

Mustelids

**Ferret (*Mustela furo*), Stoat (*Mustela eriminea*),
Weasel (*Mustelia nivalis vulgaris*)**

Mustelids are a group of small to medium sized carnivores. There are three species of mustelids in New Zealand – the ferret, the stoat and the weasel. They were introduced into New Zealand in the mid 1880s to control rabbits but have since become the main predator of many native birds.

They are widely spread throughout New Zealand and because they are small, secretive and fast moving, they are difficult to observe in the wild.

In addition to New Zealand's wild mustelids population, ferrets are kept as domestic pets and farmed for export markets in Asia. In the 1980s ferret farms were established throughout New Zealand for the export fur trade. When the fur market became unprofitable, most of these farms closed down. The ferrets escaped or were set free, allowing the invasion of this pest.



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Ferrets

These are the largest of the mustelid species, growing up to half a metre long. Generally, they have a creamy white underfur, with flecks of black on the ends. The lighter facial region has a dark mask around the eyes and across the nose.



Stoats

They have a long thin smooth body, pointed heads, short round ears, and round black eyes. They are smaller than ferrets. The males are usually about 40cm long and weigh about 350g. The females are usually about 33cm long and weigh about 240g. Their fur is dark brown with creamy white underparts and a bushy black tipped tail.



Weasels

These are the smallest and rarest of the mustelids. Their fur is brown with white underparts, often broken by brown spots. Their tail is short, brown and tapering.



Why are Mustelids Pests?

In New Zealand, mustelids do to the birds what the possums do to the trees. Mustelids are known carriers of Bovine Tuberculosis (Tb), parasites and toxoplasmosis (which causes abortions in sheep and illness in humans). Mustelids have had a huge impact on New Zealand's native species, particularly ground dwelling birds. It is estimated that stoats kill 40 North Island Kiwi chicks per day on average, which adds up to 15,000 per year. That accounts for 60% of North Island Kiwi chicks born each year.

Although ferrets mostly feed on rabbits, they find nesting birds easy prey and irresistible. Weasels will tackle prey that is much larger than themselves and are threatening native lizard and invertebrate populations as well as bird life. On farms, mustelids have been implicated in the deaths of domestic fowl and taking eggs.

Control

Trapping

Currently, the only practical and humane method of control is to use traps. While a certain amount of skill is required in capturing mustelids, a number of techniques can be adopted.

We recommend that the Mark 6 "Fenn" trap is used. Fenn traps should be set in wooden tunnels made from old timber. The tunnels should be 1 metre long with internal dimensions of 20cm wide and 17cm high. Alternatively a ready made plastic tunnel can be purchased from farm supply stores. The trap chain should be attached to the tunnel. Horizons has a limited number of ferret tunnel traps which are available for loan. They can also be purchased from stock and station agents.

Baiting Traps

To bait the tunnel, use fresh rabbit or canned cat food. Place the bait on the ground to one side of the trap. Try dragging the meat across the ground through the tunnel to leave a scent trail to attract them. The best time to catch ferrets is during the period from mid summer to autumn.

Handy Hints for Trapping

1. Traps should be placed not more than 200 metres apart. Once you catch a mustelid, leave the trap set in the same place. The scent from the captured mustelid will attract others.
2. The ideal locations for placing traps are:
 - Near creeks and water ways
 - Hay barns
 - Rabbit warrens
 - Cattle stops
 - Culverts
3. Use broken eggs for bait if you specifically want to capture stoats.

Poisoning

Using poisons to control mustelids in New Zealand is an area of new development. Mustelids are known to have died from eating the flesh of poisoned rabbits and possums. The toxin Brodifacoum is particularly effective in this secondary poisoning of mustelids.

A protein based paste containing the toxin Diphacinone is an option for direct poisoning of mustelids. This anticoagulant poison is available for public use, but must be used in tunnel bait stations.

Maintaining The Effort

Mustelid populations recover very quickly. You must persist with control if you wish to gain long term benefits. Mustelids are identified in Horizons Animal Pest Management Strategy as a 'Non-Statutory problem animal'. This means that it is an animal, which is undesirable, but has not met all the criteria for inclusion as an animal pest. Where values in High Value Conservation Areas (HVCA) are at risk and in other exceptional circumstances these animals may also be controlled by Horizons. HVCA's are important areas of native bush and wildlife habitat in the Region.