Mustelids

Ferret - *Mustela furo*
Stoat - *Mustela erminea*
Weasel - *Mustela nivalis vulgaris*

Introduction

Mustelids pose a serious threat to our native fauna and farming industry.

The introduction of mustelids is regarded as one of the worst mistakes ever made by European colonists in New Zealand. They were introduced despite strong warnings from well-known bird experts about the serious negative impact mustelids would have on native bird life. The reason for the introduction was to reduce the rabbit population but they have since become a major predator of native birds.

Mustelid predation has helped lead to the extinction of some native birds and they have aided in the decline of the kakapo, Takahe and the little spotted kiwi. They are known predators of kaka, kakariki, yellowhead and saddleback.

Mustelids are also carriers of bovine TB, parasites, and toxoplasmosis (which causes abortions in sheep and illness in humans).

Ferret

Status

In Hawke's Bay ferrets, stoats and weasels are classed as site specific animal pests. Hawke's Bay Regional Council helps by providing technical advice and subsidised trapping equipment that is available through Farmlands and PGG Wrightson. Council will also, at its discretion, assist in areas that are regionally significant and are of high ecological value. Contact the Regional Council biosecurity animal pest advisory team for more information.

Origin

Ferrets, stoats and weasels were introduced in New Zealand from the U.K. in the mid 1880s to control the growing rabbit plagues, however they had a limited impact on rabbit populations. Imports were restricted by 1936, but the 1980s saw renewed interest in ferrets with farms being developed to supply the fur trade. The industry soon collapsed but ferrets gained popularity as pets in some areas.

It is illegal to sell, distribute or breed mustelids.

Description

Ferret- *Mustela furo*

- **Body:** Ferrets grow up to half a metre long. They have a creamy yellow undercoat, with long guard hairs that are black at the tip, giving a generally dark appearance. Males are up to 62 cm long and weigh up to 1.85kg, females are smaller weighing from 400 – 1100g. The leg and tail appear darker than the body. The lighter facial region has a dark mask around the eyes and across the nose.

- **Physical Ability:** Their smell and hearing are the main senses; their eyesight is poor by day, but better at night. Ferrets can run, but compared to stoats are poor swimmers and climbers.

- **Diet:** Birds, eggs, rabbits, lizards, hedgehogs, frogs eels and various insects.

- **Preferred Habitat:** Ferrets prefer pastoral or open country where rabbits are plentiful, eg river beds, forest margins.

Stoat- *Mustela erminea*

- **Body:** Stoats have long thin bodies, smooth , pointed heads , short round ears and black eyes. They are smaller than ferrets. Males are up to 40cm long and weigh around 350g. Females are up to 33cm long and weigh around 240g. The fur is hazel brown with creamy white under parts and a bushy black tipped tail.

- **Physical Ability:** With their sharp claws, stoats are very nimble tree climbers, there are few places they cannot reach. They are strong swimmers in both fresh and salt water, and islands within 1.5km of the mainland are vulnerable to stoat invasion.

- **Diet:** Most commonly birds, mice, rabbits, rats, possums and insects. Less frequently lizards, crayfish, carrion, and human rubbish.

- **Preferred Habitat:** Stoats can be found anywhere from beaches to remote high country, in any type of forest, native or exotic, in scrub, dunes, tussock grassland and farm pastures.

Stoat

Weasel – *Mustela nivalis vulgaris*

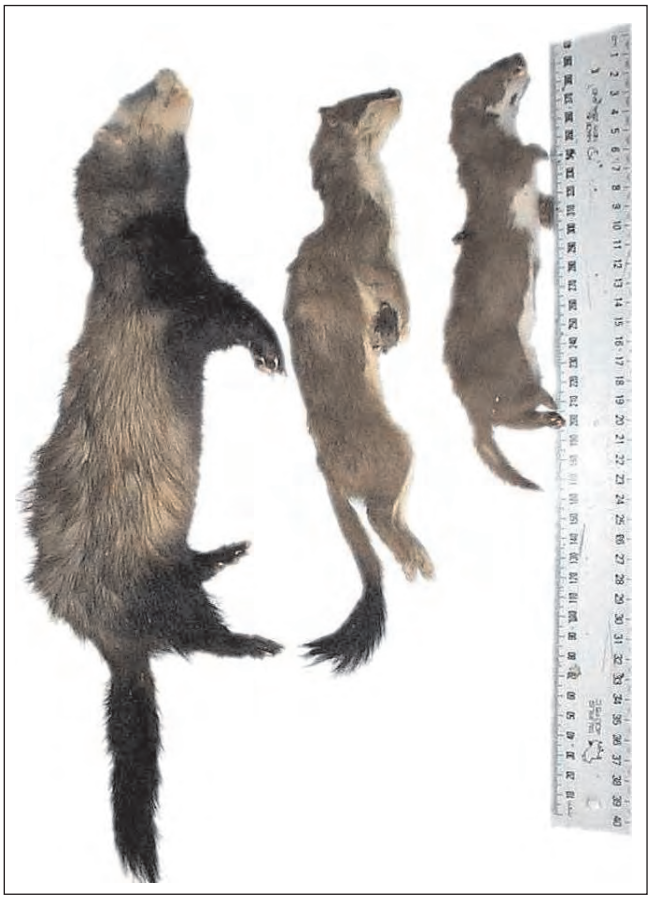
- **Body:** The smallest mustelid , weasels are the rarest introduced mammal in New Zealand. Weasels are about 20cm long, with males weighing up to 150g and females up to 80g. Their fur is a chocolate brown with white underparts often broken by brown spots. Their tail is short brown and tapering.

- **Physical ability:** Weasels run, swim and climb as well as stoats, but they have a shorter stride and cover less distance.

- **Diet:** Small prey. Most commonly mice, small birds, geckos, tree weta. Less frequently insects, skinks and birds' eggs. They are less capable of tackling larger prey than ferrets and stoats.

- **Preferred Habitat:** Weasels prefer disturbed areas like suburban gardens, farmland , scrub, exotic forest and forest margins.

Weasel



Ferret, Stoat and Weasel size comparisons

How to control mustelids

Traps are the best way to control mustelids. Several different traps are available and new ones are being designed.

Trap Types

Mustelids are able to be caught in several trap types, including but not limited to:

Kill traps

- DOC Series traps
- Fenn no.4 and No. 6 traps
- KBL tunnel trap/Timms possum trap
- Possum master trap
- Warrior Kill trap

Live Capture traps

- Leg hold traps (e.g Victor No. 1)
- Cages (e.g Havaheart)
- Box treadle traps

Important Note: The Animal Welfare Act 1999 requires all traps designed to capture an animal alive to be inspected within 12 hours after sunrise on each day the trap remains set. This refers to live capture traps such as leg hold, cage and box treadle traps.

Kill traps do not have to be checked daily, but it is good practice to check them as regularly as possible (at least fortnightly).

Contact the Animal pest advisory team for advice on which traps would be most suitable for your situation.

Tactics

- To be effective, control must be constant and intensive. The most effective way to clear large areas of farmland is to work with neighbours to catch all the mustelids in an area at the same time.
- Traps may not catch immediately. It is important to leave your traps in the same place and regularly replace the bait. Perseverance is the key to trapping mustelids.
- Scuffing up fresh soil in front of the trap can increase mustelid interest.
- When a catch is made, rub the musky scent of the mustelid around the trap This can attract other mustelids in the area. Wear gloves while doing this.

Where to set the traps

Mustelids are motivated by hunger and are extremely mobile and inquisitive. They are attracted to the areas their prey frequent. They like to remain dry and close to cover but will use established tracks to move around. They use both natural and artificial features for cover so farms provide ideal habitat.

Good mustelid habitat with a well placed trap

Place traps near or along:

- walkways, stock, animal and vehicle tracks
- rabbit warrens, chicken coops or bird aviaries
- shelter belts
- waterways, ponds and creeks
- fence lines
- hay barns
- culverts
- ridges.

If a fresh kill or freshly scavenged carcass is found , then traps set near these will often be successful.

Bait for traps

Fresh, natural bait works best:

- eggs
- fish
- rabbit/meat
- hare meat
- cat food
- commercial baits (e.g ‘Erayz’ dehydrated ferret bait)

DOC Series traps

DOC series traps have all passed ‘draft’ NAWAC (National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee) guidelines as humane kill traps.

Traps that have not passed this standard are still able to be used but it is important to check them more frequently. Hawke’s Bay Regional Council encourages the use of traps that have passed this standard.

- DOC 200 traps are designed to catch stoats, rats and hedgehogs. Traps must be used in either single or double set wooden tunnels.

- DOC 250 traps are larger trap than the 200 and designed to catch ferrets, stoats and weasels. Traps must be used in either single or double set wooden tunnels.

How to set the trap

1. Ensure trap is not set
2. Attach bait onto wood or nail pedestal.
3. Put the trap on the ground.
4. With your hand, pull carefully on the wire setting loop. Continue past the top of the trigger arm, allowing the trigger arm to drop onto the treadle.
5. Slowly release pressure, allowing the bottom of the trigger arm to gently ride up the treadle and catch on the sear. The trap will now be set.
6. To unset the trap, reverse the setting procedure.

Setting a DOC 200 trap

For more details on DOC traps go to www.predatortraps.com

Acknowledgements:

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For further information

For further information on animal pests or the Regional Plant Pest and Animal Pest Management Strategy, please contact the Biosecurity Animal Pest Officers at the Hawke's Bay Regional Council for advice.

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