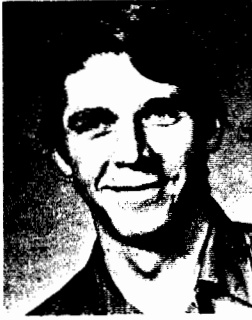


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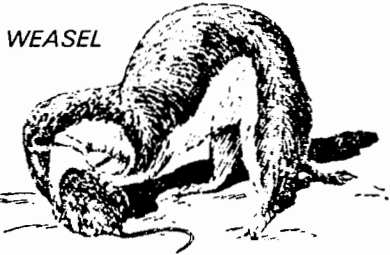


Natural History Notes



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THE WEASEL



The weasel is a widely occurring but seldom seen animal. The word weasel not only represents a group of mammals, but it also tells us something about their habits. A second definition of weasel is, to escape from or evade the situation. This is an accurate description of this swift and cagey animal.

Of all the characteristics it possesses, the weasel is most widely known for its lightning-like speed and instantaneous movements, second to none in the forest. Some of its movements are faster than the eye can see. To observe a weasel in the forest is both a delight and an education. Its vision is poor so it must depend upon its sharp senses of smell and hearing as it hunts. It moves very quickly under loose leaves and logs into stumps and up and down trees, not missing a single nook or cranny in its path. Keep a very close eye on this active creature, because now you see it and now you don't.

The name weasel also refers to a family of small to medium sized carnivorous (meat-eating) mammals. Included in this group of 35 North American species and sub-species is the ferret, martin, fisher, skunk, badger, wolverine, otter and others.

Three species of weasels inhabit the Great Lakes area; the long-tailed weasel, the short-tailed weasel and the least weasel. The long-tailed weasel is the most common and widely distributed weasel ranging from Canada to Mexico to Florida. It grows to a length of about 16 inches. The most common in Wisconsin is the short-tailed weasel or ermine,

which grows to about 11 inches in length. The least weasel reaches a length of 6 inches and is one of the smallest carnivores.

The word weasels carries with it a connotation of a blood thirsty hunter killing more than it can consume. In the wild, the weasel is an important predator of mice and other small rodents, helping to keep their numbers in check. However, in the hen house a weasel will often kill several chickens, eating only the blood and soft internal organs and leaving the rest. Weasels also eat insects and other small animals but they prefer mice. The weasel's swiftness and agility enable him to kill prey several times its size. Primary enemies of the weasel are minks, bobcats, hawks and owls. Because of its boldness and aggressive nature, the weasel is a very easy animal to trap. Today man is the weasel's key enemy.

Like a few other animals, the weasel changes color with the seasons. The brown summer coat becomes white when the snow is on the ground. This is nature's way of helping the weasel blend into its surroundings and evade its enemies. All weasels except the least have a black tip on their tail. This trait helps them escape their predators. The black tip on the tail often leads the enemy to pounce on the wrong end of the weasel allowing it to escape.

Weasels mate in mid-summer and have from three to six young the next spring. Ten months is an unusually long gestation period for a small animal. The young weasel's eyes open about five weeks after birth and they are weaned in six weeks. Weasels are excellent parents with the father often helping to protect the young. The weasel family is very close knit and will remain in the same area if food is plentiful.

Weasels are most easily seen in late fall when their fur is white, but before there is a blanket of snow on the ground. They are sharply contrasted with their environment at this time. However, a sharp and patient eye can often observe the weasel at any time of the year.