

Long-tailed Weasel

Mustela frenata



Other common names

None

Introduction

Like its cousin the short-tailed weasel, the long-tailed weasel develops a white coat in winter to aid with camouflage. This habit has also made them a target for the fur trade. Long-tailed weasels are known for being very active and inquisitive, constantly moving about and inspecting crevices for prey.

Physical Description and Anatomy

Like other members of the weasel family, long-tailed weasels have a long, slender body and short legs. Their fur also changes seasonally. In warmer months they are dark brown on the upper side and lighter on the belly. By mid-November this changes to pure white, though the tip of the tail remains black all year.

From nose to tail they measure from 11 – 17 inches in total length. As their name suggests, their tail is longer than that of the short-tailed weasel, measuring at more than 44% of body length (nose to rump), or about 3 – 6 inches. Weights range from 2.5 – 9.5 ounces (70.9 – 269.3 g), with males being larger and heavier than females.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

It is difficult to differentiate between long-tailed and short-tailed weasels in the wild, when looking at signs of their presence or observing the animals themselves. The most reliable way to determine which species you're looking at is to measure the tail. For a short-tailed weasel, the tail is less than 44% of the body length, while it is more than 44% of body length for a long-tailed weasel. Behavior gives some indication as well, as long-tailed weasels are found more often in wetlands while short-tailed weasels are found in drier habitats.

Long-tailed weasels also possess anal scent glands, which they use to mark their territory. The scent produced is often nauseating to humans.



Long-tailed weasel tracks.

Front: 1 inch long by 1 inch wide.

Hind: 1/2 inch long by 1 1/2 inches wide.

Note: Hind tracks may or may not register heel pad.



Long-tailed weasel scat.

Habitat

Long-tailed weasels are found in temperate and tropical habitats in North and Central America. They prefer lightly wooded areas with lots of habitat for small rodents which make up a large portion of their diet.

Behavior and Diet

Long-tailed weasels are mostly carnivorous, but they will feed on berries and fruit when available. Their diet consists mainly of small rodents, rabbits, birds, and reptiles, but they will take advantage of any prey they come across, and will even follow prey into the canopy. They may be considered pests by farmers as they will raid hen houses, but in turn they control rodent populations in barns and fields, resulting in a net benefit that pays for the occasional loss of a chicken. Long-tailed weasels can eat up to 1/3 of their body weight in a single day, which is the equivalent of an adult human eating about 50 lbs of food in one day.

These animals are active year round, and can be seen hunting and foraging at any time of day or night. They are generally solitary outside of breeding season, and maintain a home range of 75 – 100 acres. Within this range they have multiple den sites. They often appropriate the dens of their prey, burrowing and expanding them to suit their needs. These dens are abandoned when food or potential mates are no longer available.

Human Interactions

As mentioned above, long-tailed weasels may be considered pests by farmers for taking chickens and other domestic fowl. Like other small furbearers, they are taken for their pelts, and are an important animal in the fur trade.

Reproduction

Long-tailed weasels breed in July and August. However, females undergo delayed implantation, preventing development of the fertilized embryos, for 200 – 250 days. The majority of development occurs in the last 27 days of this cycle, and kits are born in April or May. Litter size on average is 4 – 5 kits, but may be as many as 12 in well-fed females. Young are completely helpless at birth, born blind and naked, and are dependent upon the mother for food as well as warmth. Females provide the majority of parental care, though males may occasionally provide food. They open their eyes around day 35, and weaning begins at this time as well. Young disperse before winter, and females are sexually mature by their first summer, but males generally don't breed until their second year. They can live up to 9 years if they can avoid predators like red and grey fox, predatory birds, coyotes, bobcats, and domestic dogs and cats.

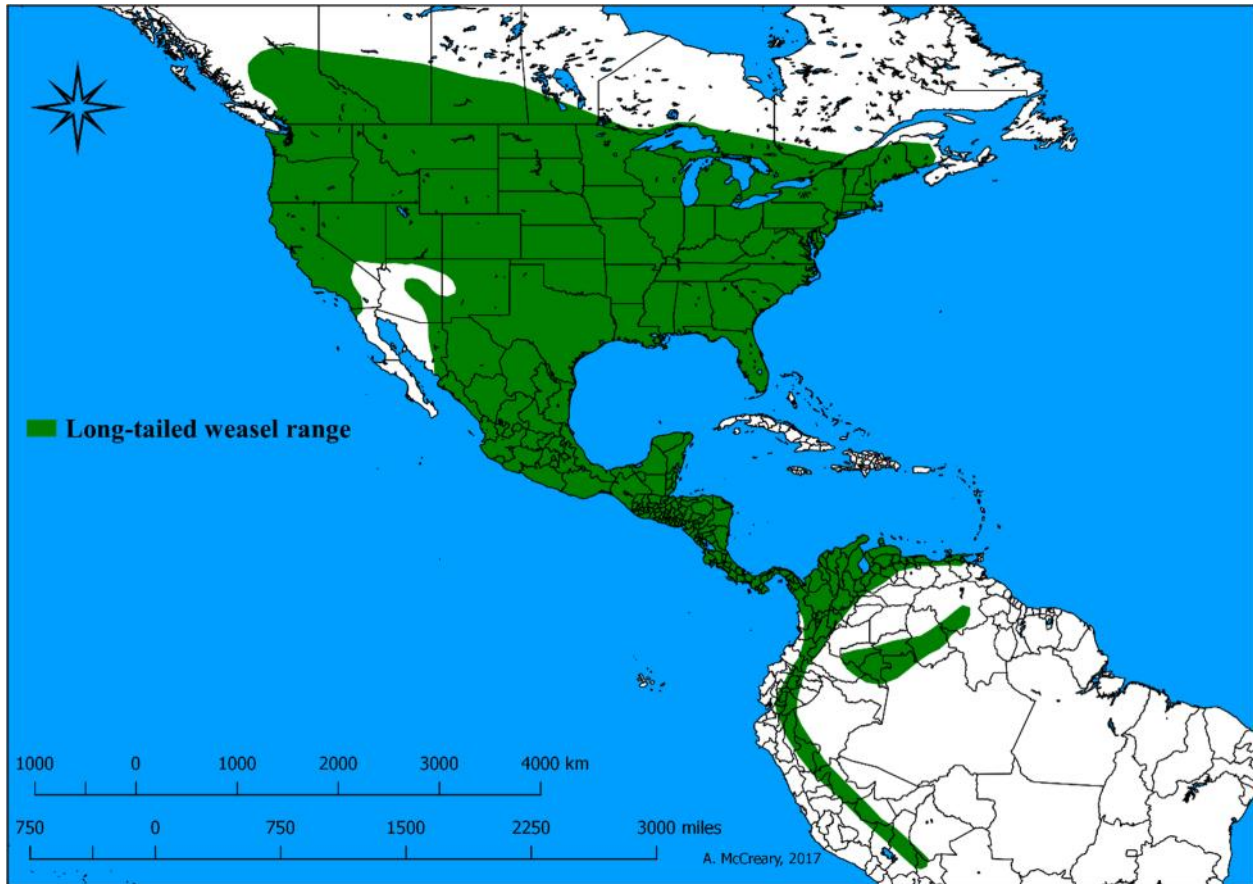
Fun Facts

Long-tailed weasels can eat up to 1/3 of their body weight every day. This is the equivalent of a 150 lb human eating 50 lbs of food in one day.

Their coat changes color, from brown in warmer months to white in winter, allowing them to remain camouflaged.

Range and Status

Long-tailed weasels can be found from southern Canada, throughout most of the US and Mexico, into Central America and parts of South America. Their populations are stable, but numbers fluctuate in response to changes in prey density.



Management and Research in New York

In New York, long-tailed weasels are managed as a small furbearer, and they are an economically important species. Trapping is permitted, with dates of trapping season varying by location.

At Dyken Pond

Long-tailed weasels can be found in the multiple wetland habitats around Dyken Pond.

Sources

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