



least weasel

Mustela nivalis

Kingdom: Animalia
Division/Phylum: Chordata - vertebrates
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae

Features

The least weasel is small, rarely exceeding 10 inches long. The tail is about one to 1 1/2 inches long. It has a long, narrow body with short legs. During the summer its back, sides, tail, and top of the head are red-brown and the rest of its body is white. In the winter the body may be all white. Fall and spring colors are a mix of the summer and winter versions as the transition in color is made. The ears are small and round.

Natural History

The least weasel lives at the edges of woodlands or in thickets or brushy fencerows near water. It eats small birds, invertebrates, mice, ground squirrels, rats, and voles. It may kill more mice and voles than it needs at one time and store them for later. It is the world's smallest carnivore. It probably relies greatly on its sense of smell because it seems to have poor eyesight. When disturbed, it may release a musky odor and make a shrieking noise. The least weasel may take over and use the nests of other small mammals. Breeding may occur at any time of year but seems to be most

common in spring. The gestation period is about one month and the average litter size is five. Two or more litters may be raised in one year. Young are helpless at birth but develop rapidly. Young females attain sexual maturity at the age of four months, while males become sexually mature at eight months of age.

Habitats

bottomland forests; Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; constructed lakes, ponds, and reservoirs; wet prairies and fens

Status

common, native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.