

Have You Ever Seen _____?

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Insert an animal of your choice to the title. As a person who spends a fair amount of time outdoors, and also works for your local park district, I am confronted with this question on a regular basis. An animal that gets asked about frequently is the Mink. In my personal experiences and from communication with other outdoor folk, there is a fairly stable population; not just in Crawford County, but Ohio as a whole. Being elusive does make them difficult to detect, but with a little practice the eye will be able to pick out that dark chocolate body bounding along the top of a creek bank. However, weasels, cousins of the Mink, are not quite as easily detected.

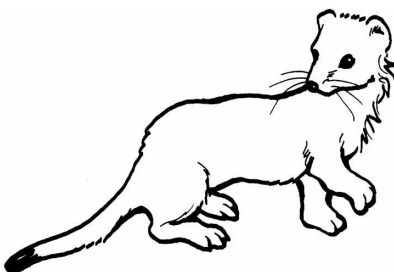
Ohio is home to three species of weasels: Long-tailed, Short-tailed, and Least. Of the three, the Short-tailed Weasel is probably the rarest. The Division of Wildlife lists it as a “species of concern”. It is known to only occur in northeast Ohio and is the mid-sized of the three at 8-14 inches. The Short-tailed is also known as Ermine (winter pelage) and Stoat (summer pelage). A brown animal most of the year, the Short-tail will molt into its winter coat of white, but will maintain the black tip on its tail. A fierce little predator, the Short-tailed Weasel is a consumer of any small rodent it can find. Other “table fare” includes rabbits, birds and their eggs, snakes, and shrews. Short-tails utilize delayed implantation. Breeding occurs in the summer months, but the egg is not implanted in the uterus until the following spring. They seem to prefer open woodlands, grasslands and wetlands, but can probably be found in any habitat that is relatively close to water. While not much is known about its distribution, it is known to occur in Trumbull and Ashtabula counties.

The Long-tailed Weasel is our largest weasel, attaining lengths over 20”. It is thought to have a statewide distribution. The tail will be tipped with black and be over half the body length. Much of the habits and habitat requirements are thought to be similar to the Short-tailed. Of course being a little larger, it will go after larger prey. The Long-tailed will also molt into white winter coats; reports from trappers indicate some years they molt, whereas other years they don’t, or maybe just partially. Is this an environmental trigger? The indication would make sense. If the fall is warm, why change colors to white when there isn’t snow on the ground? Studies have translocated weasels from Maryland, where they don’t molt, to northern locations where they do. What happens? They don’t change to white. The same happens when northern weasels are sent south; they still molt to white. So, while genetics are the major contributor, environmental influences appear to also have an effect on a weasel’s molt.



“The Smallest Carnivore in the World”...what a title! This moniker is reserved for the Least Weasel. At no more than 7 inches in length, this vicious little predator is the terror of mice. After the kill, a peculiar habit is to adorn their nest with their victims’ tails. Like its cousins, the Least Weasel will kill a lot more than it can eat and cache the remains for times of want. It is any wonder farmers didn’t want one of these “blood-thirsty” predators in their hen house! Unlike its cousins, Least Weasels do not utilize delayed implantation and can breed multiple times a year. They also do not have the indicative black tipped tail. They will though, molt into coats of white in winter months. It is thought to have statewide distribution, but with such small size, cryptic brown coloring, and its propensity to hunt mice trails under dense grass, the Least Weasel goes mostly undetected. As the smallest carnivore, it also has another prestigious honor: pound for pound (or ounces rather) and in relation to its size, the Least Weasel has the most powerful bite of any animal in North America.

Does Crawford County have weasels? The answer is yes. Short-tailed Weasels are definitely doubtful. Long-Tailed Weasels are for sure since a few have been brought to the Nature Center, the specimens killed by cats. The Least Weasel has good probability, just no known verification. Presumably more numerous in the early to mid 1900’s, the always influential habitat change has probably diminished some, if not most, weasel populations. That is probably.



All three species’ status is an enigma. That is where citizen science is of the utmost importance. If you see a weasel, or any other animal, alive or dead, don’t assume all is known about it. Call your park district office. It may be a new species record for our county.