

# JANUARY 1 - 14, 2019 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

## SMALL MAMMAL PREDATOR



(1) **Long-tailed Weasel**, *Mustela frenata*,  
© Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

The weasel is a Master Predator! There are many predators in our area, e.g. hawks, falcons, coyote or coywolf, skunk, racoon and others, but the weasel is the master of small predation. Why? Because this small predator will take on animals two to three times its size. It will tackle rabbits, squirrels, and ducks, all bigger.

There are three species of weasel in the United States. **Long-tailed Weasel**, *Mustela frenata*, **Short-tailed Weasel** or **Ermine**, *Mustela erminea*, and **Least Weasel**, *Mustela nivalis*.

The Long-tailed Weasel is a small predator about a foot to a foot and half long weighing seven to eight ounces. As I mentioned it is a master predator because this species is known to kill muskrats, cottontails and waterfowl many times its size. This species ranges from just north of our border with Canada to Central and South America.

The Short-tailed Weasel changes its coat color in the winter to white, thus it is called Ermine. Its range is throughout Canada into Alaska and south to Colorado and east to New York.

The Least Weasel (called least because it is smaller than the ermine), is found widely throughout Canada, except the most northern and eastern areas. Its range extends into the US as far as Iowa, Indiana and West Virginia.

Looking at the generic name of Mustela, this name means "one who carries off mice." The word weasel comes from the Sanskrit visra which means to "have a musty smell."

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(2) **Short-tailed weasel**, *Mustela erminea*,  
© Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

Looking at the food data for ermines, "a study of 360 ermines in New York state, indicates that their diet consisted of: 34.5% Meadow Voles/Field Mice; 13.1% rabbits; 11.3% deer mice; 11.2% shrews; 6.7% rats; 3.6% chipmunks; 3.2% birds, frogs and snakes and 16.4% undetermined mammals." The foraging area for this sample was 40 acres.

Relative to the weasel that was observed taking a vole under our boxed raised bed seemed to me to be a Short-tailed Weasel that had not changed its coat color to white. References do say that Short-tails don't always change into ermine. All I can say is that this brown long slinky weasel carrying a vole was definitely a weasel, which type still remains uncertain.



(3) **Least Weasel**, *Mustela nivalis*,  
© Wildlife Trusts

What about the Least Weasel? This mammal is primarily found northern Midwest and in Canada, so we are unlikely to have one here in Vermont. That doesn't mean it isn't possible, just unlikely.

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## **SMALL AVIAN PREDATOR**



**Northern Saw-whet Owl, *Aegolius acadicus*,**  
© Megan Lorenz

The Saw-whet Owl is a forest night hunter. It perches patiently in a tree watching and listening for the sounds of its prey.

As a small predator, Saw-whets primarily feed on mice and voles. However, they are opportunists and will feed on any small rodent that is out and about at night as well as young squirrels, birds, or large insects.

As Saw-whet Owls are forest dwellers it is unlikely we will see them or hear them here at EastView. Our open terrain lends itself to owl predators such as the Short-eared Owl or Screech Owl, topics for another note.

## **BIRDS NOT SEEN NOTE:**

For those who are worried that there are fewer birds visiting feeders, we all need to look at the weather as the possible culprit. Now there is snow on the ground. Temperatures have stopped moderating and have become cold to very cold. I believe that now you should be seeing more and different species of birds at your feeder. Birds are opportunistic and will go where food is available, such as feeders, now that their normal habitats are covered with snow and ice. When there is a lack of snow cover wildlife have a wider expanse to look for food such as seed, berries, grubs under tree bark etc., than they would ordinarily be able to cover.

Birds, and in general wildlife, have an instinct to increase caloric intake when it gets cold; whereas they tend to back off taking in high caloric food when the weather moderates or warms.

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Remember, by March wildlife food will become scarce, especially for various species of birds; so be vigilant for northern visitors, such as Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, Pine Grosbeaks, Evening Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings.



**Common Redpoll**, *Acanthis flammea*,  
Middlebury, January 2015, © Dick Harlow

### **OBSERVATIONS**

#### **MAMMALS**

Coywolf tracks  
Fox tracks  
Weasel, scat/tracks  
Gray Squirrel  
Rabbit tracks

### **WEATHER TIDBITS**

**Month of JANUARY 1-14, 2019**

*All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).*

#### **PRECIPITATION**

**Total Precipitation: 20.8 mm or 0.9 inches**

**Overcast Days: 8**