

Nature Notes

The Short-Tailed Weasel



Perhaps you have been lucky enough to see this active little predator in its brown summer coat with a lighter coloured underside or in its white winter coat with the tip of the tail in black. This change in coat colour confused early Europeans who named weasels in their summer coats stoats and in their winter coats ermine. Short-tailed weasels have a wide geographic range including all of Canada except for the southern prairies, most of western and northern USA, most of northern Europe and Asia, northern Africa, and parts of Greenland.

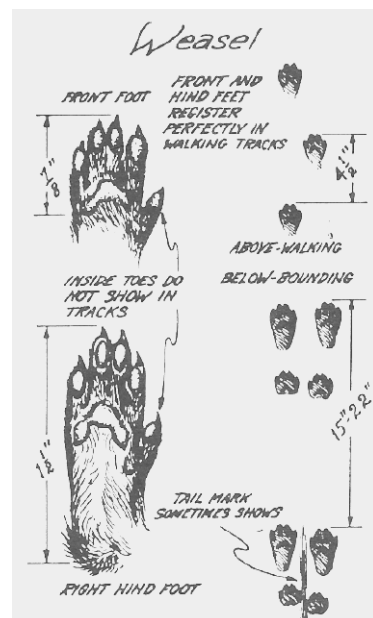
These active and inquisitive animals are found throughout the Kimberley Nature Park where they spend most of their time on the ground with an occasional foray into the trees. Seventy-five percent of their diet consists of mice and shrews. They also are known to eat chipmunks, squirrels, small rabbits, insects, small snakes, birds and the odd chicken should they get into the henhouse. Weasels eat as much as 1/3 of their weight each day in order to support their active life style and may stockpile excess prey in burrows before winter, which probably has led unfairly to their reputation as animals who love to kill. Female weasels can consume 4 mice per day when feeding kits. Weasels in turn are preyed upon by marten, larger owls, and hawks. They may have territories of up to 16 ha meaning the Kimberley Nature Park could support as many as 50 animals. The size of the territory and their reproductive success depends upon the abundance of prey so their numbers vary from year to year.

Males have an average length of 272 mm and an average weight of 80grams. Females are considerably smaller at an average weight of 56 grams. This makes the female small enough to enter the burrows of mice and voles and weasels can even take over the burrows of dead prey to raise their young. The litter of 4-9 young (kits) with fine white coats are born in a den lined with the fur of prey in April or early May. Their eyes open at 5 weeks and by 7 weeks the males are as large as their mother. Females are sexually mature at 2 to 3 months age while males do not mature sexually until the February following their birth. When alarmed, weasels can produce a musky skunk-like odour.

In winter their tracks can often be seen, usually zig-zagging from one hole in the snow or exposed stick to another. The tracks are similar to those of a squirrel but squirrels tend to take longer leaps than do weasels and squirrels usually leave no drag mark from their tail while weasels sometimes do.



A weasel in winter colours. Image from www.saskschools.ca/.../animals/images/



Weasel Tracks. Joseph J Shomon. Animal Tracks Province of BC. Ministry of Environment

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