

# Wildlife Express

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## Weasels

SHORT-TAILED  
WEASEL

### Inside

- Idaho's Weasel Family
- How Mammals Walk



Short-tailed Photo: © Stephan Morris / Adobe Stock #468773676

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## LONG-TAILED WEASEL

# Weasels OF IDAHO

If a person ever calls you “weasel,” you might take it as a compliment! Weasels are some of the greatest hunters around. This is mostly because of their need to eat! They have a high metabolism and very little fat on their bodies. Looking for food and ways to catch it fill their waking hours year-round.

Read on to learn more about two species of weasels found in Idaho. They are easy to remember, one is a long-tailed weasel, and the other is a short-tailed weasel. As you might have guessed their tails are different lengths!

Short-tailed weasels are also called ermine. Ermine is a French word that means “white winter coat.” Ermine develop white coats in the winter though gradual molting. Every part of their coat becomes white except for a black tip on their tails. In the summer, they have light brown backs and white bellies.

Another name for the short-tailed weasel is

stoat. The word stoat can refer to the Dutch word for stout or bold.

Short-tailed weasels are between eight to 14 inches long, think about a 12-inch ruler for something this size. They weigh only two to seven ounces, about the weight of a cell phone. Their tail is 1 ½ to three inches long.



Long-tailed weasels also turn white in the winter. They have light brown backs and yellowish-buff-colored bellies in the summer.

Long-tailed weasels are larger than short-tailed weasels. They are 13 to 21 inches long and weigh four to 11 ounces. Their tails are three to six inches long and also have a black tip.

They both have long slender bodies, short legs and pointed faces.

Next time you are outside and see a streak of brown or white out of the corner of your eye, think of weasels. These curious, active predators are entertaining to watch.

# THE Weasel FAMILY OF IDAHO



AMERICAN  
MINK

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, “mustela” means weasel.

In Idaho, we have nine species of mustelids. This group of animals includes wolverines, badgers, fishers, long-tailed and short-tailed weasels, American martens, Pacific martens, American minks, and river otters.

Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds, about the size of two bags of groceries. Ermine (short-tailed weasels) are the smallest. Do you remember how much they weigh? (about the size of a cell phone). Talk about species diversity!

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move freely through the water. Even bulky looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick.

Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and minks are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time

in the water. The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat. They must hunt and eat often.

As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a “cache” (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate. It is also used to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids and their caches while enjoying time in Idaho’s wild lands.

**AMERICAN  
MARTEN**



**WOLVERINE**



**Mustelid  
FAMILY OF IDAHO**

**AMERICAN BADGER**



**AMERICAN MINK**



**RIVER OTTER**



**FISHER**



Marten Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #1111995728  
Badger Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #549456361  
Fisher Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #792320092

Wolverine Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #282692138  
Otter Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game #275962\_1920  
Mink Photo: CC-BY Ben Bieri for Idaho Fish and Game

# LONG AND SHORT-TAILED Weasel WAYS!



Weasels, like most mustelids, need to eat a lot and often. They are very active, and their bodies are not good at storing fat. As mentioned earlier, weasels are known for being amazing hunters.

Their small, slender bodies are perfect for slipping down mouse holes, and their small, cupped ears help them to capture and hear sounds very well.

Weasels also have a good sense of smell and great eyesight. All around their faces they have whiskers that help them feel where they are going. Read more about this later.

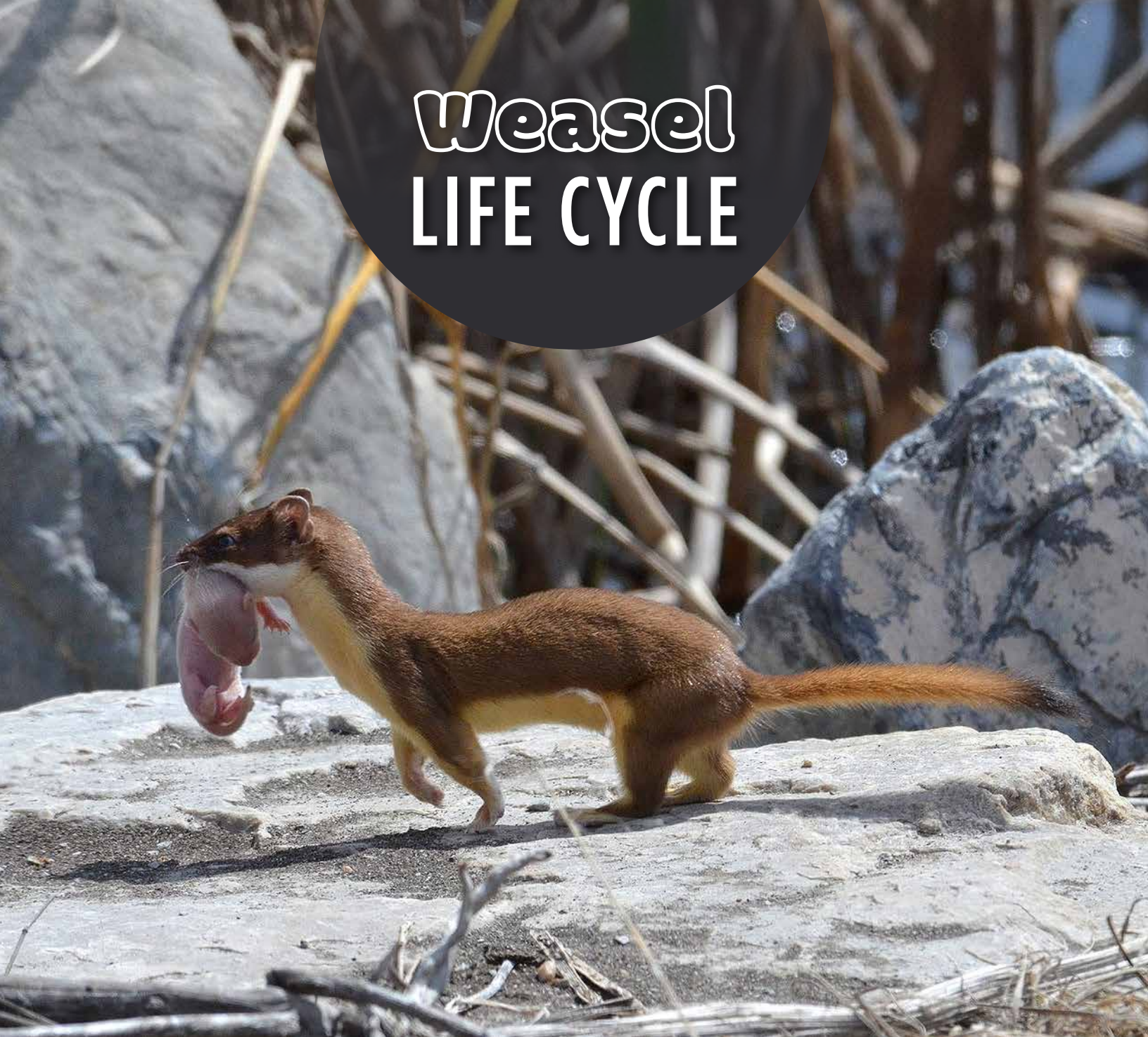
Weasels eat mostly mice and small mammals, but they may also eat insects, birds, frogs or

snakes. Weasels are incredibly strong for their size and can kill animals that are much larger than they are, like a jackrabbit or snowshoe hare.

Remember weasels' white winter coats and black tipped tails? Weasels use their tails as a lure to catch dinner. Weasels hide in the snow and flip the end of their tails. Small animals see the black tip flipping and think it could be food. When the animals come closer to get a better look, the weasels spring up and kill their prey with a quick bite to the neck.

As we've said, it's important for weasels to eat and they spend much of their time working towards that.

# Weasel LIFE CYCLE



Somewhere between the months of April and May weasel babies are born. The babies are called kits.

Six to nine kits are born in a nest of grass, feathers and mouse fur. They only weigh about as much as a stick of gum, but they grow fast. They are blind and hairless and rely on their mother's milk for nutrition.

After about a month, they begin to eat solid food.

By six to seven weeks, both long-tailed and short-tailed weasels begin hunting. Just a few short weeks later, they venture out to find their own home. Short-tailed weasels spend a little longer, closer to four months, with their mother.

Being born in the spring gives weasels the advantage to become independent and settled before winter sets in.



NOW YOU  
SEE ME,  
NOW YOU  
DON'T

How can animals hide in plain sight? They use camouflage (KAM-uh-flahzh). Camouflage means to blend in with your surroundings and hide. It is a type of disguise.

Camouflage may be a certain color, pattern of colors, or a special shape that fools the eye. It makes animals hard to see. Camouflage may help an animal to hide, or it may help a hunter to sneak up on its prey.

Insects are animals that use camouflage a lot. It is difficult to see a green insect on a plant, but it is even harder to see a green insect shaped like a leaf on a plant. Many insects look like leaves or twigs. No matter how hungry a bird is it might miss the green, leaf-shaped insect.

Great horned owls also use camouflage. All the shades of brown and white on their feathers help them to blend in with tree bark. If an owl holds completely still against a tree trunk, animals might not notice it.

Many animals change their colors with the seasons. Animals that change color to match their background are using cryptic (KRIP-tik) coloration. This is what some weasels and snowshoe hares do. When snow starts to fall, their coats gradually turn white to match.

Animals may even change colors and patterns throughout their lives. Deer fawns are born with tan coats that have white spots. The spots match the sun and shade that dapple the tall grasses where the fawns hide. As long as the fawns remain still, predators, like mountain lions, will have a difficult time seeing them. As deer fawns grow older and can run faster to escape danger, the spots fade away.

When animals are perfectly camouflaged, sticks seem to crawl, leaves can fly and trees may have eyes and beaks. Whether hunter or hunted, camouflage helps animals to survive.

Top Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Bottom Photos: CC-BY Bryant Olsen

# THE BETTER TO See you!



To have vision means to be able to turn light into images of the world around us. Animals do this with their eyes and brains.

Eyes come in all shapes, sizes and colors. An animal's eyes are designed to help it survive in its habitat. This can lead to some pretty interesting eyes.

It takes two eyes looking forward at the same scene for an animal to judge distance well.

Try closing one eye and reaching for something. Now use both eyes. Isn't it easier to grab using two eyes? Being able to judge distance is important for predators like weasels. They need to know how far away an animal may be from them before they spend a lot of energy trying to catch it.

Prey animals usually have their eyes on the sides of their heads. A rabbit can see in nearly every direction, but they can't see everywhere. Their eyes are so far to the side rabbits have a blind spot right in front of their noses.

Frogs' eyes stick out from the top of their heads. They can see above, behind, to the side and to the front, all at the same time! This lets frogs look for food while also keeping an eye out for predators. Frogs' eyes also help them to swallow food. When frogs put food into their mouths, they blink and pull their eyes down into the roof of their mouths. The eyes help to push food down the frog's throat.

Have you ever heard a person say a dog is colorblind? Well, that is half true. Dogs can see some colors but seem to have a difficult time seeing red and green. Tests have shown that many mammals can see at least some colors.

Bees and other insects see colors too, but they may see colors differently than people. Some scientists believe Insects may see blue grass and green skies.

Animals' eyes may look similar to your eyes from the outside, but they sure can work differently on the inside.

# Wonderful WHISKERS



Weasels have whiskers on their faces and legs that help them while hunting. The whiskers on the backs of weasel's front legs help them to feel animals when they reach out to catch them. The leg whiskers also help weasels feel their way down mouse burrows.

Other animals depend on whiskers as well. Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt at night or in dark places like underground or underwater. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement.

Imagine a bobcat hunting during a dark, moonless night. Although a bobcat's eyes are designed to see in low light, making their way through the darkness is difficult. Eating means survival and a mouse is nearby. The bobcat uses its whiskers to feel the vibrations caused by the mouse moving!

We call men's beards whiskers, but they are just body hairs. Body hairs do not have the same capabilities as whiskers.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vy-BRISS-ee). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin

than regular hairs. Each whisker sits in a sack of fluid filled with nerves. The whiskers can turn in the fluid like a straw in a bottle. When something touches a whisker, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt. Amazing!!

Whiskers do not only grow on animals' faces. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environments.



# HOW Mammals WALK

Believe it or not, the way an animal moves may tell you quite a bit about how it lives its life.

Have you ever noticed that mammals walk in different ways?

Some animals walk on their entire foot.

These animals are called *plantigrades* (PLANT-uh-grades). Plantigrades walk by putting their heels on the ground, rolling forward on the soles of their feet and then pushing off with their toes. Squirrels, bears, weasels and you walk this way. Walking on the whole foot takes a lot of energy and time. Plantigrades are slow walkers compared to other animals.

Some animals are called *digitigrades* (di-JIT-ah-grades). Digitigrades walk on their digits or toes. Their feet have evolved where their heels have risen higher on their legs. Only their toes touch the ground. Walk across the floor as you normally would walk. Now lift

your heels in the air and walk across the floor on your toes. Do you notice a difference in the speed of your walking? Which is easier? If you used the same amount of energy, walking on your toes should seem faster and use less effort.

The third group of mammal tracks is called *unguligrade* (un-GEW-la-grades). These are animals that walk on their toenails! Many ungulates have evolved with wolves and mountain lions eating them. To help them get away from speedy predators, their feet have evolved to walk on two toes. They can sometimes run faster or just as fast as the digitigrades that eat them.

**Study the following page with illustrations to better understand.**

# What-a-grade?

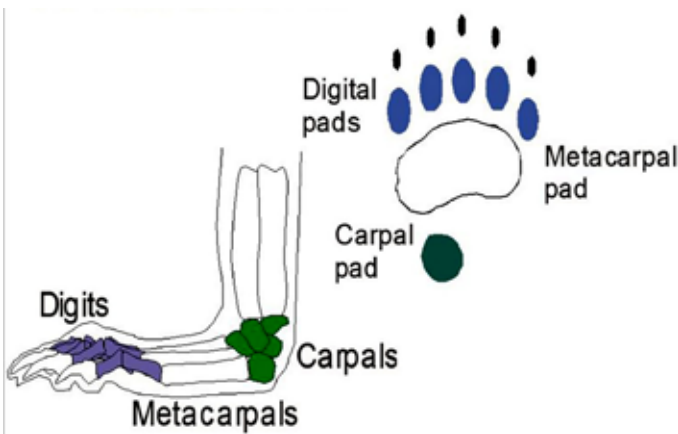
If you see some animal tracks, look closely. Are the animals walking on their whole feet or just their toes? Are there two sets of tracks, one a plantigrade and one a digitigrade?

Try to read the tracks. They may tell you a story about the animal or animals that made them!

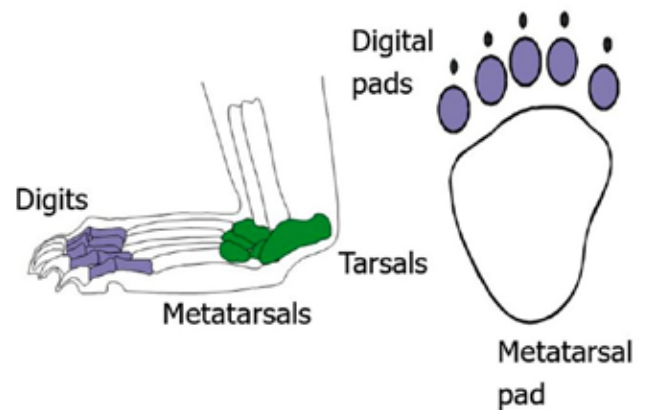


## Plantigrades

### Bear Front Foot and Track

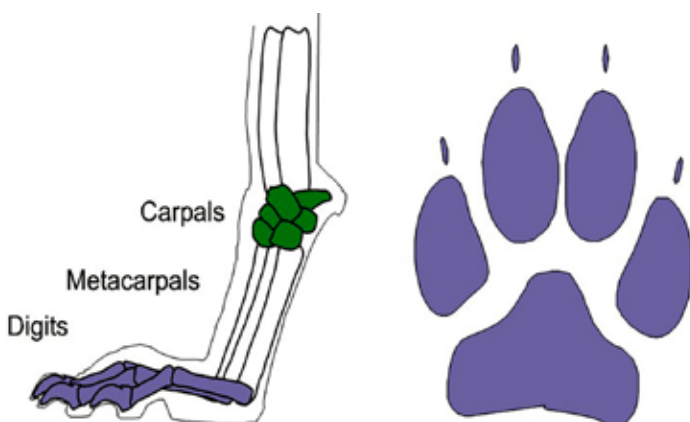


### Bear Rear Foot and Track



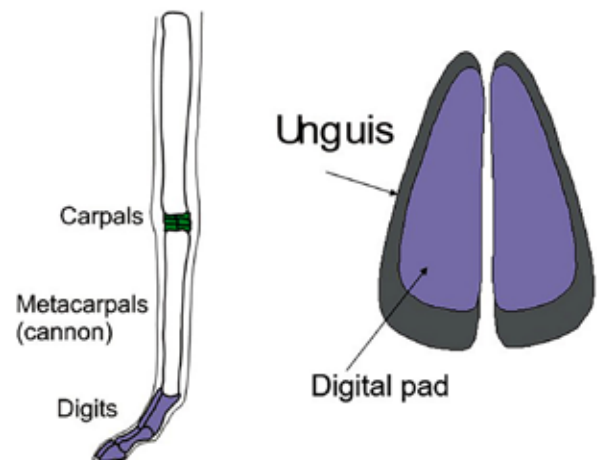
## Digitigrades

### Canine Front Foot and Track



## Unguligrades

### Pronghorn Front Foot and Track

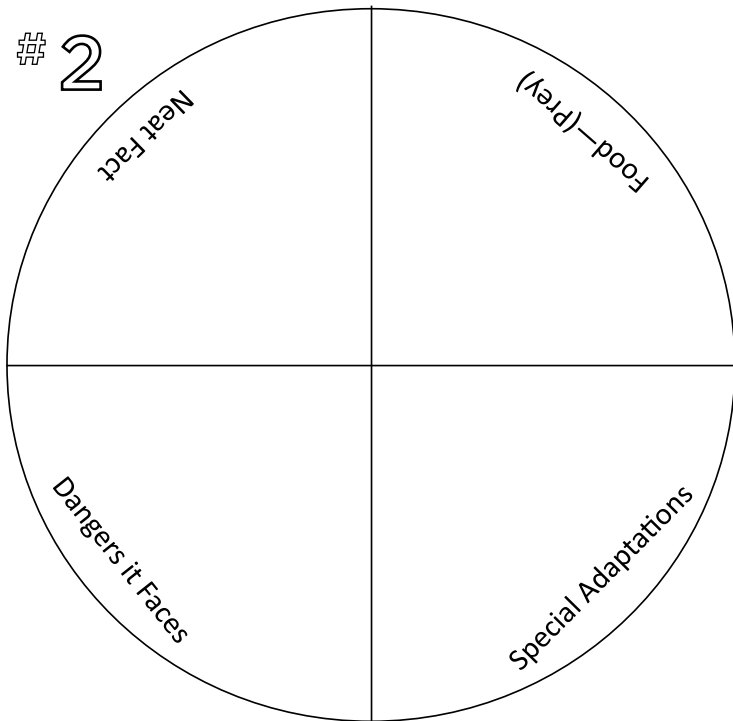


Illustrations: CC-BY <https://skyislandalliance.org/2019/10/wildlife-tracking-101-a-what-a-grade/>

Bear Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #1041038179; Pronghorn Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #86473445; Fox Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #523551145

# Mustelid PROJECT

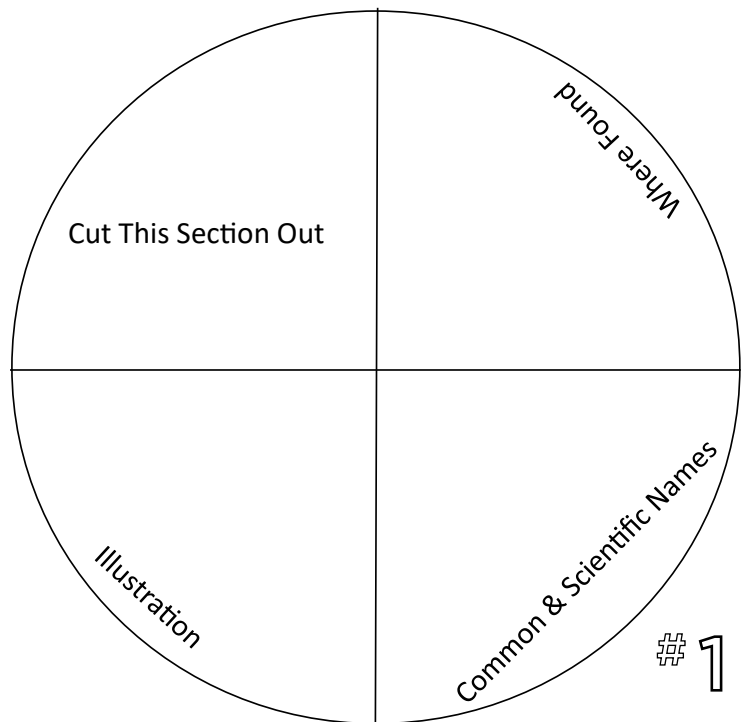
# 2



## My oh my, Mustelid

Directions: Choose an Idaho mustelid to learn more about. Print this page (or draw your own circles). Complete each section with illustrations and words. Cut circles out. Place circle one over circle two. Use a brad to connect in center.

Share with people you know!



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Weasels

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Editors: Sara Focht, Lori Wilson,  
Cory Mosby

Layout: Nancy Jasper



### WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: [lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov](mailto:lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov)

or

Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game  
PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707