



The Weasels of Alaska

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Weasels of Alaska

There are many different species of weasels; over 70 to be exact, but only seven species are in Alaska. The seven weasels found in Alaska are the mink (*mustela vison*), marten (*martes americana*), ermine (*mustela erminea*), fisher (*martes pennanti*), river otter (*lutra canadensis*), sea otter (*enhydra lutris*) and the wolverine (*mustelidae gulo gulo*).

The Ermine (*Mustela Erminea*) is the smallest member of the weasel family living in Alaska. At only about 1-foot long and weighing only 7 ounces, he is a very muscular, agile, curious and bold creature sometimes known for climbing up peoples clothing to retrieve food. Ermine generally eat mice, cotton tails, small hares, porcupines, rats, frogs, fish and insects. The ermine population fluctuates according to the abundance of food. The predators of ermines are coyotes, badgers, foxes, birds of prey and wolverines. In late spring and early fall, the ermine breed. The males and females only associate during the breeding season. A few months later a litter of about 4-9 kits arrive blind and helpless. They reach sexual maturity after 60-70 days. After birth the females stay with the young and the males disperse to their territories. Like all weasels the ermine is hunted for its pelts, however, farmers will kill the ermine not for its furs but to protect his poultry.



The Ermine
Photographer Unknown

The Fisher (*Martes Pennanti*) is a dark colored bushy-tailed member of the weasel family that is about the size of a small fox. It is a nocturnal hunter, so its eyes are on the larger side, and it is very aggressive. Humans, rarely see this solitary animal with a territory of about 10 square miles. They congregate only during breeding season, which is in the late winter and early spring. The females have a litter of 1-5 young, called kits, and reach sexual maturity at about 2 years.

The fisher has retractable claws, much like a cat, and preys on mice, porcupines, squirrels, snowshoe hare, birds, shrews, and can even kill deer and lynx. Unlike what its name implies, the fisher rarely preys upon fish. They compete with foxes, bobcats, lynx, coyotes, wolverines, martens and all other weasels of Alaska for prey. They have a life span of less than 10 years.

The American Marten (*Martes Americana*) is a relative of the mink, but is significantly larger. Within martens the males are about 1/3 larger than the females, reaching body lengths of 14 to 17 inches and weighing 2 to 4 pounds. They usually live in Alaska's interior areas and are found in spruce trees and bogs. The marten preys on birds, insects, fruits and nuts. They also feed on carrion, wolf kills or salmon carcasses. The marten is a very careful animal, when traveling, it uses every tree as cover, perhaps hiding from birds of prey. If there are no trees around it will burrow into the snow or loose soil, and if all else fails will stand and fight.

Marten usually breed between June and August, locating their mates by scent glands. They have a litter of 1-5 kits, which are born blind and helpless, usually between late March and early April. At 3-5 months they reach full size, and reach sexual maturity at 15-24 months. In the winter the marten does not hibernate but it will den in hollow trees or vacant burrows.



The Marten

Photo courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

The mink (*Mustela Vison*) is one of the most well known of the weasels, primarily because of the mink coat rage in the 1960's. It has a body length of about 2 feet, including its tail, and weighs between 3-5 pounds. They are found in every part of Alaska except Kodiak Island, the Aleutians Islands, and most of the Arctic Slope. The mink is an avid swimmer with partially webbed feet. They prey on crayfish, frogs, ducks, shrews, rabbits, mice, muskrats and many other small mammals.

The minks breeding season is during the winter and the young are usually born in April and May. The female has a litter ranging from 1 to 8 kits that are white at birth. Minks reach sexual maturity at about 10 months of age. Minks are preyed upon by coyotes, bobcats, and many Alaskan birds of prey, but the main threat is humans (for the pelts). The maximum life expectancy is about 10 years.



The Mink

Photo courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

The River otter (*Lutra Canadensis*) is found all over Alaska except for the Aleutians and the Bering Sea. Their body weight varies from 15 to 35 pounds and they are about 30-40 inches in length, with the females being somewhat smaller than the males. The river otter is a very reclusive animal when it comes to humans, unlike its cousin the Sea otter. But when together, river otters play and strengthen their social bonds. They have a great deal of energy derived from a very high metabolism. They communicate with whistles, growls, chuckles and screams. When alarmed they will emit a loud HAH!!

River otter usually breed in March and April. After 10-12 months gestation they have a litter of 1-5 pups. Immediately after the pups are born, the males are driven away but then are allowed to return later. The pups are helpless for about the first 2 months of life. They reach sexual maturity at 2-3 years of age. The aquatic river otter preys on amphibians, fish, crayfish, birds and other small mammals. Using specialized guard hairs on their face (whiskers), they can easily locate prey. They can hold their breath up to 8 minutes and run over 15 MPH.



The River Otter

Photo Courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

The sea otter (*Enhydra Lutris*) is one of the “cuter,” more fascinating weasels. They are expert divers and use their skills to prey on abalone (mollusk), urchins, clams, and crabs. Sea otter are known to use tools such as sharp rocks, while floating on their backs, to open the shells of their prey. Many people who reside in Alaska, as well as those that visit Alaska, love to observe these creatures because of their antics. They will dive, roll, “talk,” and play for hours. When sleeping they will wrap themselves in kelp to prevent being carried away by currents. They spend 40 to 50 percent of daylight hours just grooming their fur. The sea otter almost became extinct in the 18th and 19th centuries due to the popularity of their luscious furs.

Sea otters breed year round; however, the peak is in October and November. Females generally have 2 babies or kits. The females reach sexual maturity between 3 and 4 years of age, but it is unclear on the age of the males.

The wolverine (*Mustelidae Gulo Gulo*), also known as the “devil bear” and the “woods devil,” is the largest and most ferocious member of the Mustelidae. They are usually very solitary animals, until it is time for breeding season. The season ranges from May through August. After mating the males stay close to the females, and she initiates the travel when it is time to move. Mates as well as all other wolverines communicate with vocalizations and scent marks. All members of the weasel family have scent glands. The females usually give birth in March with litter size usually being 2-3 kits. At birth the kit’s fur is white. They are born with their eyes closed and teeth not even breaching the gums. At about 15 months of age, the males reach sexual maturity.

Other than humans, the wolverine’s only natural predators are mountain lions and wolves. Wolverines prey on ground squirrels, snowshoe hare, moose, and caribou. They have even been known to prey on livestock and poultry. The wolverine population primarily depends on the abundance of rodents. They usually dwell in coniferous forests with territories ranging from 240 square miles to over 400 square miles. Humans hunted wolverines, as well as all other weasels, for their pelts which were mainly used for subzero condition jackets. The wolverine’s pelt is world renowned because of its frost resistant properties.



The Wolverine

Photo courtesy of American Bald Eagle Foundation

The table below identifies and differentiates between the various members of the weasel family in Alaska.

| Common Name: | <i>Ermine</i> | <i>Fisher</i> | <i>Marten</i> | <i>Mink</i> | <i>River Otter</i> | <i>Sea Otter</i> | <i>Wolverine</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Scientific Name: | Mustula ermine | Martes pennanti | Martes americana | Mustela vison | Lutra canadensis | Enhydra lutris | Gulo gulo |
| Length: | 12 in. | 27-37 in. | 14-17 in. | 24 in. | 30-40 in. | 30-40 in. | 40-50 in. |
| Weight: | 7 oz. | 6-8 lbs. | 2-4 lbs. | 3-5 lbs. | 15- 35 lbs. | 15-35 lbs. | 50 lbs. |
| Diet: | Mice, cotton tails, rats, frogs, fish | Mice, squirrels, birds, shrews | Carrion, wolf kills, birds, salmon | Crayfish, frogs, ducks, shrews, rabbits mice | Fish, crayfish, birds, other small animals | Abalone, clams, urchins, crabs | ground squirrels, snowshoe hare, moose, caribou |

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