

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT:

the LONG-TAILED WEASEL

THE LONG-TAILED WEASEL (*Mustela frenata*) is the most widespread Mustelid (weasel) of the Americas. It is found from the Northern tip of South America to the southern border of Canada. Weasels exhibit a slender, long body with small head, long neck, short legs and a relatively long, slender tail. The upperparts of this weasel are yellowish-brown and the tip of its tail is black. For the majority of the year, the weasels' body is covered with brown fur but as winter approaches, within 30 days, it grows a coat of white, giving it perfect camouflage against the snow.

Although largely terrestrial, these weasels are skilled at climbing trees. They are also strong swimmers and are not afraid to cross rapidly flowing streams. On the ground, the long-tailed weasel usually occupies areas where there are many small rodents. They often live in the burrows of groundhogs, in rotten logs, hollow stumps and under tree

roots. Their nests are made of grass and leaves, and lined with fur from animals that they have preyed upon.

The Long-tailed weasel, long thought to be nocturnal, also hunts by day. The food of long-tailed weasels consists almost entirely of small mammals—ground squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats and small cottontails. Birds and insects make up a small percentage of their total diet and are rarely hunted unless there is no other food available. Long-tailed weasels are not picky eaters, but they eat only meat! They use tunnels made by other animals to hunt for their food and are known for their zigzag pattern when hunting from burrow to burrow. Long-tailed weasel tracks have a unique appearance, the hind feet of the animal fall exactly in the tracks of its front feet. Weasels may kill all animals they find, even if they do not need all of the food. This is because a weasel's instinct tells it to collect food when it is available and store it for the future. In captivity, adults can consume an amount equal to 1/3 their own body weight in 24 hours. In the wild, they may store food in a burrow or near a kill site. Weasels, although considered a pest to many farmers, are beneficial to the environment because they help keep rodent populations low.

Long-tailed weasels are active year round and show no tendency to hibernate during winter. As winter approaches, the weasel's coat turns from brown to white, all except for the tip of its tail, which stays black. A hungry predator, such as a hawk or owl, aims for that black tip, enabling the weasel to escape. However, foxes, raptors, coyotes, domestic dogs, cats and rattlesnakes are just a handful of the many animals that prey on Long-tailed weasels. Although they can live in a variety of habitats, population densities are low.

Long-tailed weasels make a loud chirping sound when scared or ready to attack. When they feel friendly and meet another weasel, they will make a low trilling sound like a whistle. When alarmed or excited they drag their rear ends on the ground, which leaves a scent to let other weasels know their identities. The Long-tailed weasel can have many mates and will have three to eight young in each litter. Shortly after babies are born, they begin to follow their mother on hunting excursions. Young weasels begin to hunt on their own at approximately two months old. Females reach adulthood in approximately three months, but males do not reach adulthood until one year old. The Long-tailed weasel's life span can be quite short—less than one year in some cases—because they have many predators. However, they usually live an average of three to four years in the wild and up to eight years in captivity.

