



Ferrets, stoats and weasels

Animal pests

Ferrets, stoats and weasels all belong to the mustelid family. Mustelids are slender-bodied carnivorous mammals that naturally occur throughout Asia, Europe and North America. Three species were introduced into New Zealand – the stoat, weasel and ferret.

Mustelids are found throughout New Zealand, but because they are small, secretive and fast-moving, they are hard to see in the wild. The stoat has adapted very well to living in New Zealand bush. Ferrets and weasels are more commonly found in open country.

Why are they a problem?

New Zealand's native animals evolved during 80 million years of isolation without any mammalian predators. Mustelids are a major predator of our unique native birds. Some birds – like the kiwi – have lost the ability to fly. This makes them extremely vulnerable to predators.

Stoats are the main reason that mainland kiwi populations are declining. (See "Did you know?") Even in low numbers, stoats can have a huge impact on kiwi survival and trapping is not always reducing numbers enough to protect young kiwi.

Stoats are also expert tree climbers. Birds which nest in tree holes such as the mohua/yellowhead or critically endangered kākāriki/orange-fronted parakeet are particularly vulnerable. Stoats will take the eggs, chicks and the mother sitting on the nest, as she has no escape route.

Ferrets find ground-nesting birds easy prey, such as turiwhatu/dotterels, ngutu parore/wrybills and the endangered kakī/black stilt.

Weasels are found in low numbers in most places in New Zealand but impact on lizard and insects as well as bird life. Weasels will tackle a prey much larger than themselves and nesting birds are easy targets.

Introducing . . .

Ferret *Mustela furo*

Ferrets (a domesticated form of the European polecat) have a creamy undercoat with long, black-tipped hairs and grow 48–56 cm long including their tail – the size of a small cat.

In New Zealand, ferrets are usually limited to pastoral habitats, rough grassland, riverbeds, scrub-land and the fringes of nearby forests, where they can access easy prey such as rabbits or ground-nesting birds.



Weasel



Did you know?

On average, stoats kill 10 North Island brown kiwi chicks every day. This adds up to 3650 chicks killed each year. That accounts for 40 % of North Island brown kiwi born.

Only 12 % of North Island brown kiwi that hatch survive to six months of age, when they are big enough to be 'stoat-proof'. Controlling stoats and other mustelids will make a significant difference to survival chances of North Island brown kiwi.

Stoat *Mustela ermina*

Stoats have a brown back and pale belly, and bushy tail with a black tip. They are 34–40 cm long including tail. Stoats will live in any habitat in which they can find prey. In New Zealand they can be found from beaches to remote high country, at any altitude, up to and beyond the tree-line; in any kind of forest – exotic or native; in scrub, dunes, tussock, and farm pastures, and near human settlements.

Weasel *Mustela nivalis*

Weasels are 20–25 cm long, coloured a deep brown to light tan, with a short tail.

Little is known about weasels but their impact on native birds and lizards is likely to be similar to stoats, although on a smaller scale. Weasels were originally introduced in larger numbers than stoats but have not thrived.

Why are they here?

Ferrets, stoats and weasels were introduced into New Zealand in the 1880s to help control rabbits, which had become a serious agricultural pest here by the mid 1870s. Despite protests by bird experts, ferrets, stoats and weasels were released

Stoat (left)



throughout pastoral areas. By the mid 1890s they had spread into forests west of Lake Manapouri. Far too late, after many official protests, the government changed its policy on mustelids in 1903. However, it was not until 1936 that all legal protection for mustelids was removed.

Ferrets were farmed for their fur during the 1980s. When the fur trade became unprofitable, these farms closed and many escaped or were let loose into the wild.

What is being done?

- Stoats, ferrets and weasels are controlled in some areas using traps to reduce numbers to levels that take the pressure off our special birds.
- Some of our most 'at risk' endangered species have been moved offshore, onto predator-free islands.
- Mainland Islands are areas that have intensive predator control to maintain populations of vulnerable forest birds in their natural habitats.
- Operation Ark is a Department of Conservation programme, which has identified areas of beech forest with bird populations that are vulnerable to predators. Predator control is frequently stepped up in these areas.
- More research is being done into the most effective method of controlling these mustelids. In 1999, an extra \$6.6 million was given for a five-year integrated stoat control research programme.
- In 2002, the law was changed to ban the sale, distribution and breeding of ferrets, by declaring them unwanted organisms under the Biosecurity Act. This does not apply to existing pets.

How can you help?

A co-ordinated and co-operative approach involving regional councils, interest groups, private landowners and the department is needed for the control of all mustelids. Regional councils are developing regional pest management strategies to cope with threats to native biodiversity and to reduce the spread of bovine tuberculosis (Tb).

Contact your regional council or local Department of Conservation office for information on controlling stoats and ferrets on your property. Some regional councils hire or sell traps.

If you still have a pet ferret, make sure it is neutered and descented, and that it can't escape into the wild.

For more information

Contact your local DOC office or visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz

Ferret (left) R. Morris