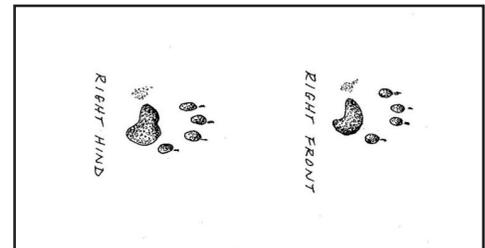
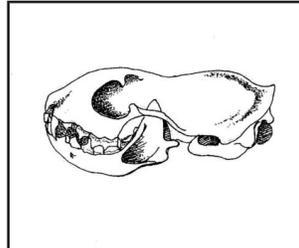
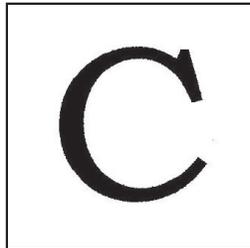




The Weasels

Family Mustelidae

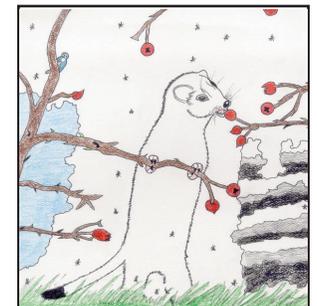


Weasels belong to the Mustelidae family along with the skunk, mink & otter. The chief characteristic they all share is a musky oil that some members of this family can dispel to ward over a potential attacker. **There are three weasels native to Pennsylvania:** the **Least Weasel**, the **Long-tailed Weasel** and the **Short-tailed Weasel or Ermine**. Their ranges overlap in the state, but the long-tailed is most common throughout the state. The short-tailed is found mostly in the northern and eastern regions, and the least weasel is found in our southcentral and northwest sections.

Weasels have small triangular-shaped heads with small dark eyes & small rounded ears. Their **long, slender bodies** and short legs allow them to bound like a slinky as they move, occasionally stopping to stand on their hind legs or sit on their haunches for a better look around or to investigate food. They all have **five small-clawed toes on each foot**.

All of our weasels are brown above with white or pale yellow undersides. Depending on their range, **some weasels**, or some members of each weasel species may **turn white in winter** to better camouflage with their habitat.

Weasels are known for being fierce predators - usually dispatching their prey with a swift bite through the skull or under the chin to the windpipe. They have superb senses of sight, hearing and smell. Normally nocturnal, they will hunt during the day and are active year-round.



Talk about trophy hunting. Weasels will often kill prey larger than themselves. When weasels build their underground nests, it is not uncommon for them to line the nest with fur. Not only their own fur, but the fur of their prey, especially shrews and mice. Sometimes the fur is packed so densely it resembles felt. The rest of the nest is made of layers of grass. Weasels rarely dig their own nest, preferring to take over a chipmunk or mouse burrow. Or they may nest in a hollow log or within rock crevices.

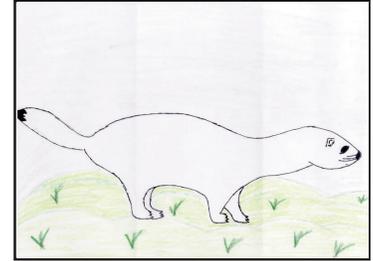


Weasels show a strong size-dimorphism between the male and female. That means the male weasel is much larger than the female weasel. **Some animals show color-dimorphism** - meaning the male is a different color than the female. The cardinal is an example - the male cardinal is bright red but the female cardinal is brownish-green.

The **Short-tailed Weasel or Ermine** (*Mustela erminea*), at right, is not as common as the closely related long-tailed weasel, but this is the weasel most of us are familiar with because of their beautiful and varying coat colors. Their pelt is soft and glossy and has long been admired in the fur trade.

In summer, the short-tailed's upper-parts are dark brown, with pale undersides. But as the amount of daylight shortens with approaching winter, the ermine turns white except for their black tail tip. Ermines and varying hares are the only Pennsylvania mammals to turn white in winter. The white pelt helps the ermine hunt for prey in a snowy landscape. It also helps them avoid being seen by larger predators.

Adults are rather small, from nine-15 inches in length, including a short, bushy tail. Males are larger and heavier than females, but still only weigh up to about four ounces. A male short-tailed may be about the same size as a small female long-tailed.



The **Long-tailed Weasel** (*Mustela frenata*), above, looks like the short-tailed weasel except it has a larger body and longer tail. Typically colored dark brown above and cream underneath, they only turn white in the northern most sections of their range. So during winters in Pennsylvania you will only see white long-tailed weasel once in a while. Both the short-tailed and long-tailed weasel only breed once each year.

Like all weasels, they are good swimmers and good climbers - easily hunting squirrels. Ferocious little predators, they will also take rabbits or hares, bats, birds or their eggs, frogs, snakes, insects and even carrion. Weasels have no problem dragging prey bigger than themselves. They also like to cache their prey for a later meal.



The **Least Weasel** (*Mustela nivalis*) is the **smallest carnivore in the world!** Just about seven inches long (above left), including a 1.5-inch tail, they only weigh about 2 ounces. Brown above and white below with white chin and feet, their tail does not have a black tip. A few least weasels in their northern range turn white in winter. Despite their size, least weasels are as aggressive as the larger weasels and kill in the same manner. If disturbed near its nest, an adult least weasel will chirp or hiss at its enemy. **When agitated, they can spray musk from their anal scent glands.** Unlike the other weasels, least weasels can breed & reproduce year round.



A Simple Review of Weasels



They are mean, fast & aggressive killers! But that's a good thing. Perhaps not if you are a chicken or a chipmunk, but weasels are very good at what they do. They are survivors. They have to be. Since they are small animals, a lot of bigger animals are hunting them too. The same skills that help weasels hunt prey help weasels escape other hunters. **Weasels are carnivores** and members of a large family of mammals called mustelids.

Weasels are related to mink, skunks & otters. They are long, slender animals with short legs, a small head and short fur. They bound up and down as they run, like a ferret.

Weasels have **needle-like canine teeth designed to puncture the skull of their prey** - especially rodents. Part of their scientific name, *Mustela*, means "one who carries off mice." But weasels eat more than just mice. They'll take just about anything they can catch on the ground and in the trees. From insects to squirrels, weasels are not choosy. Believe it or not, **a four-ounce weasel can kill a four-pound rabbit.** If their prey is too big to eat at one time they will cache the rest of the animal for a later meal.

Weasels are active all year and usually hunt throughout the night. They are curious with endless energy, often stopping to investigate every hole and crevice they pass. Because they are so slender weasels can easily slide into burrows and cavities in search of prey or shelter.

Three weasels live in our state: The Long-tailed, the Short-tailed and the Least weasel. They all have similar coloring - brown above and cream below. But it is the short-tailed weasel or ermine that turns white during wintertime. This helps them to camouflage as they hunt or try to avoid being hunted. The other two weasels only turn white if they live in the coldest, northern-most part of Pennsylvania.



All weasels den underground or in a ground cavity. They will steal the burrow of another animal or find a hollow log or pile of rubble to tunnel into. Nest chambers may be lined with fine grasses. More often though, they are lined with the feathers or fur of their prey. Weasels are very clean and even have a separate chamber for their waste.

Young weasels are called pups and are born blind and helpless. But once their eyes open at about five weeks they are already eating some of the prey the parents bring to them. By 10-12 weeks the pups start killing prey on their own - sometimes starting with earthworms.