

Pest of the month

– weasels, stoats and ferrets

The mustelid family - weasels, stoats and ferrets - was introduced into New Zealand during the late 1800s to control the ravages of a growing rabbit population.

Weasels and stoats are similar in colour and appearance, but stoats are larger and have a bushy black tail tip. Ferrets are larger still and have a characteristic dark “bandit” mask around their eyes. All have the typical mustelid body shape - long and narrow, pointed head, short legs and short, blunt ears.

Stoats are the most common of the mustelids and are found throughout New Zealand on farmland, in scrubland and forest and in the high country. Ferrets are less common and are found in farmland, scrubland and forest margins where their primary prey – rabbits – also live. Weasels are the least common and are restricted to lowland sites.

Stoats are active during the day and are often seen crossing roads or scavenging on “road kill”. They are bold hunters and regularly take prey much larger than themselves. Stoats and weasels are adept at running and climbing; stoats can travel considerable distances cross-country and have been known to swim more than two kilometres to off-shore islands, putting wildlife at risk.

They eat frequently – up to six times a day - and have had a devastating effect on both native wildlife (birds, insects, lizards, frogs, eels) and introduced animals (mice, rats, rabbits, hares, possums and birds).

Ferrets don’t climb, but prey on similar ground-dwelling species and often scavenge carcasses. They are also carriers of Bovine Tuberculosis and have contributed to its spread on farmland.

The mustelid breeding season starts in

the spring (September to November), with the first litters born around mid-October. Kits are weaned at 6-8 weeks and start to disperse from home at about three months.

This increase in mustelid numbers over spring and summer makes the period from late spring to early winter the best time for trapping. A whole egg is the best bait as it keeps better in the heat than other baits such as cat food, rabbit or fish. Traps should be sited along bush, scrub and stream margins, around ponds, in culverts, along the edges of farm tracks and near poultry runs. All trapping should be carried out using tunnel or box traps, which are attractive to mustelids but safe for other species and children.

For more detailed advice on control techniques and trap types, please contact a Biosecurity Officer at Tasman District Council Ph 03 543 8400.



Stoat



Ferret



Weasel