MUSTELIDS – FERRETS, STOATS AND WEASELS

Mustela furo, Mustela ermine and *Mustela nivalis vulgaris*

Management programme

Exclusion	Eradication	Progressive containment	Sustained control	**Site-led** (Hūnua Ranges Pest Management Area)

Impacts

Economic	**Biodiversity**	Soil resources	Water quantity/ quality
Human health	Social and cultural wellbeing	Amenity/recreation	Animal welfare

Objectives

Provide advice and information on mustelids (Waikato Regional Council) and reduce their impacts on the values within the Hūnua Ranges Pest Management Area (Auckland Council).

Why is it a pest?

Mustelids are a major threat to the survival of New Zealand's native birds and animals. Flightless birds (such as kiwi), other ground nesting birds (such as New Zealand dotterel) and birds that nest in holes (such as kākā) are particularly vulnerable. Mustelids are a major threat to chickens being raised on lifestyle blocks and in urban backyards. They will also target pets such as guinea pigs and rabbits. Ferrets can carry bovine tuberculosis (TB) and all mustelids can carry parasites and toxoplasmosis, which can cause miscarriages in sheep and illness in humans.

Mustelids are found in a diverse range of habitats including fertile pasture, rough grassland, tussock, scrubland, the margins of forest fragments and wherever there are high numbers of rabbits. In the Waikato region, ferrets and stoats are more common than weasels (which are quite scarce).

Mustelids' greatest impact on our native species occurs when their primary prey such as rabbits and rodents become scarce. This is particularly so in relation to their effects on the numbers of kiwi, penguins, wading and perching birds, lizards, and invertebrates. Even in low numbers, mustelids can have a major impact on these animals and our native biodiversity in general.

Checking for signs of mustelids

- Mustelid scats (droppings) are long and thin, often with a characteristic tapering twist at each end. They are filled with fur, feathers and bone fragments (from whatever they have been eating). They are hard and black when dry.
- Mustelids secrete a thick, oily, powerful smelling yellow fluid called musk onto their scats.
- Scats are often placed in conspicuous positions, such as in the middle of a track, as a sign to other mustelids in the area.
- Prey killed by mustelids is usually bloody with chew marks on the back of the head or neck.
- Typically, mustelids move their prey under cover, so often no prey remains are visible.
- Footprints in soft ground (see What Made These Tracks? on gotchatraps.co.nz/tracking-guide).
- Mustelids have five toes on each foot, with fur between the pads. Stoat footprints measure approximately 20mm long and 22mm wide (front feet) and 42mm by 25mm (rear feet). Ferrets have the largest footprints of the three mustelid species.

What do they look like?

Ferrets, stoats and weasels are extremely mobile, active predators. They prefer to remain close to cover as they move around. You are most likely to spot one when it is forced to cross an area of open ground such as a road. All mustelids have a long body, short legs and a sharp pointed face.

Ferrets

- Ferrets are the largest of the mustelid species in New Zealand. Male ferrets grow up to 44cm and females up to 37cm in length.
- The undercoat is creamy yellow with long black guard hairs that give the ferret a dark appearance.
- Legs and tail appear darker than the body.
- The lighter facial region has a dark 'mask' around the eyes and across the nose.

Stoats

- Stoats have long, thin bodies and smooth pointed heads.
- They are smaller than ferrets. Males grow up to 30cm and females up to 25cm long.
- Ears are short and rounded.
- Their fur is dark brown with creamy white undercoat.
- Stoats have relatively long tails with a bushy black tip.

Responsibility for control

Occupiers in the Waikato region may control mustelids on their property.

- The council can provide advice and some assistance (e.g. through contestable funds in the council's Natural Heritage Partnership Programme) to those who are interested in mustelid control.

Auckland Council is responsible for a site-led pest management programme within the Hūnua Ranges Pest Management Area.

In relation to mustelids within the area, Auckland Council:

- will provide information, advice and support to individuals and community groups in relation to pest animal identification, impacts and control
- may undertake direct control of mustelids as part of integrated pest management where required to protect prioritised biodiversity values at the site.

In addition, no person shall knowingly distribute to other persons, release, sell, offer for sale, hold in premises where animals are offered for sale or breed any ferret, stoat or weasel in the Hūnua Ranges Pest Management Area unless permitted by the Chief Technical Officer of MPI (rule HŪNUA-8 of the ***Waikato Regional Pest Management Plan 2022-2032***).

Control methods

Trapping is the best control tool available for mustelids. Predator Free New Zealand and Bionet have best practice advice on their websites for landowners and community groups on how to undertake mustelid control.

Traps

- The KBL tunnel trap and the Timms possum trap are similar but the KBL trap has a tunnel entrance to prevent non-target animals from being caught accidentally. Timms possum traps can be baited with meat or fish to catch mustelids. Ensure that there is no possibility of catching pet cats, as they will probably be attracted to the bait.
- The Department of Conservation (DOC) series of traps – 150, 200 and 250 – are used nationally for predator control. The DOC150 and 200 are suitable for catching stoats and weasels, while the larger DOC 250 can kill larger ferrets as well as stoats and weasels. These traps are easy to use when set using a setting arm tool. They are designed to fit into a wooden box to ensure non-target species can't access the trap.

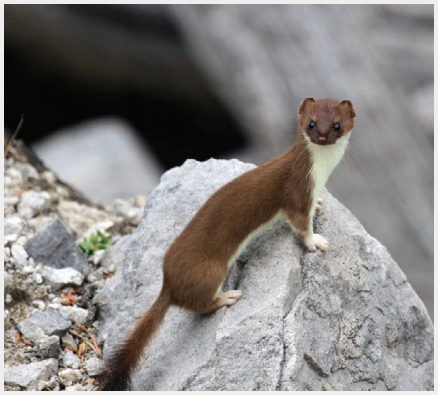
Poison

PredaSTOP (PAPP) containing para-aminopropiophenone is a deadly poison. It is a humane and effective control tool for predators like mustelids. It is biodegradable with low toxicity and does not pose a threat of secondary poisoning. A controlled substance licence (CSL) is required to store, handle and use this toxin. For more information on obtaining a licence contact WorkSafe NZ.

Exclusion fencing

Poultry and pets are best protected by ensuring mustelids cannot access animal enclosures. Ensure enclosures have netting floors or netting walls buried 30 to 45cm below ground level and that the mesh size is small enough that mustelids cannot squeeze through it.

You can also speak to one of our pest animal team for advice and information on controlling mustelids on freephone 0800 800 401.



Weasels

- Weasels are the smallest and least common mustelid in New Zealand. Males grow to about 20cm.
- Their fur is brown with white undercoat, often broken by brown spots.
- Their tails are short, brown, and tapering.

More information

Advice

For more information and advice on mustelids contact Waikato Regional Council on freephone 0800 800 401.

For more information and advice on mustelids in the Hūnua Ranges Pest Management Area contact Auckland Council on 09 301 0101 or email pestfree@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz.

Web

- Toolkits – Predator Free NZ Trust
- Predator Free 2050 Practical Guide to Trapping
- pestdetective.org.nz/culprits
- doc.govt.nz
- *Waikato Regional Pest Management Plan 2022-2032* – **waikatoregion.govt.nz/rpmp**