



Weasel

(*Mustela nivalis*)



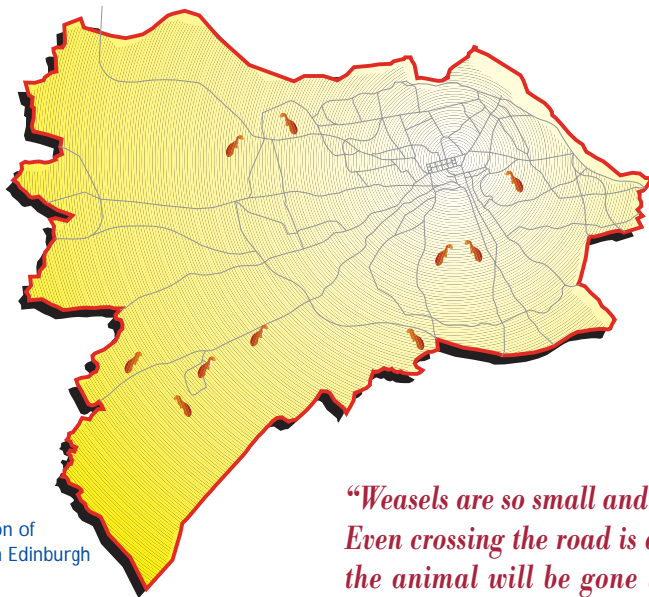
STATUS & ECOLOGY

The weasel is a small, long-bodied carnivore, chestnut brown in colour with an irregularly marked white belly. It favours good quality ground cover across a range of habitats, from woodland and farmland to grassland and scrub areas. In open country, it is generally restricted to cover such as hedgerows, stone dykes, fence lines, banks, walls, lanes and ditches, which are also its hunting grounds. Small enough to search through the tunnels and runways of rodents, weasels are found wherever there are voles and mice, their main prey. They can swim, climb and often raid nests. Depending on local habitat, their diet is supplemented with birds (and eggs in season), occasional rabbits or water voles, and small rodents.

Weasels are generally solitary (except during courtship) but they have been known to hunt in family parties, even in large packs. The size of home ranges is very variable from 1ha to 25ha, and is dependent on density of prey, region, and sex. Each home range includes many dens and resting places visited at intervals. Dens are normally temporary and usually a burrow is taken over from prey. Weasels are considered pests on some kept estates. Other predators include hawks, owls, foxes, stoats and domestic cats. However, population density is more likely to depend on productivity than mortality. When rodents are abundant there is a very rapid turnover of population, while in vole-poor years the weasel can become locally extinct. This makes populations very unstable.

Although weasels are believed to be widespread throughout Britain, evidence suggests a progressive decline in population numbers over the last thirty years. Scotland has about one quarter of the UK population but decline is not so pronounced. Within Edinburgh, weasels have been sighted at intervals since 1980, but insufficient records exist to determine their status with any accuracy. Recent sightings have been made around Currie and Balerno, Arthur's Seat, Blackford quarry, the Hermitage of Braid, Barnton woods, Hillend and Cammo Estate.

The weasel is listed on Appendix III of the Bern Convention. This protects populations from exploitation by indiscriminate mass killing, trading and any means capable of causing local disappearance or serious disturbance.



Distribution of Weasel in Edinburgh

"Weasels are so small and unobtrusive that you are lucky to see them. Even crossing the road is done with such liquid grace and speed that the animal will be gone long before you realise what has passed"

Tony Soper

FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE

Impacts

The extent of, and reasons for, the long-term decline of weasel numbers is largely unknown. Habitat loss is likely to be the main culprit. There has been a significant decline of habitat favoured by the weasel in Edinburgh over the last 15 years. For instance, broad-leaved and mixed woodland is estimated to have declined by almost 20% over this period and grassland/moorland by around 6%.

A scarcity of prey may have contributed to the decline in weasel numbers. These sometimes show fluctuations that correlate with cycles in field vole numbers, which are also believed to be in decline in Scotland. Direct control through trapping appears to have had little effect on long-term weasel abundance. However, secondary poisoning from prey items contaminated with rodenticides may be a significant cause. Farm intensification and agricultural improvement has also reduced the availability of long grass and led to a gradual loss of the overall length, extent and network of field boundary features such as hedges, dykes, and trees. This has limited the good quality cover required by weasels on farms.

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Impacts (cont.)

Although weasel trapping is permitted by law, this means of control has probably lessened over recent years. Control is normally only needed when game production is affected. Deaths caused by road traffic accidents may be a more significant impact in Edinburgh.

Threats

Habitat loss, fragmentation and the loss of traditional farm features and management practices are likely to remain the main threats to weasel numbers and distribution. Trapping and poisoning may be less widely practised, particularly as reared game is now more common, and gamekeepers perceive weasels as less of a threat to reared game than wild game. Losses caused by road traffic accidents are, if anything, likely to increase in line with the continuing growth in traffic levels.

CURRENT ACTION

Although there is no national weasel conservation programme, independent work across the UK is being undertaken to establish the impact of both road traffic accidents and rodenticides on weasel numbers. A range of habitat enhancement measures which encourage farmland wildlife, and which may particularly benefit the weasel, are also being promoted in Edinburgh by the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group.



ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

Objectives

To help conserve and enhance weasel numbers and distribution in Edinburgh by obtaining local information on the species and determining its conservation requirements.

Targets

To obtain further information on Edinburgh's weasel population, distribution and use of land, as a basis on which to establish conservation requirements and priorities.

Actions

Undertake a survey, by Summer 2003, to establish the distribution and baseline population of weasel in Edinburgh.

(Actioned by: Edinburgh Green Belt Trust & Napier University)

Determine, using radiotracking techniques, how weasels use land in Edinburgh, from Autumn 2003.

(Actioned by: Napier University)

Establish the extent of the threat posed by pesticide use and road traffic to weasel in Edinburgh, from Autumn 2003.

(Actioned by: Napier University)

Identify weasel conservation requirements and priorities in Edinburgh, by Winter 2004.

(Actioned by: Edinburgh Green Belt Trust & Napier University)

Key Contacts

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CHAMPIONS


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