

Best Management Practices for Trapping Weasels in the United States



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Figure WS1. Weasel (*Mustela frenata*)

Best Management Practices (BMPs) are carefully researched educational guides designed to address animal welfare and increase trappers' efficiency and selectivity. The extensive research and field-testing used to develop BMPs are described in the Introduction section of this manual. The evaluation methods used to develop BMPs have been standardized, enabling them to be easily updated and revised as new traps and techniques become available. All traps listed in the BMPs have been tested and meet performance standards for animal welfare, efficiency, selectivity, practicality and safety.

Trapping BMPs provide options, allowing for discretion and decision making in the field. BMPs are meant to be implemented in a voluntary and educational approach and do not present a single choice that can or must be applied in all cases. BMPs are the product of ongoing work that may be updated as additional traps are identified through future scientific testing.

The Weasel at a Glance

Characteristics

Weasels are members of the Mustelidae family. There are three species of weasels indigenous to North America; the long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*) (Figure WS1), the short-tailed weasel (*Mustela erminea*) and the least weasel (*Mustela nivalis*). Within species, adult males are generally larger than adult females. The three species can be differentiated by their size and range. Adult long-tailed weasels weigh from 3 to 16 ounces and range from 11 to 16.5 inches in length, including a 4-to-6 inch tail. The short-tailed weasel is 7.5 to 13 inches long, with its tail making up a third of its body length. The least weasel rarely exceeds 9.8 inches, with a quarter of its length being the tail (shortest relative tail length of the weasels). Also distinctive, long-tailed and short-tailed weasels have black-tipped tails in all seasons, but least weasels never have black-tipped tails. In colder climates, the pelage of all three species turns white in winter. In the fur trade, the short-tailed weasel is commonly referred to as an "ermine" when in winter pelage. Least weasels are so small as not to be valuable in the trade of raw furs and are generally not sought by trappers.

Range

Long-tailed weasels are found from southern Canada to Peru; however, they are not common in extensive desert habitats. The short-tailed weasel ranges from above the Arctic Circle to the northern United States. The least weasel is also found above the Arctic Circle, but the range extends further south into the central United States.

Habitat

Weasels are found in a wide variety of habitats, but prefer woodlands, brushy areas, and thickets near watercourses. They inhabit shallow burrows, often those previously occupied by moles, ground squirrels or mice. Rock piles, cavities under roots of trees, and dense vegetation may also be used for dens, resting and hunting. Depending on their habitat, weasels may use one or many dens.

Food Habits

Small mammals are the preferred food of weasels. When this prey source is available, it makes up the majority of the diet. Mice, rats, squirrels, chipmunks, shrews, moles and rabbits are all likely food sources. Occasionally, birds, reptiles, amphibians, eggs, and insects are also consumed. Weasels may store their food for future use, but fresh kills seem to be preferred.

Reproduction

Mating in short-tailed and long-tailed weasels occurs in mid-to-late summer, but due to delayed implantation, embryo development does not take place immediately; young are born the following April or May. For both species, litters range from four to eight young. This delay in embryo development does not occur in least weasels, and they are capable of producing young in any month. Generally, least weasels produce only two litters per year, typically in spring and mid to late summer, with four to five young per litter.

Populations

Weasel populations rise and fall in accordance with their prey abundance, and are also impacted by predation. Foxes, coyotes, domestic cats, hawks, owls and snakes have all been documented as predators of weasels.

General Overview of Traps Meeting BMP Criteria for Weasels in the United States

A longspring trap, used in the body-grip mode, and “rat type” snap trap were tested for weasel as killing devices (Table WS1). Examples, brief descriptions and mechanical details of the various makes and models are given in the next section.

Table WS1. Overview of traps meeting BMP criteria for weasels in the United States.

Trap Category	Jaw/Frame Characteristics	Inside Jaw/Frame Spread at Dog*	Inside Width at Jaw/Frame Hinge Posts*
Longspring Trap	Unmodified	4 1/2	4 5/16
Snap Trap	Unmodified	3 3/16	2 1/2

* Inches

General Considerations When Trapping Weasels

Longspring Trap

- Reducing pan-tension may be necessary to achieve desired capture rate and proper strike location
- Can be used to capture several furbearer species
- Traps can be set in baited cubbies (Figure WS2) to help ensure proper strike location (Figure WS3), and to improve selectivity

Snap Trap

- Traps can be set in baited cubbies (Figure WS4) to help ensure proper strike location (Figure WS5a), and to improve selectivity
- Little or no trap modification is necessary

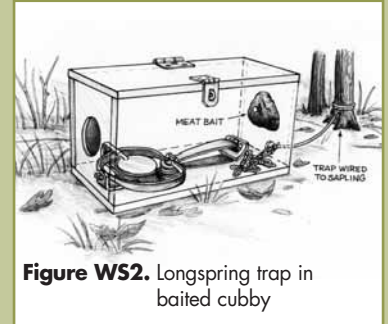


Figure WS2. Longspring trap in baited cubby

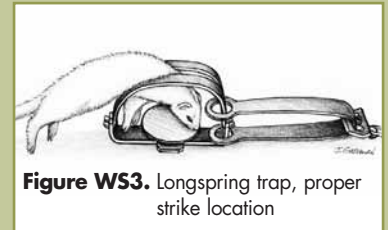


Figure WS3. Longspring trap, proper strike location

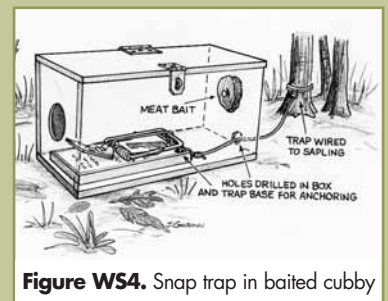


Figure WS4. Snap trap in baited cubby

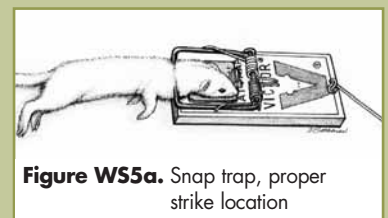


Figure WS5a. Snap trap, proper strike location

Specifications of Traps Meeting BMP Criteria for Weasels in the United States

As more capture devices are tested and new information becomes available, they will be added to an updated list. Mechanical descriptions of tested traps are given as an aid to trappers or manufacturers who may wish to measure, build or modify traps to meet these specifications. Also, other commercially available traps, modified traps or other capture devices not yet tested may perform as well as, or better than, the listed BMP traps. References to trap names are provided to identify the specific traps tested. This list is provided for information purposes only, and does not imply an endorsement of any manufacturer.

These are average mechanical measurements which are rounded to the nearest $\frac{1}{16}$ inch. There may be up to $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch variation in specifications on the part of the manufacturer. Manufacturers use recognizable names, such as "No. 2" coil-spring, to identify certain traps. However, there is no standardized system linking mechanical design features with trap names. The mechanical features of these traps are listed so that similar traps may be identified.

The performance of anchoring systems was not specifically evaluated. However, methods of attachment are described for informational purposes.

Traps with the following specifications meet or exceed the selection criteria previously described.

Longspring Traps

Unmodified jaws (Figures WS5b and WS5c)

Average Mechanical Description and Attributes

Inside jaw spread at dog: 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Inner width: 3 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches

Width at jaw hinge posts: 4 $\frac{5}{16}$ inches

Jaw width: $\frac{1}{2}$ inch

Jaw thickness: $\frac{1}{8}$ inch

Length of main trap springs: 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Thickness of main trap springs: $\frac{1}{8}$ inch

Width of main trap springs: 1 inch narrowing to $\frac{5}{8}$ inch

Any trap that has similar specifications may be considered a BMP trap regardless of brand or source of modification, although performance information on all other BMP criteria (see Introduction: "Criteria for Evaluation of Trapping Devices" pages 4-6) needs to be considered as well. The trap tested was the Sleepy Creek™ No. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ longspring.



Figure WS5b. Longspring trap (open)



Figure WS5c. Longspring trap (closed)

Additional Information

- Chain attachment used in trap testing: 16-inch chain attached to longspring of trap with one swivel, and anchored securely.
- Selectivity features: Brass pan tension machine screw; pan tension was set to “free fall” for testing, and checked and readjusted as needed after every capture. Traps were placed in cubbies and were baited with bait placed to the rear center of the cubby (Figure WS2). Traps should be positioned in the cubby so that the animal will step between the jaws and onto the pan of the set trap. Trap dogs were bent slightly downward to increase sensitivity.
- Practicality considerations: Traps can be set in baited cubbies (Figure WS2) to help ensure proper strike location and improve selectivity. Cubbies can be constructed as noted (Figure WS6).



Snap Traps: Unmodified jaw (Figures WS7a and WS7b)

Average Mechanical Description and Attributes

Inside jaw spread at dog: 3 ³/₁₆ inches

Inner width: 2 ⁵/₈ inches

Inside width at jaw hinge posts: 2 ¹/₂ inches

Bar width: ¹/₈ inch round bar

Bar thickness: ¹/₈ inch round bar

Trap base: 6 ¹⁵/₁₆ inches (length) x 3 ⁵/₁₆ inches (width); wooden

Pan dimensions: 1 ¹⁵/₁₆ inches (length) x 2 inches (width); plastic

Main trap spring: Two 0.07 inch diameter wire coil-springs

Any trap that has similar specifications may be considered a BMP trap regardless of brand or source of modification, although performance information on all other BMP criteria (see Introduction: “Criteria for Evaluation of Trapping Devices” pages 4-6) needs to be considered as well. The trap tested was the Woodstream™ Victor Rat Trap (with large plastic treadle).

Additional information

- Anchoring used in trap testing: A length of wire was securely anchored and attached to the trap (via a hole drilled in the wooden base).
- Selectivity features: Two sensitivity settings for adjusting pan tension are located on the plastic treadle (trap pan); “sensitive” setting was used. Large plastic treadle “creates” multiple options for bait placement to improve selectivity. Traps were placed in cubbies (Figure WS4) and were baited with bait placed to the rear center of the cubby.
- Practicality considerations: Traps can be set in baited cubbies (figure WS4) to help ensure proper strike location and improve selectivity. Cubbies can be constructed as noted (Figure WS6).

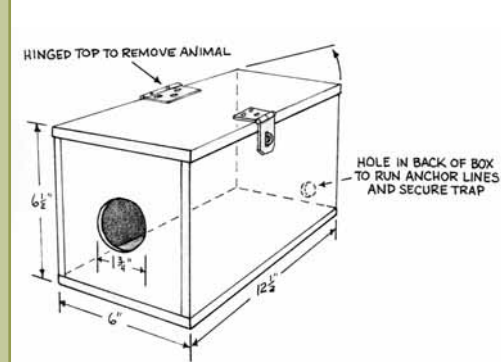


Figure WS6. Wooden weasel cubby (note dimensions)



Figure WS7a. Snap trap (unset)

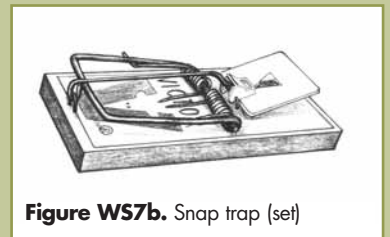


Figure WS7b. Snap trap (set)