Weasel

*Mustela frenata*

**Order:** Carnivora  
**Family:** Mustelidae

**Other names:** bridled weasel

**Similar species:** short-tailed weasel (also known as ermine), mink, least weasel

**Description**
As the name implies, this weasel is named for its long tail, which is > 44 percent of the total body length. It has a long and lithe body and neck and the legs are disproportionately short. Total length (body length + tail length) ranges 11-17 inches, males being larger than females. Adults weigh from 3.0 – 9.5 ounces; males are significantly heavier than females. Long-tailed weasels are cinnamon light brown to dark brown on their backs and yellow to white on their bellies and paws. Their tails have black tips that can extend 0.25 - 0.33 the length of the tail. This coloration works as a distraction for raptors that would try to make a meal of the weasel, drawing the raptor’s eyes to the tail tip rather than the body of the weasel.

Long-tailed weasels undergo two molts each year, in which both their fur thickness and changes color. Molts last about three to four weeks. The fall molt begins with the belly and fills out upward, while the spring molt starts on the back and thins downward into the summer coat. In more northern regions such as Iowa, the weasel will be completely white with the black tail-tip during the winter, and only a lighter brown in more southern regions where snow is sparse or non-existent. In far southern regions such as Florida and the southwest, the weasels have white or yellow markings on their faces, leading to the name “bridled weasel” because they look like they’re wearing bridles.

The face is the typical weasel shape, having long whiskers, rounded ears, and small, black eyes. The weasel’s head is only slightly wider than its neck, which allows it to fit down small holes. Long-tailed weasels develop their infamous musk glands at only six weeks of age, and will use them throughout their lifetime to mark territories or in anger and warning. Although the musk isn’t as powerful as that of a skunk, it is still nauseating enough to mistakenly assume a pet dog has been sprayed by a skunk.
Long-tailed weasels rarely walk or run, rather they lope or bound, and can travel quite quickly this way. Tracks of this weasel have the hind feet appear together in front of the much smaller forefeet (see Figure below). Weasels are curious and will stand on their hind legs to investigate their surroundings. Although they’re mostly solitary, sometimes two adults will play together. Weasels express a variety of emotions; they purr when they’re happy, hiss when angry, screech when fighting, and stamp their feet when annoyed.

It has been hypothesized that the long-tailed weasel is not distributed farther north because the larger males have difficulty moving across deep snow.

Habitat
The long-tailed weasel, a habitat generalist, lives in scrublands, prairies, meadows, fields, and forests, or any open area with dense vegetation for cover and a water source. These weasels can be found along suburban edges or even in town, and do not seem disturbed by humans in the vicinity. Its burrow is most often in an old chipmunk, ground squirrel, pocket-gopher, or mole burrow, but can be found in rock piles, stone walls, haystacks, and under stumps and fallen logs. The burrow has a main nest with multiple side tunnels that hold stores of prey. Its nest is lined with layers of grass and fur from prey, with bones and skins around the edges. Weasels are horrible housekeepers. They use their sleeping quarters as a place to eat as well as a latrine (place to urinate and defecate), and instead of cleaning up after themselves they just lay down another layer of grass and fur on top of the leftovers and waste material. Feces, also known as scat, can be found in the tunnels as well.

A long-tailed weasel’s home range can be up to 400 acres, with males having larger hunting circuits than females, sometimes so large it takes them 7 - 12 days before moving on to another. One male will have multiple females’ ranges overlapping his, but he fiercely guards against any other males. Females will tolerate a male in their range, but will attack any female weasels.

Diet
The long-tailed weasel is very opportunistic as a hunter and will eat anything alive and moving that it can kill. It is a carnivore, but will eat berries on occasion. The diet is mostly rats, mice, squirrels, shrews, moles, and rabbits, but weasels will go after small birds, reptiles, amphibians, and raid nests for eggs. Weasels have been reported eating a few insects and earthworms, and bats if given a chance.

Weasels may kill more than they can eat and cache (hide) the remainder. Like most predators, such a response is because there may be long intervals between kills.
Caching is prevalent especially during spring when babies are born and in fall when the cooler weather sends the weasel into a preparation mode for winter. However, most cached food will rot and spoil in the tunnels of the weasel’s burrow before it’s eaten. The long-tailed weasel consumes a lot and can eat anywhere from 30-70 percent of its body weight every day. Because of their appetites, long-tailed weasels are ferocious and successful killers, and will occasionally climb trees to get at nests and birds, even though they’re not really built for tree climbing. They’ll also wade in shallow water, even though they’re not great swimmers.  

Although a rabbit is nearly twice the size of a weasel, this little predator can still take one down. A rabbit provides a lot of energy in exchange for the energy expended by the weasel in catching it. A weasel will leap at the neck and bite down, holding on tightly with all four paws to the rabbit and riding it as it tries to run away and roll and flip. All the while the weasel is waiting for the perfect moment to get a fatal bite in to the base of the skull or the jugular vein. Although it is widely believed that weasels suck blood from their prey, they don’t. Despite being messy at home, weasels appear to be quite neat when eating. Like the vampire bat, a weasel will lick at the wound and lap up the blood that has spilled on the fur, keeping its face clean. However, the reason for lapping up the blood has more to do with its nutritive value rather than a weasel’s neatness. When able to hunt down a large prey item, a weasel will first consume organ meat, including heart, liver, and kidney. The weasel may be sated after eating only some of a larger prey item, whereas with small prey, the weasel will consume the entire carcass. Fur and feathers are then regurgitated back up later in a pellet, much like that produced by an owl. The weasel eats eggs quite daintily, removing one egg at a time from the nest, biting off the top, and then lapping up the innards like a cat with a saucer of milk. The long-tailed weasel is nocturnal, but is often active during the day, when its prey is most exposed, because a weasel will be awake and hunting when its prey is away from its burrow. Long-tailed weasels are excellent mousers, and before the domestic cat became a fixture around farms, farmers would encourage the weasel’s presence. It should be noted that if the rodent population runs too low a weasel will most definitely go to the hen house for some easy meals. The long-tailed weasel has excellent senses of smell, hearing, and sight, but relies mostly on scent to find prey. A weasel will stand up when it’s hunting and wave its head back and forth to catch any smell of prey drifting through the air.

Life History

The long-tailed weasel breeds 8 - 10 months prior to giving birth to its young. This is because weasels suspend development of the embryos until a month prior to birth, at which time fetus development occurs. This process of suspending embryos for several months prior to development is known as delayed implantation. When food is plentiful and a female is in good physical condition more embryos (i.e. 7 - 9) will be implanted, but if the female is in poor physical condition because food is scarce few or no (i.e. 0-3) embryos will be implanted. Instead the female will either flush them out or they will be resorbed into her body. Mating season is midsummer, July to August, and males will find one female and stay with her until shortly after his litter is born. At that time, the male
will take off and find another mate. This may be a female that is still nursing or has just weaned her litter from the previous year’s mating, unless it is her first mating season. Females mate as young as three to four months of age, while males wait until their second year. The litter is born from April to May with four to nine young. Young are born naked and pink, with little white hairs on their heads. The first 35 days are spent without sight, but overall development is rapid. Teeth poke through at three weeks and the mother will then start supplying a little meat, so that when the kits’ eyes open at five weeks, weaning can begin. By eight weeks old, the kits can make their own kills while on outings with the mother, and will move out before winter.

Long-tailed weasels live three to five years on average in the wild, but not much is known regarding how long they could potentially live. Foxes, hawks, and owls prey heavily on the weasels, and cats, dogs, and larger snakes such as the black rat snake have been known to attack them. Human fur trappers have the capacity to reduce the population, but given the small annual harvest in Iowa, they currently don’t seem to impact long-tailed weasel populations. Raptors will strike when a weasel ventures out in the open, and it is most vulnerable in snow; hence weasels found in northern regions are white during winter. The black tail spot acts as a target for birds of prey, directing them to the tail rather than the weasel’s body. If the bird manages to hold on to the slim tail, the weasel can still turn around and strike at and scratch the bird’s legs and chest. On one account a vulture was observed taking a weasel, and then suddenly dropped from the sky dead. The vulture had only managed to grab the tail, and the weasel had torn at the vulture’s chest with its mouth and claws. Most times larger birds will survive this sort of attack, but a weasel has a powerful death grip, and a bald eagle was found with a bleached weasel skull embedded in its chest.

Management

Although the long-tailed weasel has soft, strong fur, it is of lesser value than the fur of mink, putting the weasel under less harvest pressure. Very few trappers focus on only weasels, but an accidental trapping is welcomed, as it does have some value. Trappers that try to catch weasels for fur will most often target their harvest during the winter because the solid white pelt is worth more than the brown pelt, just as with ermine pelts. Humans have both positive and negative impacts on weasels. While human harvest may reduce a weasel population, human land use that results in increased numbers of field mice and rodents, weasel prey items, can support and enhance local weasel populations. The long-tailed weasel is listed as a species of Least Concern or Common by the IUCN, as it is common across a large range.

Reducing Conflict

Long-tailed weasels occasionally cause conflict with humans when they raid poultry houses. However, this conflict can be prevented by excluding weasels from the poultry house. Close all openings larger than 1 inch. To block openings, use 1/2-inch hardware cloth or similar materials.

What you can do to help

Weasels are important predators of rodents and provide food to other animals, such as birds of prey. Weasels are not harmful to people or their property, unless you happen to keep chickens for eggs or are raising chicks. If you are keeping chickens, the most effective way to eliminate weasel predation is to make the chicken coop predator-proof, thereby excluding weasels (see paragraph above). To encourage weasels, keep habitat intact, including fallen wood and leaves, which can be used by the weasels themselves, or their prey. Brush piles, where allowed, provide habitat and cover for weasels as well as their prey items.
References


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This publication was peer reviewed by two independent reviewers using a double-blind process.

PMR 1015B   May 2014

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