

Short-tailed Weasel

Mustela ermine



Other common names

Ermine, stoat

Introduction

The short-tailed weasel is one of the smaller members of the weasel family. In winter, their coat turns pure white to help them blend into their surroundings. This white pelt has been prized by the fur trade for hundreds of years, and it was even considered a symbol of royalty in Europe.

Physical Description and Anatomy

Short-tailed weasels change their fur according to the season. From December to March or April their coat is pure white and the tip of the tail is black. This allows them to blend into their snowy surroundings. Only the white individuals, as well as their pelts, are referred to as ermine. In

warmer seasons, the upper part of the body is brown, and the lower parts are cream colored, while the tip of the tail remains black. The change in coat is triggered by day length as well as ambient temperature.

Like other members of the weasel family, short-tailed weasels have a long, slender body and short legs. Adults are 7 – 13 inches (17.8 – 33.0 cm) long, and only weigh 1 – 4 ounces (28.4 – 113.4 g). The tail is less than 44% of the length of the head and body, giving this species its name.



Short-tailed weasel pelt.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Short-tailed weasels are easily confused with long-tailed weasels, as they have very similar proportions and coloration. The most reliable way to differentiate between the two species is to measure the length of the tail. Let's ignore for a moment how difficult it is to get a small, active weasel to sit still long enough for you to measure its tail. In short-tailed weasels, the tail is less than 44% of the length of the head and body. In long-tailed weasels, the tail is more than 44% of the length of the head and body. Long familiarity with both species is needed to identify an individual in the wild.



When running, short-tailed weasels often place their hind feet in the same tracks as their front feet, leaving a doubled print.



Short-tailed weasel tracks.

Front: $\frac{7}{16}$ – $\frac{5}{8}$ inches long by $\frac{7}{16}$ – $\frac{5}{8}$ inches wide.

Hind: $\frac{7}{16}$ – $\frac{9}{16}$ inches long by $\frac{3}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide.

When tracking weasels in the wild, look for doubled prints, as they often place their hind feet in the tracks left by their front feet. In snowy conditions, if there is a crust on the surface they may not leave any tracks because they are so small. If snow is soft and deep, they will tunnel through it, occasionally peeking their head above the surface to get their bearings.



Short-tailed weasel scat.

Habitat

Short-tailed weasels are found in a wide variety of habitats, from riparian woodlands and marshes to scrub brush and forest edges. They prefer upland hardwood forests and meadows rather than wetlands. Two other members of the weasel family, the long-tailed weasel and the least weasel, are more commonly found in wetlands. The main requirement for short-tailed weasels is a high density of small mammals as a sufficient source of prey.

Behavior and Diet

Short-tailed weasels may be small, but they are fierce predators. They are fast and very quiet hunters, sneaking up on their targets and often tunneling through snow to ambush prey. They feed on small mammals, birds, eggs, frogs, fish, and insects. If prey is scarce, they will even attack animals larger than themselves, like rabbits and larger birds. On a daily basis, they need to eat 19 – 32% of their total body weight to survive. They will cache excess prey, but they are often at risk of starvation if small mammal populations are scarce. In times of scarcity, they may feed on fruit and carrion.

Short-tailed weasels are active all year long, and can be seen hunting at any time of day or night. They den in crevices under tree roots, rocks, and logs, or the abandoned burrows of the prey they've just killed. They are extremely agile and flexible, and are capable of climbing trees and swimming quite well. While traveling, they often stop to stand upright on their hind legs to get a good look at their surroundings. They can run up to 8 mph (13 kph), and can jump up to 6 feet (1.8 m) in a single leap when hunting.

Human Interactions

Ermine, short-tailed weasels in their white phase, are trapped by humans for their pelts. In many areas, trapping is managed to prevent overharvesting. Other influences humans have are through habitat disturbance and reduction of prey animals.

Reproduction

Short-tailed weasels mate in mid to late summer. Females are able to delay implantation of embryos, so while gestation is 280 days, most of the development occurs in the last 28 days of pregnancy. Females give birth in April and May to litters of 4 – 8 young. Nutrition has a large

influence on litter size and survival. If a female is not well fed, her litter will be smaller and less likely to survive to adulthood. A well fed female can produce as many as 18 young in a single litter. Young are born hairless and blind, and care is provided solely by the female. Young open their eyes at 28 – 48 days, at which point they begin taking some solid food provided by the mother. They nurse until 7 – 12 weeks, and the female will mate while her current litter is still nursing. Interested males may bring fresh prey to entice the female into mating, but they do not provide any other care. At 3 months, young are able to hunt for themselves, and they are fully grown around 6 months. Short-tailed weasels have the potential to live 6 – 7 years, but often do not live more than 1 – 2 years. They are preyed upon by great horned owls, goshawks, foxes, coyotes, and occasionally long-tailed weasels.

Fun Facts

The short-tailed weasel is called an ermine only when it is in its white phase during the winter.

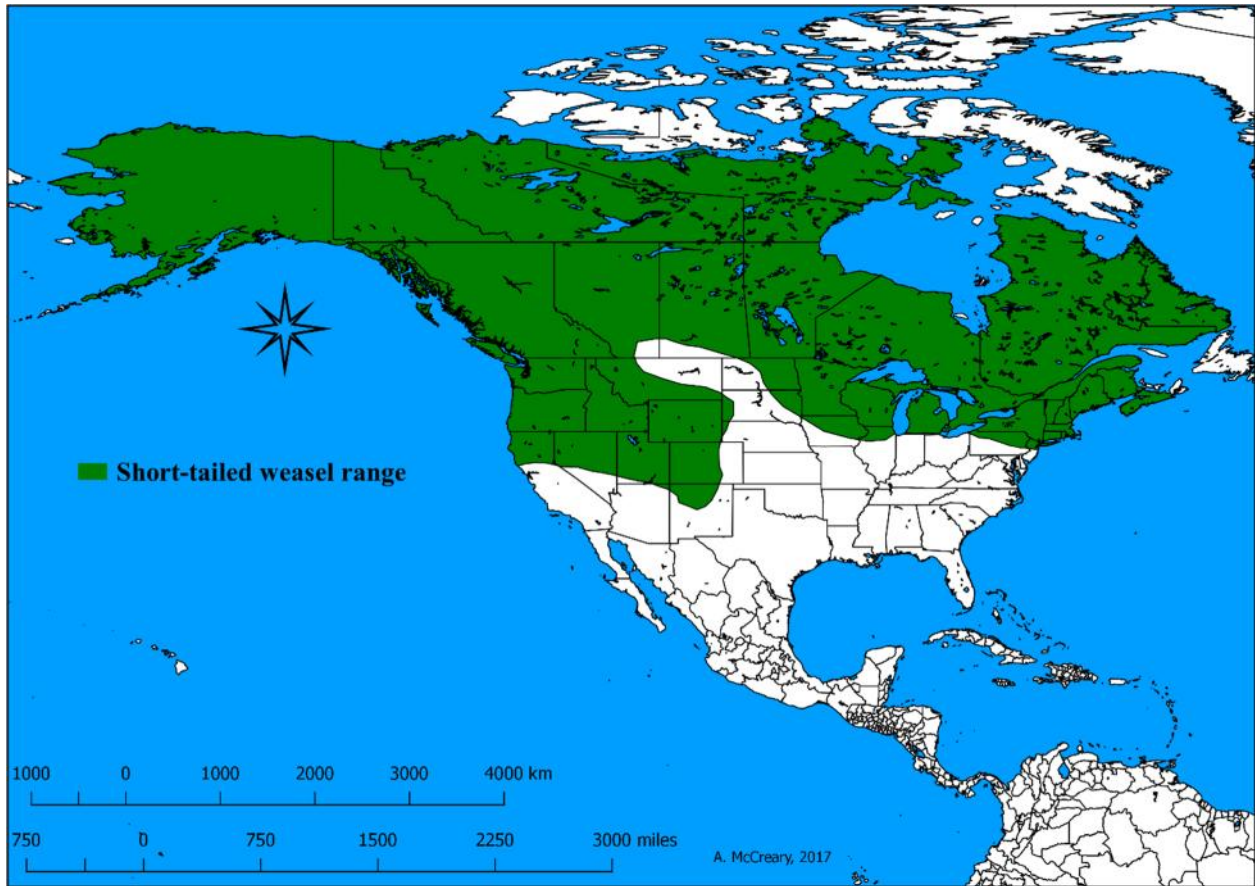
Ermine pelts were considered a symbol of royalty in Europe, and Queen Elizabeth II wore an ermine-trimmed cloak for part of her coronation ceremonies in 1953.

Range and Status

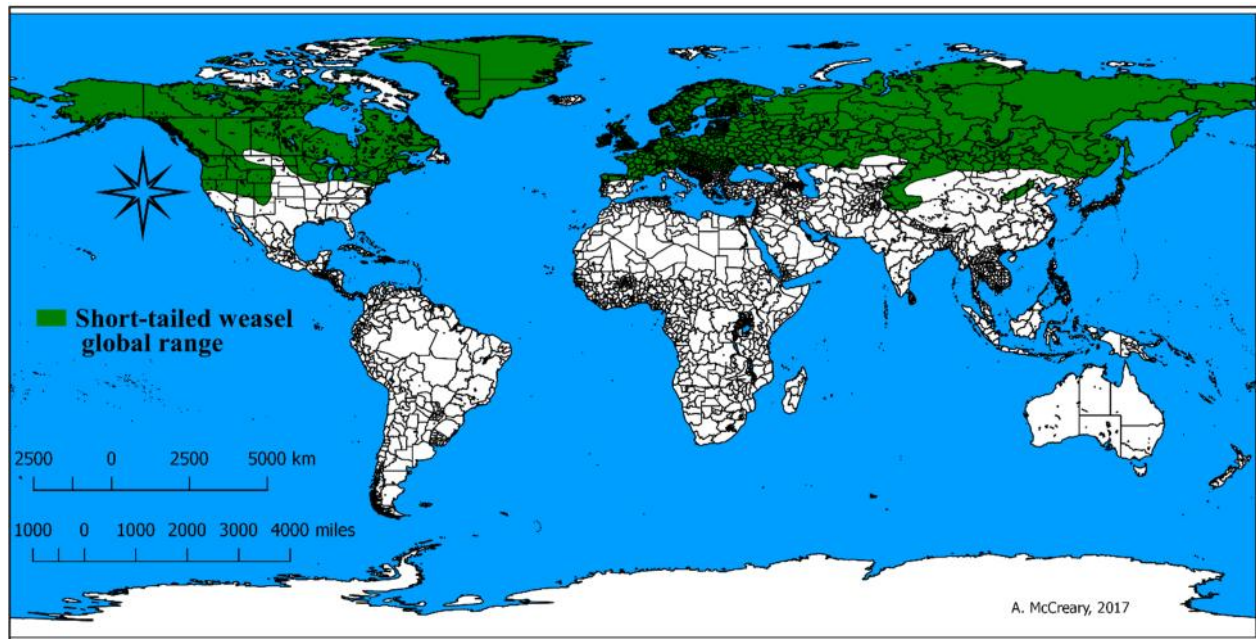
Short-tailed weasels are found throughout the northern hemisphere, down to about the 35°N latitude, which runs along the border between Virginia and North Carolina. Global populations are stable, but in some localities it may be threatened by habitat loss, overharvesting, and reduced availability of prey.



Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II in her Coronation Gown and the Purple Robe of Estate, trimmed with ermine fur.



Range of short-tailed weasel in North America.



Global range of short-tailed weasel.

Management and Research in New York

Short-tailed weasels are managed in New York as a small game animal. Hunting and trapping is allowed with the appropriate permits.

At Dyken Pond

Look for short-tailed weasels along stone walls in forested areas and wood piles where they will hide and hunt for prey.

Sources

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. (n.d.). *Best management practices for trapping weasels in the United States*. Washington, D.C. Available from:
http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/trapbmpsweasel.pdf

Elbroch, M. (2003). *Mammal tracks & sign: A guide to North American species*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books.

Hoyt, L. (2016). *Mammals*. Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, Cropseyville, NY.

Lakehead University Faculty of Natural Resources Management. (2011). *Common mammal species of Northwestern Ontario: Ermine*. Available from:
<https://www.borealforest.org/zoo/ermine.htm>

New York Falls. (n.d.). *Mammals of New York*. Available from:
<http://nyfalls.com/wildlife/mammals/>

Saunders, D.A. (1988). *Adirondack Mammals*. Syracuse, NY: State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry [SUNY-ESF].