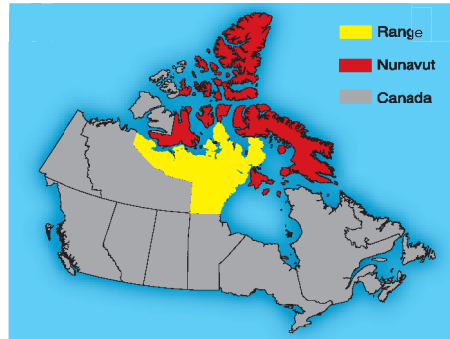




LEAST WEASEL

Mustela nivalis



Habitat

The least weasel can be found in fields, meadows, riverbanks, parklands, mixed forests and tundra.

Reproduction

Least weasels breed from February until mid-November.

Appearance

The least weasel is the smallest carnivore in North America. It has a small head with short oval ears, black beady eyes and a pointy nose. Its body is long and slender and it has two colour phases. During the summer, the least weasel has brown fur on its back, white on its belly and whitish feet with furred soles. In the winter, it is completely white and may have a few black hairs on the tip of its tail. The female is usually 16 to 18cm in length and weighs 25 to 57g. The male is generally 18 to 22cm in length and weighs 34 to 62g.

Food And Feeding

The least weasel feeds mostly on small mammals and will occasionally eat insects.

Behaviour

Least weasels take over the burrows of the small mammals they hunt and line their nests with the fur from their prey. At times, this fur can be up to 2.5cm thick. They use it to keep themselves warm and at times, to thaw their dinners. Like some of the other species in this family, the least weasel keeps a cache of available food on hand. They have a high metabolic rate and eat about half their body weight each day. They seem to be clean animals and have a separate toilet area in their burrows. The least weasel is very agile and not often seen. It has a high, shrill, shriek.

Range

In Nunavut, the least weasel can be found throughout the Kivalliq region, in the southwestern Kitikmeot region as well as in the western portion of the Baffin region on Melville Peninsula.

There is no period of delayed implantation and females give birth after a gestation period of just over a month. There are 3 to 10 young per litter and they can have two or more litters a year. The young are born blind and helpless, but develop rapidly and are weaned after 4 weeks. Males are not involved in raising the young. Females reach maturity at 4 months of age and males at 8 months.

Status Survival and Management

According to the Nunavut Wild Species 2000 report, the current status of the least weasel in Nunavut is not assessed. The least weasel can live up to about 1 year. Its main predators in Nunavut include other carnivores and some birds. The least weasel helps keep mouse and vole populations in check but is not considered valuable as a fur-bearing animal.

Did You Know?

The least weasel hunts by scent and pounces onto its victims back, then bites into the skull with its small canine teeth.

