



A guide to identifying the small mustelids of Ireland

The small mustelids

Order: Carnivora Family: Mustelidae

The small mustelids are characterised by their long thin body shape, which enables them to follow their prey down small tunnels and burrows. However, because of their similar body shape, they can be difficult to tell apart from each other especially as sightings of these animals are usually very brief and often at dusk or dark.



Irish Stoat
Mustela erminea hibernica



Mink
Neovison vison



Ferret
Mustela putorius furo



Pine marten
Martes martes

Fig 1 Small mustelids



1 Irish Stoat – Easóg (*Irish*) or Assag (*Manx*)

(head and body less than ~40cm)

The **Irish stoat** (*Mustela erminea hibernica*) is the smallest of the mustelids in Ireland. Females can be up to about 30cm long (excluding the tail), whereas the head and body length of males can be up to 40cm. However, Irish stoats do vary in size across the island – those in the north are noticeably smaller while those further south are bigger and heavier.

The stoat's fur is chestnut brown on the back and head with a creamy white underside that continues from the chest all the way down the belly. The division between the brown and cream fur is irregular and wavy. The tail is long (5.5-13cm) and slender with a distinctive black 'tip' at the end.

Irish stoats can be found in many different habitats including woodlands, hedgerows, marsh, heather, farmland, coastal areas and mountains. They are active at all times of the day or night and are sometimes seen bounding across a road or peering out from features that provide cover, such as dry-stone walls and wood piles. If you are lucky enough to see a live stoat, the small size and black tail tip are the key identifying features, along with a characteristically arched-back bounding movement.

The Irish stoat is a recognised sub-species only found throughout the island of Ireland and on the Isle of Man.

Irish stoat



2 Pine marten, American mink and ferret

(head and body 30-50cm)

Pine martens, mink and ferrets all have long sinuous bodies but are larger and heavier than stoats.

The **pine marten** (*Martes martes*) is a chestnut brown, cat-like animal with large, rounded ears fringed with pale fur, a creamy yellow or orange chest and throat patch, and a long bushy tail. It has relatively longer legs and longer tail than either mink or ferrets and its movement on the ground is characteristically loping or bounding. The pine marten is the mustelid species most likely to be seen in trees where they are agile climbers, although they also spend much of their time on the ground. The large creamy yellow throat patch is characteristic (compared with the smaller, and usually white patches sometimes seen on the throat of mink and ferrets). Mink are typically not found in forested areas, and are normally associated with aquatic habitat like ditches, streams and reedbeds, but may occur in other habitats. When seen in trees, a pine marten may be confused with red or grey squirrel, but it has a longer body and tail, darker coat and is much larger.

Fig 2 Pine martens are larger, longer and darker in colour than red squirrels. Although larger than red squirrels, grey squirrels are still smaller than pine martens.



Pine marten



The **American mink** (*Neovison vison*) is a non-native species that has become widely established throughout Ireland. American mink are usually a uniform dark chocolate brown that may appear almost black at times. There is often a white chin patch present and sometimes white patches also on the chest, belly and groin. The tail is slightly bushy, and approximately half the body length. Pale-coloured farmed variants are occasionally seen but these do not seem to do well in the wild. Mink are semi aquatic and usually found near water, where they may be mistaken for otters. However, mink are substantially smaller than otters with a much thinner and shorter tail than that of an otter.

American mink

American mink @Matt Birstead



The **otter** (*Lutra lutra*) is semi-aquatic and can be found in freshwater and coastal habitats. Otters have a thick dark brown coat, short legs and a long thick tail, tapering off to a point. The head and body of a male otter can measure up to 90cm, with a further 40cm long tail. The females are slightly smaller at up to 80cm with a 35cm long tail.

Otters can be seen away from water and they also have a bounding movement with the head held low to the ground.

Otter



The **ferret** (*Mustela furo*) is a domesticated form of the wild polecat, although wild polecats do not occur in Ireland or the Isle of Man. In Ireland, ferrets occur in low numbers in the south, east and particularly the north. They have also been recorded across the Isle of Man. Feral or owned ferrets can range in colour from pure albino to dark 'sable' animals, which have similar markings to the wild polecat, but they are usually paler and have much more white on the face. These 'sable' ferrets have bicoloured guard hairs resulting in creamy under fur over most of the body. Their lighter colouration distinguishes ferrets from the similar sized American mink, which is uniformly dark. Polecat ferrets may have darker fur round the eyes like a bandit 'mask' and may also have a large pale throat patch, pale paws and white hairs scattered over the body.



Ferret ©Pexels-Verina

Ferret



Polecat ©Anne Newton

Polecat



Ferret ©Pexels-Sarena-Koi

The **brown rat** (*Rattus norvegicus*) is similar in size to the Irish stoat but is not a member of the mustelid family. The rat's head and body measure between 15-27cm but it has a pointed face and prominent ears, and a shorter, more rounded body shape. A rat's tail is long (10.5-24cm) and slender and, unlike the stoat's tail, is not furred.



Brown rat ©James Mulhail

Brown rat



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