Ferret

Mustela furo

What does it look like?

Ferrets, Stoats and Weasels belong to a group of animals known as **Mustelids**.

Ferrets are the largest of the three species and are about 48-56 cm long, including the tail. Their colours vary but they are usually dark brown or blackish with a creamy under fur, but they can appear almost white/creamy white. The tail is uniformly dark. The face is pale with a dark mask over the eyes. Adult males are generally larger than the females.

Stoats

Stoats are the most common of the three mustelids and grow to 34-40 cm long, including the tail. They are very thin and about half the size of a rabbit. Stoats have a chestnut-brown coat, which turns white in winter, a cream coloured belly and a bushy, black-tipped tail

Weasels

Weasels are the smallest and least common of the three mustelids in New Zealand. They have a thin, muscular body and a small head. Their colouring is very like the stoat, but with a more red-brown coat, white underside and a shorter tail without a black tip. They grow to 20-25 cm long and will attack prey that is much larger than themselves

HABITAT NICHES:

Ferrets Are generally absent or in low numbers in areas of high rainfall, where there are few rabbits, or deep within forested areas. It was originally thought that ferrets were limited to open country like pasture, scrubland, coastal areas and in the fringes of forests. However, recent research has found ferrets within some forests, placing added pressure on already threatened kiwi populations

Stoats will live in any habitat where they can find prey. In New Zealand they can be found at any altitude, in any kind of forest, exotic or native, in scrub, dunes and pasture. They are even known to occur near human settlements. In open country they are less common than ferrets, but in the forest they are much more common.

Weasels are usually found where there are plenty of mice, in gardens, long rank grass and near buildings, rather than in open paddocks

Why is it a problem?

Mustelids can be devastating to native bird life and other fauna. They have very good hearing and a strong sense of smell. Ferrets also can carry Bovine TB disease.

Ferrets mainly hunt at night. Their main prey are rabbits and hares but they also feed on native birds, especially ground-nesting birds, lizards, frogs and large native invertebrates (for example, weta). They are good climbers and can steal eggs and chicks from nests in trees. Ferrets are one of the few predators able to kill an adult kiwi. They will also kill little blue penguins, possums, lizards, eels, hedgehogs and other small mammals.

Ferrets are successful breeders, producing between four and eight kittens per litter and one or two litters each year. Within three months of being

born, the young ferret is capable of moving out into its own territory. There is high mortality in the first year, and an average lifespan in the wild may be 4-5 years.

Control Methods

GW will control mustelids in Key Native Ecosystems; support Predator Free Wellington project partners, and provide a cost recovery service in actively managed Territorial Authority (TA) reserves in agreement with the associated TA.

Signs ferrets are present

Scats: long and thin, they often also have a characteristic tapering twist at each end. They are filled with fur, feathers and bone fragments. They are hard and black when dry.

Ferrets secrete onto their scats, a thick, oily yellow powerful smelling fluid called musk. Scats are often found out in the open, such as in the middle of a track. This acts as a sign to other mustelids in the area.

Ferrets usually eat the flesh from the neck and head area of their prey. Often only the head will be consumed, particularly with chickens

Trapping

The Department of Conservation (DOC) series of traps, the DOC150, 200 and 250, are used nationally for predator control. For ferrets it's recommended the DOC250 is used, as it is a more powerful trap designed to kill larger ferrets as well as stoats and weasels. Always follow trap manufacturer instructions when using traps. Use of a setting tool is recommended. There are a wide range of trap types and suppliers available online for ferret control. Other trap types include: BT250. More information about these traps can be found at the Trapping link below.

Good places for traps are areas where ferrets would be travelling or hunting for rabbits and other prey (near cover, along streams, offal holes, pathways, tracks and fence lines, tree lanes and forest margins).

If you are trapping over a large area then set the traps about 100m apart. Put a number on each trap and keep a record of how many have been set, when and where

Bait traps, check the traps at least once a month and change the bait. Remove and dispose of old bait away from the trap. Check traps more often in late summer and autumn as food sources dwindle and catch rates can go up. Wear gloves when handling the bait and setting traps as mustelids can detect, and be put off by, human scent.

If you have cats then use eggs as bait and avoid meat. Buy a weka link extension for the trap. This also works to keep cats out.

If you don't catch them immediately then experiment with different bait and locations. Ferrets are very suspicious of baits and traps.

Lures

The best lure for mustelids is fresh or salted rabbit. Eggs or fish flavoured cat food also work well. There are commercial long life baits on the market as well. A piece of bait or fish can be dragged around on a piece of string to make a scent trail leading to the trap.

Salted rabbit lure

- Shot rabbits can be frozen until you have enough to salt (a dozen rabbits make a bucketful).
- Partially defrost rabbits (there is less mess when butchering).
- Use a meat cleaver and sturdy chopping block to chop off the head and feet.
- Skin and gut. Split the carcass in half with the cleaver then chop it into bait size pieces, about 25 per reasonable size rabbit.
- Layer the pieces in a 20-litre bucket with a handful or two of non-iodised agricultural salt per rabbit.
- Stir, cover and leave in a cool place for 24 hours, stir again then drain off the liquid

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- Bag the pieces in plastic bags and freeze. The pieces of bait should freeze free-flow and be ready to use, as you need them. Excess bait left after a day's trapping can be re-frozen.
- Put the bait on top of two or three nails inside your traps to help it last and to aid scent dispersal. The bait should last around three weeks depending on the weather and the shade on your trap site.
- Dispose of all used bait carefully, either bury or remove from the area. You must not leave used bait in the field where stoats may find it, taste it and be put off going into traps.

Related Links

Pest Detective http://www.pestdetective.org.nz/
Landcare Research - Vertebrate Pest Control https://pestdss.landcareresearch.co.nz/Ferrets/Location
Bionet https://www.bionet.nz/
Predator Free NZ - Pest Control Suppliers Information https://predatorfreenz.org/resources/where-to-buy-equipment/
GW Regional Pest Management Plan https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/
Trapping https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/pest-animals/trapping/
An Urban Predator-Free Blueprint https://www.pfw.org.nz/site/assets/files/2550/an_urban_eradication_blueprint_-_predator_free_wellington_2024-_version_1.pdf
Practical Guide to Trapping https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/pf2050/trapping-guide-pf2050.pdf

Rules

Under Section 52 and 53 of the Biosecurity Act 1993 no person can sell, propagate, breed, distribute or otherwise spread any pest in a Pest Management Plan, or any unwanted organism. Not complying with Section 52 or 53 is an offence under the Act, and may result in penalties noted in Section 157(1).

No person shall possess and/or release any mustelid within the Wellington Region.

Management Programme

Site-led