

FEBRUARY 1 - 14, 2017 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

WEASEL FAMILY - MUSTELIDS

This family of mammals (from Latin *mustela*, weasel) has always interested me, not because of their common attribute of strong musk scent glands, but for their independence and tenacity in the mammal world. All Mustelids are relatively small to medium sized predators. They need to be tenacious to survive. Here in the East we have at least 5, possibly seven-plus representatives.



© Sheri Ansel

Has anyone seen, heard, or smelled any of these characters? Yes, one, the odor of the Striped Skunk. I believe that is the only member of the weasel family that we at EastView have smelled so far. The Badger and Wolverine tend to be out West. The Otter could be how Otter Creek got its name, but none have been seen here to my knowledge. The Weasel, short or long tailed are so cagy and secretive that the possibility of seeing one is slim. The Martin needs spruce and fir forests, so that leaves the Fisher from this group. I saw tracks and other evidence of one when we lived in Milton, VT, but EastView is too open and therefore it is unlikely that one might amble by. Too much human habitation, open land and not enough extensive cover. Then there is the Mink, a Mustelid, but not in this particular group. Usually you will find Mink around water, so it is possible a Mink could visit us. Our EastView habitat is adequate for weasels to investigate our vast Meadow Vole population. However, there is current evidence that Coyote (CoyWolf), Fox, Owls and raptors have cut into this population. Weasels prefer voles and mice as well as rabbits for food. Thus, the weasel and skunk are the only two of the Mustelids that could possibly be seen on our property.

We already have odor indications that a Striped Skunk has investigated EastView. Its odor has only been detected twice at EastView as far as I know.

STRIPED SKUNK



Striped Skunk, *Mephitis mephitis* From Wikipedia

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The **Striped Skunk** (*Mephitis mephitis*) has a wide-spread distribution for a mammal. It is a native from southern Canada to all 48 states and into northern Mexico.

Being adaptable to humans and their habitats, and having few natural predators, but for the Great-horned Owl and maybe a Golden Eagle, this allows them to populate this very large area.

This mammal is listed as "least concern" because of its wide range and ability to adapt to whatever circumstances that are presented to it.

Skunks are polygamous omnivores that are a very recognizable mammal. Its fur was highly prized at one time and some people kept young skunks as pets. Once they spray their scent the cuteness of this mammal disappears. The horrible odor is very difficult to erase as owners of dogs that have tangled with a skunk can testify. Be that as it may, skunks are popular in children's books and cartoons.

RED-TAILED HAWK



(1) **Red-tailed Hawk**, *Buteo jamaicensis*.
© Dick Harlow

These pictures are of the Deer Meadow Drive Red-tail Hawk, taken either on the edge of the woods over looking our meadow/field or flying from one bird box to another by the south pond.

Hawks are either classified as Buteos or Accipiters. The Red-tail, as the Genus name implies, is a Buteo.

This hawk is a large, broad winged, heavy billed raptor. It is probably North America's most common hawk and certainly it is common here in Vermont and for that matter in New England. The chief characteristic to look for when trying to determine what you are looking at is the bellyband on a frontal view and the red tail if you are seeing it from behind.

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(2) **Red-tailed Hawk**, *Buteo jamaicensis*.

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You can see the bellyband in picture 1 and evidence of a band in picture 2 and the red tail in picture 3. Notice that the chest and belly of the hawk around the bellyband of brown feathers is flanked white above and below the band. This band can be made of heavy brown feathers or be light brown feathers and fewer in number, but all red-tails here in the east have a bellyband whether you are looking at them sitting on a branch or flying overhead. The red tail depends on whether you are looking at an adult or an immature and whether you are looking at the dorsal side of the bird. And, dependent on the light the tail can appear dark rusty red.

An immature or a juvenile bird has a gray brown tail and is generally heavily streaked with blackish tail bands.

The back is always going to be dark brown, and its head a slightly lighter brown with a touch of rust or reddish brown and would appear dark from a distance. Therefore, looking at this hawk with its back to you would not give you the satisfaction of knowing exactly who it might be since there are other raptors that are dark on the back and head. However, if you have good binoculars you would be able to see the red tail if the bird was an adult.



(3) **Red-tailed Hawk**, *Buteo jamaicensis*.

© Dick Harlow

There are several plumage phases for the Red-tail depending on where you are in the United States. In the Great Plains an adult Red-tail might appear pale with a pale reddish wash to its tail. This Red-tail is called a Krider's Red-tail. A darker phase, found in the Southeast, so dark that it used to be considered a separate species is called Harlan's Hawk. Be happy we don't have these complications here in the East!

Red-tails are primarily mammal predators. Will they take a bird, sure if they are very hungry and the occasion presents itself. But, mammals are what they are looking for. If you see a Red-tail sticking fairly close to trees it is probably looking for squirrels. Out in the open or at the edge of a field it is looking for voles, rabbits or any small mammal. Besides seeing a Red-tail sitting on a branch looking down for a possible vole, squirrel or rabbit, you also might see it soaring on the thermals over a large field or meadow.

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OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

Eastern Coyote - Heard, tracks

Red Fox - tracks

Gray Squirrel - 4 at feeders

Eastern Cottontail - 1, tracks, scat

Meadow Vole - fresh tunnels, but less than last year. Middle of Feb one garden that was inundated with voles last year is free of Vole tunnels and activity so far this year.

Weather Tidbits

Month of FEBRUARY 1-14, 2017

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Snow 230 mm of fluffy snow, which is equal to 158 mm of precipitation or 6.2 inches.

Overcast Days: 9

TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: -5.6 C⁰/21.9⁰F

High Temp: 11.6 C⁰/52.9⁰F

Low Temp: -19.6 C⁰/-3.3⁰F

DAYS

MAX <0.0 C⁰ 9 DAYS

MIN >0.0 C⁰ 14 DAYS

MAX <-18.0 C⁰ 1 DAY