

NATURE Winter 2006 DETECTIVES



Who Are You Calling a Weasel?

Pity the poor weasels. Weasels go about life like any other critters, trying to find food, shelter, water, space to live and the opportunity to have baby weasels. In other words, they just try to do their weasel jobs. But then, because they are keen little hunters, seeking out prey without being seen or getting caught themselves, people think they look sneaky and furtive. People even started calling sneaky humans "weasels." Since they have this shifty reputation, weasels make great "bad guys" in made-up stories. (Think of Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame or the Redwall series by Brian Jacques.)

Escape Artists, Not Villains

Weasels have long skinny bodies and short legs, which makes it easy for them to fit into small spaces such as underground rodent dens. Alert, listening and sniffing for prey and watching for enemies, weasels are always on the move, slipping in and out of crevices and holes, looking...well...sneaky. If a person shirks some job or responsibility, we say they "weaseled out of" doing something, and we don't think highly of such a person. But, weasel bodies are built for doing weasel work and being able to "weasel out" of narrow spaces is a good thing for these small hunters.

Weasel Relatives

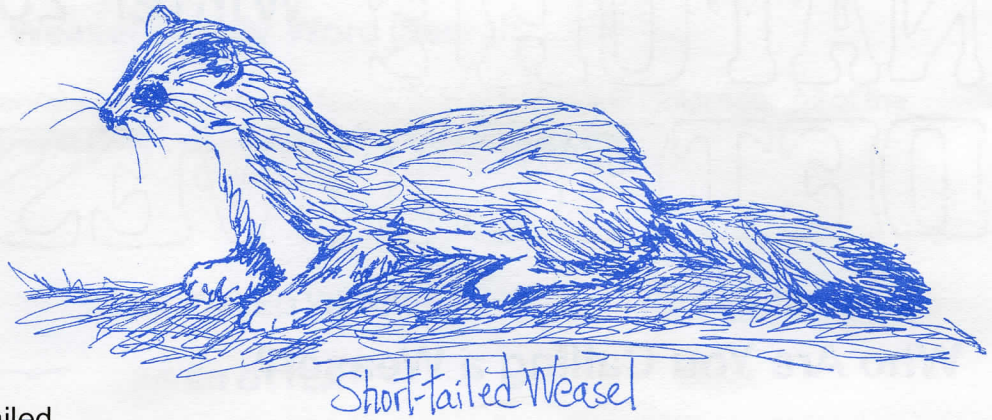
Two different weasels live in Boulder County, the **long-tailed weasel** and the **short-tailed weasel**. You might be surprised to learn that other members of the weasel family (Mustelidae) are residents, too. Our **American pine martens**, **minks** and **badgers** are also mustelids. **Wolverines** are hard to find weasel family members, but some might wander our most remote areas. The endangered **river otters** lived here long ago and someday we may see these playful members of the weasel family making their homes along local streams once again.

One thing all mustelids have in common is that they are stinky! At their rear ends, they have musk glands that give off a smelly fluid useful for marking food and territory so that other animals want to stay away. Phew-y!



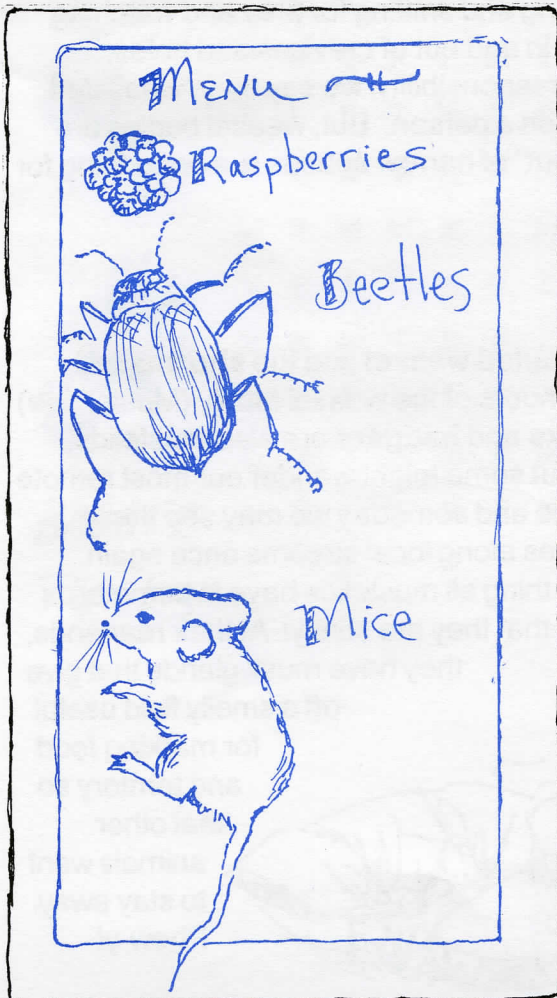
The Long and Short of Weasels

Weasels run with a funny hunched back and if you are lucky enough to spot one, you might wonder if you glimpsed a short-tailed or the slightly bigger long-tailed weasel. Long-tailed weasels have tails about half the length of their bodies, and they tend to hold their tails up in the air. Short-tailed weasels have tails about a quarter the length of their bodies. Male weasels are bigger than female weasels but all weasels are much smaller than housecats.



Baby Weasels Grow Up Fast

Female long-tailed weasels typically have seven to nine babies sometime between April and May. Short-tailed babies usually make their appearance during May, June, or July, with six to nine young in each litter. By the time they are six to seven weeks old, the young weasels spend much of their time playing, but soon they are on their own in a serious game of finding food and staying out of danger.



Little Bodies with Big Appetites

Their scientific name, *Mustela*, means "one who carries off mice" and weasels hunt lots of them plus chipmunks, ground squirrels, voles and shrews. They will also eat insects, rabbits, birds, eggs, snakes and fruit. They'll eat most anything they find including fish and frogs. They play an important role in the balance of nature by keeping rodents from becoming too numerous. If they have a chance to kill more prey than they can eat, they will store the extra for future meals. Weasels have been known to kill animals such as rabbits that are much larger than themselves. Weasels have to eat a lot to keep up their energy; their lean bodies don't have fat reserves so they are active year-round, day or night. When they do sleep, they use the burrows of their prey, lined with grass or leaves and fur from their kills.

Camouflage and Stinky Ferocity Keep Weasels Alive

In winter, short-tailed and long-tailed weasels are snow white except for the black tips of their tails. Early spring and fall, they turn a mixture of brown and white as the old hair falls out and new hair grows in. In summer, weasels' brown coats match the color of woody plants and rocks. Short-tailed weasel bellies in summer are a whitish color; the undersides of long-tailed are more yellowish to orangish in summer. The tail tip is always black.



LONG-TAILED WEASEL IN WINTER

Perhaps the black tip is what a predator might see first and grab, giving the weasel a chance to pull away and escape. When they can't escape into a nearby crevice, weasels become fierce fighters and make that stinky odor to drive their enemies away. Predators such as great horned owls, hawks, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, martens, mink, snakes, pet dogs and cats are more likely to snatch baby weasels.

An odd fact is that short-tailed weasels are called ermine in the winter when they are white. Ermine pelts were once highly prized as decoration on clothing for kings and queens. People still trap some weasels each year for their soft luxurious fur. Many more weasels are accidentally killed by cars. Most weasels live less than two full years.

Tracking Down Weasels in Winter

Winter is a good time to look for weasel tracks in the snow, especially close to streams.

Weasels drink water and tend to live near water. Watch for tracks with little footprints in sets of two that go here and there, looping around, doubling back, close together then far apart within a short distance. Weasels also scamper through the forests, diving under the snowpack near rocks or trees to investigate vole and mice tunnels under the snow. Weasels check out every little hole. Long-tailed weasels are more common than short-tailed, and they are curious so you just might see one poking its head out of a crevice to watch you.

Since most wild animals don't want us to see them, it is no surprise that catching sight of a weasel is a difficult thing. It is much easier to catch a whiff of them. While you are looking for tracks and weasels, sniff the air and see if you detect the sharp, skunky scent of a mustelid.

You might be smelling a pine martin or a mink or other mustelid, but it could be a weasel.

Tracks in snow



Short-tailed Weasel emerging from snow

Weasel Family Word Search

Find and circle each of the members of the weasel family that are found in Colorado. All of the words are listed across or up-and-down, none are backwards or diagonal.

Good luck!

BADGER

LONG-TAILED WEASEL

WOLVERINE

ERMINE

RIVER OTTER

MINK

PINE MARTEN

SHORT-TAILED WEASEL



*BADGER
TRACKS*

R	M	M	E	T	R	P	E	B	I	W	R	R	V	T	N
M	G	L	W	N	E	I	E	A	R	O	T	R	W	E	I
A	N	W	E	E	A	N	V	N	B	L	B	L	R	R	A
B	T	D	B	N	V	E	N	E	I	V	N	E	E	R	G
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N	R	L	R	R	T	K	M	P	M	E	E	N	N	I	N



RIVER OTTER