



## Weasels in New Jersey

Two species of weasel are native to New Jersey, the long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*) and the short-tailed weasel (*Mustela erminea*). Long-tailed weasels have the largest distribution of any mustelid in the Western Hemisphere and unlike other North American weasels, they have no close relatives in Eurasia. The short-tailed weasel occurs throughout North America, Europe, and Asia, from Greenland and the Canadian and Siberian Arctic islands. These weasels are two of the three species of weasel in North America.

These small carnivores are known for their hunting ability and their fearlessness in the face of man or other animals much larger than themselves is legendary. Both weasel species can be harvested by licensed trappers during the New Jersey trapping season that runs from November 15 through March 15.

### Long-tailed Weasel

The long-tailed weasel is the largest and has the longest tail of any species of North American weasel. The fur of the long-tailed weasel is short, soft and is a chocolate brown on the sides and back with a light-colored neck and light-colored belly tinged with yellow. The tail is tipped with black.

In winter in the northern United States and in Canada, the long-tailed weasel's pelt color changes to completely white except for a black tip on the tail. In areas where it rarely snows, such as in the southern United States, Mexico, and Central America, the long-tailed weasel will have a brown winter coat. In intermediate areas including New Jersey, the winter coat may be either brown or white. Data from Pennsylvania shows that about 80% of long-tailed weasels remain brown during the winter. In summer, in the long-tailed weasel, body fur is a uniform dark brown, extending to and including the feet and toes. Long-tailed weasels molt during fall and spring each year.

The long-tailed weasel can be distinguished from the short-tailed weasel by its long tail which is more than 44% the length of the head and body, hence the name- Long-tailed weasel. Long-tailed weasels have a total length of about 11 to 14 inches for females and 13 to 16.5 inches for males. Males weigh 5.6 to 16 ounces; females are smaller, 3 to 9 ounces. As with most species of mustelid, the long-tailed weasel displays notable sexual dimorphism with adult males being about 1.5 to almost 2 times larger than females.

Long-tailed weasels mate in the mid-summer months. After breeding, implantation is delayed and the egg does not begin to develop until March. The total gestation time is about 280 days. Young are born from late April to early May, and the average litter size is six. At birth, a young weasel may weigh about 3 grams. Newborn long-tailed weasels are pink with wrinkled skin and have white fur. In fourteen days, their white hair begins to thicken, and size differences make it easy to tell the males from females. Weasels are weaned at about 5 weeks and can by then eat food brought back to the nest by their mother. They learn how to hunt and kill prey from the mother and by about 2 months of age, they are able to kill prey on their own. Females will mate during their first summer, but males will not breed until the following spring.

Generally, most long-tailed weasels do not survive much longer than a year in the wild with average lifespan about 1 to 1.5 years. However, weasels have been known to live to 7 years of age.

A male long-tailed weasel may have a home range of between 25 to 60 acres and home range size can change, as it is dependent on food availability. A home range for a female is usually smaller and is generally included within a male's home range. Males may live in an area for their entire lifespan, but females frequently disperse from their natal area before establishing home ranges.

Long-tailed weasel habitats range from agricultural fields to small woodlands to suburban areas. They are not found in thick, dense forests or desert areas. Areas near water seem to be preferred.

Long-tailed weasels prey mainly on small rodents, including voles, mice, and chipmunks. Male long-tailed weasels will take larger prey than females up to the size of and including cottontails. The weasel's small bodies fit readily into the burrows of their prey while hunting. The eggs of ground nesting birds and snakes may also be taken. Small birds make up a relatively small part of their diet.

While long-tailed weasels can be active during daylight hours, they hunt mainly at night.

### **Short-tailed Weasel**

In the warm months, the fur of the short-tailed weasel is reddish brown above and white below with white fur along and down the inner side of the hind leg. The feet and toes of the short-tailed weasel stay white year around even though the fur on the rest of the body turns brown in the warm months.

Tail length averages about 35% of the length of the head and body. And, like the long-tailed weasel, the tail has a black tip. In most areas the short-tailed weasel molts to white during winter, except for the black tip on its tail. In its white winter coat, the short-tail weasel is known as an ermine. In Britain this weasel is know as a stoat.

Males can be about twice the size of females and range from about 8.7 to 13 inches in length whereas females range from 7.5 to 11.4 inches in length. Males weigh between 2.5 to 7.3 ounces and females weigh only half as much, 1 to 3 ounces.

Short-tailed weasels mate in late spring to early summer. Females produce only 1 litter per year. Like the long-tailed weasel, the young are born in April or May after an average gestation period of 280 days. This gestation period includes 8 to 9 months of developmental delay. The changes in photoperiod (longer days) beginning in March trigger the continuation of fetal development. Litter size ranges from 3 to 18 offspring with an average somewhere between 4 and 9. The sex ratio is unequal, and young are born blind and helpless. The young are covered with fine white hair, with a prominent dark mane of dense fur developing around the neck by about three weeks of age. The young grow fast and are able to hunt with their mother by two months of age. Although the females do not completely reach adult size until a least 6 weeks after birth, they are able to mate when they are 60 to 70 days old, often before they are weaned. Males do not grow to their full size, nor do they breed until their second summer. Females may live through at least two breeding seasons. Males generally do not survive this long.

A male short-tailed weasel's home range may cover an area similar to the size of a male long-tailed weasel's home range. This is generally two to three times and sometimes up to five to six times the size of the female's home range area. The size of the home range is dependent on food availability. Data suggests that female short-tail weasels remain in or near their natal home range, unlike female long-tailed weasels. Young male short-tailed weasels will disperse from their natal range.

Short-tailed weasels habitat preferences include riparian woodlands, marshes, shrubby fencerows, and open areas adjacent to forests or shrub borders.

Short-tailed weasels hunt primarily during the night. These small predators specialize in taking small, warm-blooded vertebrates, preferably mammals of rabbit size and smaller. When these preferred prey species are scarce, they will eat birds, eggs, frogs, fish, and insects. In severe climates, short-tailed weasels will hunt under snow and survive on small rodents. It is essential to the weasel's survival that they eat daily meals to meet their tremendous energy and heat production demands. Short-tailed weasels will cache leftovers from a meal as a way of dealing with these demands.