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Mammals in a Sustainable
Environment

The
Vincent Wildlife
Trust



A guide to identifying the
small mustelids of Britain and Ireland

The small mustelids or weasel family



Photograph by Clive Craik

For the purposes of identification they can be separated into two groups based on size:

1. *Weasel and stoat*
2. *Pine marten, polecat, polecat-ferret and mink*

Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae

The small mustelids are characterised by their long thin body shape, which enables them to follow their prey down small tunnels and burrows. However, because of their similar body shape they can be difficult to distinguish from each other, especially when, as is usually the case, they are seen only briefly and in poor light!

Otter



Pine Marten



Mink



Polecat



Stoat



Weasel



The otter, one of our larger mustelids, is shown here for size comparison only.

1. Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) and stoat (*Mustela erminea*) (head and body less than 30cm)

Weasels and stoats are generally much smaller than the rest of the mustelids. The other distinguishing feature is the sharp contrast between the reddish-brown coat colour on their back and sides and the creamy white fur on the throat, chest and belly.

The weasel

The weasel is the smallest of the small mustelids and the smallest of all the carnivores. It has short legs and a slender body (17-24cm). The fur is chestnut brown on the back and head with a creamy white belly, and the division between brown and cream is irregular and spotted. This irregular pattern is different for each animal so can be used to identify individuals. The tail is short (3-6cm) and is a uniform chestnut brown colour with no black tip.



Photograph by Frank Greenaway

Although there is quite a difference in size between weasels and stoats, the black tip to the stoat's tail (which is always present, even in white winter coat) is usually the only visible difference when an animal is seen at a distance. If seen moving, then the weasel's gait is often quicker, flatter and less bounding than that of the stoat. Weasels are absent from Ireland.

The stoat



Photograph by Frank Greenaway

The stoat is slightly larger (20-30cm) than the weasel and has a longer tail (7-12cm) with a distinctive black tip. It is a sandy brown colour on the back and head with a cream belly, and the division between brown and cream fur is straight. If live animals are seen, the black tail tip is a key identifying feature, and the stoat's gait is a characteristically arched-back bounding movement.

The Irish stoat

The Irish stoat (*Mustela erminea hibernica*) is a recognised sub-species. The division between upper and lower coat colour in Irish stoat can be irregular, as in the British weasel.



Photograph by Carrie Crowley

In Scotland and the north of England and Wales, the stoat turns white in winter (apart from the black tail tip); in Ireland and southern England the winter coat stays brown. Elsewhere in England and Wales, stoats with piebald or mottled winter coats are often seen.

2. Pine marten (*Martes martes*), polecat (*Mustela putorius*), polecat-ferret and mink (*Mustela vison*) (head and body 30-50cm)

Pine marten, polecat, polecat-ferret and mink all have long sinuous bodies but are much larger and heavier than stoats. They are also more strictly nocturnal, making it difficult to see and identify live animals with certainty.

The pine marten

The pine marten is a chestnut brown, cat-sized animal with large rounded ears fringed with pale fur, a creamy yellow or orange chest and throat patch and a long bushy tail. It has longer legs and tail than either mink or polecat, and its gait on the ground is characteristically loping or bounding.

This is the mustelid species most likely to be seen in trees, although pine marten also spend much of their time on the ground.



Photograph by Frank Greenaway

The large, creamy yellow throat patch is diagnostic; however, smaller and usually whiter patches are found on the throat of some mink and polecat-ferrets. Mink, stoat and weasel can also climb trees but are not normally arboreal, whereas pine marten are agile climbers. When seen in the trees a pine marten may be confused with red or grey squirrel, but it has a longer body and tail, darker coat and is much larger.

The polecat

The polecat has dark guard hairs with creamy underfur over most of its body, a dark facial mask, white fur on the muzzle and white ear margins; this colouration distinguishes it from the similar sized American mink, which is uniformly dark. Polecats can, however, look very similar to feral ferrets, some of which are bred to look like polecats, and to polecat-ferret hybrids.



Photograph by Johnny Birks

The dark fur on the face of a polecat always extends to the nose, and the pale cheek patches and possible frontal band contrast with the dark facial mask. There is not usually a pale throat patch but if there is it is small (less than 50mm long). Polecats have dark fur on their paws and dark guard hairs over the body, so even though the creamy underfur shows through on the flanks there are no white hairs present on the body. The polecat is absent from Ireland.

The polecat-ferret



Photograph by Johnny Birks

The polecat-ferret can appear very similar to the polecat, but the presence of one or more of the following characteristics can be used to distinguish them to some extent. However, dark polecat-ferret hybrids can be difficult to separate from polecats in the field. In polecat-ferrets the dark fur on the face often does not reach the nose, and the pale cheek patches and frontal band are

extensive, contrasting poorly with the darker facial mask which may be absent. There may be a large pale throat patch (50mm or more in length), the paws can be pale, with one or more white paws; and there may be white guard hairs scattered over the body, especially on the hind quarters and tail. Feral ferrets are present in Ireland.

Feral ferrets can range in colour from pure albino to dark animals almost indistinguishable from wild polecats, but the overall colour is usually pale and, in particular, the white on the face is more extensive.

The American mink



Photograph by Henry Schofield

The American mink is a non-native species that has become widely established throughout Britain and Ireland. Mink are a uniform dark chocolate brown which may appear almost black at times. There is often a white chin patch present and sometimes white patches are also present on the chest, belly and groin. The tail is slightly bushy and approximately half the body length.

Mink are semi-aquatic and usually found near water, where they may be mistaken for otters. However, mink are substantially smaller than otters, with a much thinner and shorter tail.

Further reading

For more information about small mustelids :

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