

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



WEASELS

“The worse thing an animal can have is a good looking pelt. People like good-looking pelts. Just ask the beaver.” A.C.Woltz

When the new appointments were made to the Supreme Court of Canada, the new photograph showed our top justices dressed in their ceremonial robes; red velvet bordered with luxurious white fur, a sign of their high station in our society. Our justices use mink for their robes, but the beautiful white fur trim has a history dating hundreds of years when ermine was the fur of choice. Indeed, at one time in Europe, only the upper classes were allowed to wear ermine. Lately, to the chagrin of fur trappers, the popularity of the ermine has declined.

Kelly called and reported a strange animal in their kitchen. It had climbed on top of the kitchen counter and had stolen a raw chicken leg. The creature was frequently seen skittering across the kitchen floor and all attempts to live-trap it failed. Kelly’s family, no strangers to wildlife, identified it as a weasel. In another case, Tom was working on his new house and had a regular visitor for a period of time. A weasel watched him from a safe distance. Gail reported a weasel boldly scampering around her front porch at her camp.

Weasels are part of a large family of animals called mustelidae that includes ferrets, mink, martens, fishers, skunks, badgers and otters. In our corner of the Shield we don’t have any badgers or ferrets. According to a member of the local trappers association there is a healthy population of the other animals. The ermine is a winter weasel, also known as the short-tailed weasel.



Turning white for winter as weasels do, is a mixed blessing. With snow covering the ground the weasel is almost invisible. On the downside, there is the possibility of late snowfall or an early thaw that leaves the weasel without its advantage of camouflage.

Throughout our literature, the weasel is depicted as sly, evil and self-serving. The Wind in the Willows uses weasels as the villain's henchmen. Referring to someone as a weasel indicates they are not to be trusted. Some

people weasel their way out of due punishment. Has our weasel had a bad rap? Not really, except for their penchant for poultry and thus raising the ire of farmers.

The ermine, also known as the stoat or short-tailed weasel grows to approximately 13 cm (5 in.) in length while its larger cousin, long-tailed weasel can reach sizes of 40 cm. (16 in.). Both are thin, long-necked and sinewy; they appear to flow along the ground rather than trot or run. They feed on rodents, birds, rabbits/hares, reptiles, and amphibians, some much larger than themselves and they are very efficient hunters. The ermine is actually small enough to pursue ground-dwelling rodents through their burrows.

While the ermine changes colour in winter, as does the longtail weasel, members of these species living in warmer climes don't bother. It would be interesting to know at what line of latitude this colour change is triggered.



In her natural history classic, *One Day On Beetle Rock*, Sally Carrighar devotes a chapter to this little carnivore. She describes the weasel as the body of a squirrel squeezed into the width of a mouse. According to her story, the weasel's 'lithe little body flowed' between boulders and plants, 'wove' through shrubs and 'melted' through leaves and needles. One of Ms. Carrighar's strengths is capturing the essence of animal motion through words.

While in the three situations cited above where humans and weasels shared the same dwelling, the animals were seen in daylight hours, weasels are primarily nocturnal which is why most of us cannot lay claim to seeing one—the operative word being 'primarily'. Even though we don't see them, they are there quietly doing their job of rodent control.

(Photos – G. Rowe)