



Long-tailed Weasel

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo Gerald Rozemeijer

Long-tailed Weasel (*Mustela frenata*)

There are two species of weasels in North Carolina, the least weasel and the long-tailed weasel. The long-tailed weasel is the larger and more widely distributed of the two species. Biologists have described the long-tailed weasel as the purist of carnivores, as every feature of their body and behavior is adapted to live exclusively as a hunter. In short, they are effective rodent-harvesting machines.

Description

With long, slender bodies, short legs and flattish pointed heads, long-tailed weasels are adapted to burrowing underground to catch prey or create homes. The origin of their Latin name likely derived from their small, slender stature; *Mustela* means a “mus (mouse) as long as a telum (spear).” Normally brown, with a white or tan underbody, these weasels can have facial and body markings dependent on their habitat. Their large rounded ears lie flat on their head and their tails make up 40-70% of their entire body length. They are agile swimmers and climbers, and their running has been described as small bolts of brown lightning.

History and Status

The long-tailed weasel arose in North America approximately 2 million years ago and thrived during the Ice Age. The weasel’s ancestors were larger than the current form, and underwent a reduction in size that helped them exploit the new food sources available in North America. Its small size and long body allowed the weasel to easily maneuver beneath snow, as well as hunt in burrows and runways of voles, mice, and lemmings. The long-tailed weasel is classified as a fur-bearing animal in North Carolina and can be trapped during the regulated furbearer trapping season.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/long-tailed-weasel.

Habitats & Habits

Long-tailed weasels can be found in a variety of habitats, including thickets, forests, marshes, and open farm lands, but appear to be partially restricted to the vicinity of water. They are mainly limited by the abundance and distribution of small prey populations. Due to their small size, weasels have high metabolic demands and their populations are sensitive to fluxes in prey populations. To meet their metabolic demands, they are proficient and active hunters; if several prey are available they will catch as many as they can and cache the surplus for later consumption.

Weasels hunt by using smell, hearing and sight, likely in that order, and they systematically search an area, exploring logs, tree trunks, cavities, crevices, and

The long-tailed weasel is found throughout North Carolina but is seldom seen due to its solitary and secretive nature.



Photo David A. Mitchell



Photo Becky Matsubara

Range and Distribution

The long-tailed weasel has populations extend from southern Canada through North America, Central America, and into northern South America. It is found statewide in North Carolina.

Range Map



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burrows. Weasels subdue their prey by wrapping their long body around the catch and kill their prey by biting the nape of the neck.

Weasels do not hibernate and are generally active both day and night. In more northern climates, they will molt their brown coat, replacing it with a white coat, except for the black tail tip. Solitary animals by nature, these mammals live by themselves in abandoned burrows of other mammals.

Human/NCWRC Interactions

Long-tailed weasels tend to be solitary and elusive animals and are rarely seen by people, even though they may be abundant in the area. Weasels will attack poultry, sometimes causing disastrous results in the chicken coop. However, they may be more an asset than a liability, as they eat rodents that would otherwise damage crops, produce and poultry. Damage from weasels can be prevented by excluding them from poultry houses by closing all openings with wire mesh. Trapping can also be an effective tool that can be used to remove depredating weasels.

Due to the elusive nature of this species, biologists with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission are interested in observations from the public. If you believe you observed a weasel, please contact the NC Wildlife Helpline at 866-318-2401 or e-mail wildlifehelpline@ncwildlife.org.

In addition to collecting observations, the Commission is conducting a camera survey using “baited tubes” to document occurrence of weasels. Weasels are quick, making them difficult to capture on a camera. The baited tubes, which are visual and olfactory attractants, keep the weasels around long enough for the camera to snap a picture. Information collected from observations will expand agency staff’s knowledge on North Carolina’s weasels, including occurrence, distribution and habitat preferences.



Long-tailed weasel at a baited tube (Photo Jessie Matthews/NCSU)

References

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Credits

Written by Colleen Olfenbittel, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 2019.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 13-17 inches (males) and 11-14 inches (females)

Weight: 6-16 oz (males) and 3-9 oz (females)

Food

Mice, rats, chipmunks, shrews, voles, frogs, lizards, snakes, insects, earthworms and poultry

Breeding/Young

Males reach maturity at 1 year old, but females can reach sexuality at 3 to 4 months old. Breeding occurs from June through August, and embryonic development occurs by delayed implantation. While the egg is fertilized in the summer, it is not implanted in the womb until the following spring. Young are born approximately 27-30 days later. Litters of 4-8 young are born in April or May, weighing just 3 grams. At 5 weeks, their eyes open and at about 7 to 8 weeks old, they can hunt on their own.

Life Expectancy

Average 5-6 years in the wild