

First Sight Record of a Least Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) in Yellowstone National Park

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Yellowstone National Park is noted primarily for its geothermal features and vast assemblages of temperate zone mammals. It is quite unusual to add to the list of mammals of Yellowstone National Park, especially with the vast numbers of people that visit this popular high elevational national park. This short note documents the first sight record of the Least Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) in Yellowstone National Park.

Of all the mustelids of the family Mustelidae studied to date, there continues to be a paucity of information on the world's smallest carnivore the Least Weasel. Part of the reason is this mammal is not seen very often, and secondly its sheer small size oftentimes limits detection. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department *Atlas of the Birds, Mammals, Amphibians, and Reptiles in Wyoming* (Cerovski, et al 2004) shows the nearest record to be from the east flank of the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming, and the Bozeman Pass area of Montana (Montana Natural Heritage Program). This record is unique because of the different habitat it was found in and the close distance of the observer to the Least Weasel.

On June 20, 2007, while hiking approximately 2.5 miles uphill from the Thunderer Trailhead, a flash of white caught the corner of my eye. I immediately stopped in an Engelman Spruce/Subalpine fir habitat at 8216' (UTM=NAD 83, 0574155E,4974203N), and remained motionless, and tried to figure out what it was that I saw underneath a fallen fir tree. At first I thought maybe it was a Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), but I waited to make sure. But to my surprise it turned out to be a small weasel. I made a squeaking noise in hopes of luring it in, and it immediately responded by coming closer to me at first as close as 10 feet. The diminutive weasel would rush up to me and run back and hide. Then it appeared with a Southern Red-backed Vole (*Clethrionomys gapperi*) in its mouth. But to my surprise the vole was the same size as the weasel, and the vole was still alive but paralyzed, as evidenced by the pumping heart of the vole. I pished and the weasel reappeared with the live vole in its mouth on three occasions, which suggested to me the weasel was attempting to feed young in a den underneath the log. Later it reappeared without the vole and was attracted to the squeaking noise I was making with my mouth. The weasel came closer, so close in fact that it stood on my boot just three feet below me. And on another occasion it stood with hind legs on my boot and front legs on my pants. It was at this point I decided not to go any further.

The weasel was definitely a Least Weasel. Obvious features included its diminutive size (length: 6 inches body, 7-8 inches including tail), and being the same size as the small vole. It had very small pure white feet and belly, a tiny head, and chocolate brown

colored pelage. The tail was stubby, and appeared only one inch to one and one half inches long. There was no black tip on the chocolate brown tail. The tail because it was so short did not flow or follow the weasel at it ran, such as occurs with Short-tailed and Long-tailed Weasels. The weasel went under the log. I went back and returned with a camera, but the weasel could not be found.