

Weasel

Mustela nivalis (Linnaeus, 1766)

Order: Carnivora

Weasels are Britain's smallest carnivore they have a long sinuous body with chestnut-brown fur on top and a yellow-white underside with a short tail. Like stoats, weasels moult in spring and again in autumn. In colder climates than Britain, weasels turn white in winter.

There is a pronounced size difference between the sexes, although they are similar in appearance. In Britain, males measure 195-248 mm and females 175-194 mm. Similarly, tail length differs between the sexes with males measuring 32-62 mm and females 35-46 mm. Males weigh an average of 125 g whereas females about 68 g.

Droppings, or scats, are 3-6 cm long and 2-3mm wide with hair, feathers and pieces of bone. They are coiled, similar in shape to that of the stoat but more twisted and curled.

Weasels are most likely to be confused with stoats, however, the weasel lacks the black tip to its, shorter, tail and does not have the stoat's clear demarcation between the two colours of the fur.



Weasel dropping

Field signs



Weasel footprint,

Weasels reproduce quickly and are able to recover from population declines effectively after a food shortage. Sexual maturity is reached at about three to four months. Males are fertile from February to October. There is no delayed implantation and females will have one or two litters per year, depending on food availability. Like stoats, they nest in the burrows of other small mammal. Gestation lasts 34-37 days and typically results in a litter of 4-8 naked and blind kits in April or May, and perhaps a second litter in July or August when voles are abundant, although spring litters develop more quickly. Kit's eyes open after 30 days and they are weaned at three to four weeks and will leave the nest after two months. Weasels can live for up to three years in the wild, however only one in 80-90 weasels survives to over 2 years old.

Weasels live in a range of habitats providing there is sufficient cover and food, including sand dunes, farmland, grassland, mountains and woodland. Weasels are rarely found in urban habitats.

Weasels are carnivorous, their diet consists mainly of mice and voles, however, rabbits, small birds, shrews and eggs may be eaten. Excess prey may be cached. Weasels are mainly active during the day and will hunt along hedgerows and stone walls. Whilst hunting, they will often stand up on their hind legs to view and smell their surroundings before dashing off again. Game birds do not feature prominently in their diet.

Predators include foxes, owls, kestrels, domestic cats and sometimes stoats. Although weasels may be regarded as vermin and gamekeepers may pose a threat, traps set are more often intended for stoats. Other threats include the weasel-specific biting louse, *Trichodectes mustelae*, and the nasal passage can become infected with a nematode parasite, which can have a negative effect on body size and condition. Lastly, in bad rodent years many weasels starve and populations can experience local extinctions.

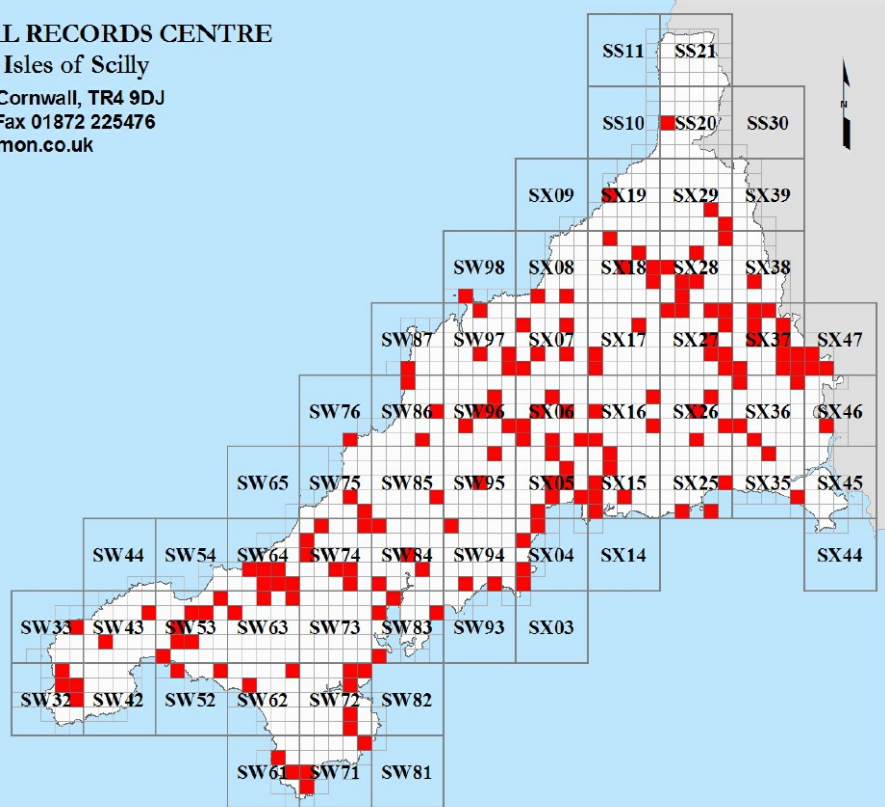


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Cornwall Mammal Group
Weasel
Mustela nivalis
As of September 2009

Legend

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



0 5 10 20 Kilometers

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Local distribution and key sites

Weasels in Cornwall they are widespread but thought to be under recorded. They are found throughout Britain but are not present in Ireland or some of the outlying islands including the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

Number of records per date class

2002 to 2006 inclusive 184
1997 to 2001 inclusive 148
All records previous to 1997 316
Total 648

Weasels occur across Europe and Asia, as well as Northwestern Africa. The least weasel of North America is generally regarded as a subspecies of the Weasel. The weasel has also been

Weasels have been declining steadily which is thought to reflect changes in agriculture on rough grassland resulting in a reduction in food availability, especially of field voles. They have no specific legal protection.

Bern Convention, Appendix III

Long list of Globally Threatened/Declining Species (1995)

Survey Methods

- No specific methods. Could be live trapped and droppings can be searched for along vole runs.
- Cat kills
- Road kills

Did you know?

Weasels need to eat one third of their body weight every day. Weasels do not have delayed implantation because they are adapted to have as many young as possible when food supplies are plentiful.

Key references

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