



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION  
WILDLIFE BUREAU

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

WEASELS

LONG-TAILED WEASEL & SHORT-TAILED WEASEL

General

Weasels are found throughout New England in abundant numbers. Of the two species commonly found in Connecticut, the long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*) is more readily seen than the short-tailed weasel (*Mustela erminea*); both are related to mink, marten, fishers, otters, and skunks, all members of the family Mustelidae.



Weasels are small, slender, long-bodied animals with small heads and rounded ears. The long-tailed weasel measures 11 - 17 inches; its tail making up to 2 - 4 inches of its total length. In both species the males are larger than the females. Weasels have dark brown upperparts with white to yellowish-white underparts during the summer. On the long-tailed weasel the brown coloration tends to extend down to the feet and toes where as the short-tailed weasel usually has white extending from the toes on to the lower legs. Both species have a brown tail with a black tip. Molting occurs from October through November and both weasels take on a completely white winter coat, except for the black tip of the tail. The long-tailed weasel may remain brown through the winter in areas where the climate is mild. The spring molt takes place from late February throughout April, after which the weasels regain their brown summer fur.

**Reproduction**

Breeding occurs during the summer--in July and August for the long-tailed weasel, somewhat earlier for the short-tailed weasel. Both species are monogamous, so the male and female only breed with one individual. After breeding, the implantation of the embryo is delayed; this is typical of all mustelids. About 7 months later, the embryo begins to grow and the gestation period ends in 270 - 280 days. A litter of 4 - 9 young are born between April and May. At birth, the young are blind, naked, and helpless. They are well-furred at 3 weeks, have teeth at 4 weeks, and their eyes open at 5 weeks of age. Weaning begins soon after their eyes have opened and by November the young are almost full-grown. Soon after the young are weaned, the family unit will start to disperse. Young females can breed at 3 - 4 months, while males are not sexually mature until they are about one year old. A weasel's life span is about 5 years in captivity but probably less in the wild. These animals are generally solitary except during the mating season and while rearing their young.

**Habits**

Short-tailed weasels inhabit brushy areas and thickets in forested habitats where water is nearby. Long-tailed weasels prefer open woodlands, brushland, and rocky areas close to water. Burrows are made in abandoned rodent dens, hollow logs, and crevices in ledges and stone walls and typically have several entrances. The sleeping and birthing chamber is lined with grass, leaves, and fur from their prey.

Weasels are carnivorous and prey on mice, rats, moles, rabbits, chipmunks, frogs, snakes, earthworms, birds and their eggs. Daily, they may consume up to 30 - 40 percent of their body weight.

Weasels are alert, curious predators that are active throughout the year, and although mainly nocturnal, they may be seen during the day. Thorough and persistent in their search for food, they may travel 2 - 3 miles in a single night. Their normal home range is about 30 - 40 acres.

These voracious hunters secure their prey by striking at the base of the skull and pressing their bodies against the victim until the struggling ceases. They may kill more than they can eat, but will usually store the surplus for times when food is scarce.

Weasels have good senses of sight, hearing, and smell and produce vocalizations that include hisses, screeches, purrs, and chatters. They will swim and climb, especially when in pursuit of prey. When annoyed or frightened, weasels may emit a foul, musty odor from scent glands located near the anus.

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**Benefits**

Weasels are valuable predators since they feed heavily on small rodents often considered human pests. Their effect of keeping rodent populations in check usually outweighs the occasional damage they may cause. Weasels are also important furbearers.

**Management of Nuisances**

Weasels do not usually cause many nuisance problems to the landowner. However, they may occasionally "raid" a poultry house or a rabbit hutch. Weasel predation can be identified by examining the carcasses of their prey. They kill by biting at the base of the skull or under the wing and they usually eat the back of the head and the neck. Also, the tops of eggs are bitten off and the contents eaten.

The best and most permanent solution to a problem like this is to secure and maintain poultry and animal houses to prevent a weasel from gaining entrance. Heavy gage, mesh wire can be used to cover up holes on such structures and will keep most any potential predator out.

Weasels have a curious nature and can be captured in live traps baited with fresh meat. These animals should be released as soon as possible in suitable habitat at least 5 miles away. However, live trapping alone will not always solve this problem since other individuals may move into the area.

**References and Further Reading**

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