

## A few weasel words

Last year we were, for the first time, able to confirm that we have weasels in the garden. Some time in April we were turning into our drive (for which, read concrete track) and a weasel sauntered across in front of us. It was a good enough view to see the tail which is a key identifying feature – quite short and no black tip. We had mixed emotions about this sighting – weasels are a reasonably rare sighting so that was good – but it was not so good for our local nesting birds. Weasels can easily predate most bird's nest if they can find them – the fact that all Blackbird and Robin nests are not predated just shows that Weasels cannot be very common.



We did not think much more about it until a few days later we were sitting on the paved area by the conservatory and suddenly a weasel poked his head out of the surrounding hedge only a few feet away. We were sat quietly and the weasel saw us but did not seem too bothered. He moved further out so that we could see his splendid ginger body and white bib, then turned and went back into the hedge, again showing us his distinctive short tail. (I have said “he” here but it was just as likely to have been a female.)

The creature seemed large to us, but it was definitely not a stoat. Perhaps it was large male weasel, which can be 3 times the weight of a female – up to 200 gms. In the following weeks we often heard birds making alarm calls around the garden and we feel certain that the weasel was the cause.

Often the only views you have of weasels is when they dash across the road, sometimes with babies in tow. Then they look very small, like bendy toilet rolls with short legs. They are between 20 to 27 cms long including the tail.

In contrast, stoats are up to 45 cms long including tail and much heavier at up to 450 grams. As already mentioned stoats have a black tail tip. In many snowier parts of their range they turn completely white in winter, apart from the black tail tip. The white pelts can be sewn together with the black tails protruding – this is known as “ermine” and was (and maybe still is) used in ceremonial robes and capes.

In the UK both stoats and weasels are serious predators of birds and rodents, especially voles (the voles are probably what attracted weasels to our garden) but they seem to exist in balance with their prey and do not cause serious harm to their overall populations. The same is not true when they are introduced elsewhere. Stoats were introduced to New Zealand in the 1880s to control rabbits and almost immediately turned into a major pest. They are a serious threat to ground- and hole-nesting birds in New Zealand since the latter are not familiar with the idea of mammalian predators and have little means of defence. Bird populations started decreasing only 6 years after the introduction. At the current time major efforts are made to trap and poison stoats but they are very hard to eradicate. In areas without trapping, few native wild birds breed successfully.

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