

Stoat

Mustela erminea (Linnaeus, 1758)

Order: Carnivora

The stoat has a long sinuous body, short legs and a black tail tip. Body length is 16-31 cm with tail length being 9-14 cm. In England, the summer coat is brown on top and yellow-white underneath. The dividing line between the two colours is sharp and straight. In winter, especially in Scotland and Wales, the stoat may moult into a white coat; the “ermine” form, whilst retaining its black tail tip.

There is pronounced sexual dimorphism, the male stoat is approximately 50% larger than a female. In Britain, adult males reach 320 g by spring, where as females grow faster but reach an adult weight of 220 g by spring.

Droppings, known as ‘scats’, are dark, irregular and elongated, 4-8 cm long and about 5mm in diameter with a characteristic twist of fur at each end which is coiled and twisted within. Scat can be found piled up in a den and have a strong scent when fresh. Stoats may leave tracks in soft ground. Their fore feet measure approximately 2 cm long by 2.2 cm wide.

Most likely to be confused with a weasel but the diagnostic feature of the stoat is the black tail tip. Weasels are smaller than stoats and have a shorter tail. The dividing line between the brown and white-yellow colours on the coat is sharp and straight whereas on a weasel it is wavy and less clearly defined.

Stoats live in dens which may be in hollow trees, rock crevices or burrows sometimes taken over from prey and often lined with their prey’s fur. The sexes usually live separately, except for breeding, the sexes occupy separate territories, excluding other stoats of the same sex. Males become sexually mature in the spring following the year of their birth and are fertile from mid-May to mid-August. Females, on the other hand, become sexually mature within the year of their birth and will typically mate with an older male before weaning. Ovulation is induced and mating occurs during summer. Implantation is delayed until March the following year. Stoats give birth to single litters of 6-13 kits which are born following a gestation period of 28 days. Sex ratio at birth is typically 1:1. When born, the blind kits have fine white fur with a brown mane on their neck. Eyes open at 5-6 weeks, females first, and the black tail tip appears at 6-7 weeks. Juveniles are weaned by five weeks and lactation lasts 7-12 weeks, however, solid food may be taken from four weeks. Prey-killing behaviour is exhibited, inexpertly, at about ten weeks. At maturity males disperse, whilst females usually remain near their natal area. In the wild stoats live for 1-1.5 years; in captivity however, they can live for up to ten years.

Stoats live in a range of habitats including agricultural land, marsh, coniferous and mixed woodland, moorland and mountains up to 3,000 m.

Stoats are carnivorous and hunt along hedgerows, banks and streams. Before the arrival of myxomatosis in Britain their principle food was rabbits. They also eat other small mammals and birds. As well as bird eggs, earthworms, lizards, frogs, berries and insects. Predators include hawks, owls and larger carnivores. The stoat’s most significant predator is man, they are often regarded as pests and may be trapped or shot by gamekeepers. Historically, stoats were hunted for their white winter coat; the ‘ermine’ form. Other threats to stoats include nematode *Skrjabingylus nasicola* which can infect the animal’s nasal passage.



Photograph: Dave Chapman

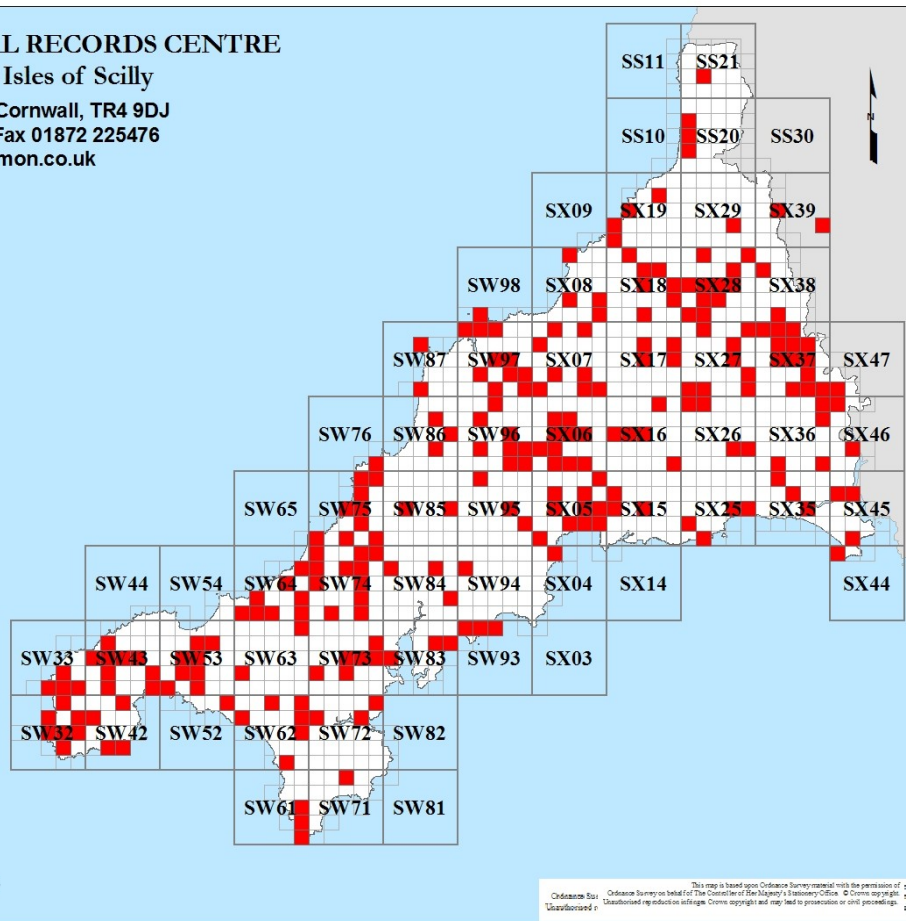


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Cornwall Mammal Group
Stoat
Mustela erminea
As of September 2009

Legend

-  Grid 10 Km
-  Grid 2 Km (Tetrad)
-  Stoat records, 2000-2009



Local distribution and key sites

Widespread throughout Cornwall but under-recorded in places. Not found on the Isles of Scilly

Number of records per date class

2002 to 2006 inclusive 273
1997 to 2001 inclusive 214
All records previous to 1997 561
Total 1048

The stoat occurs across Northern Europe and into Asia as well as North America, where it is known as the short-tailed weasel. The stoat has been introduced to New Zealand and Australia as an (unsuccessful) control for the rabbit population

Research is currently being carried out to determine whether the population of stoats are in decline. It is estimated that there is a UK population of 462,000 but this fluctuates widely with prey availability.

Survey Methods

No specific methods.
The National Game Bag Census (Games Conservancy Trust)
The stoat has been poorly studied in the UK

Did you know?

A.k.a ermine, hob and whitnick. When a stoat moults in spring, moulting starts from the head, progresses slowly across the back then to the underside. The autumn moult is in reverse and much quicker, starting at the belly, then the sides, followed by the back and lastly, the head. The British race of stoat is larger than those of other European countries, Russia and North America.

Key references

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