



Weasel or stoat? How do you tell them apart?

Dr Mark Hows looks at the lives of the weasel and stoat and how they differ.

THE SERENGETI, with its lions and wildebeest, has far more in common with Salisbury Plain than you might at first think. For here, the same battles are played out – all be it in miniature.

Some of Britain's most ferocious killers – stoats and weasels – are on the prowl and if you happen to be out walking this winter you may encounter one of them. Don't worry, you're not in any danger; for these diminutive predators with the heart of a lion, rabbits and rodents are their wildebeest. But their battles are just as enthralling as those of Africa's big game out on the savannah.

Weasels and stoats are active hunters and both will tackle prey several times their size. Watching a stoat tackle a full-size rabbit is quite a sight and it's not all one way traffic; a kick from a large rabbit can dissuade an attack, so they have to be quick and cunning in the battle for life and death.

They aren't only found on the Plain, but in a wide range of habitats all over Wiltshire and even in some lightly populated urban areas. They can

Now you know the difference between a weasel (above left) and a stoat (above right)

be surprisingly bold, living in outbuildings, and are active both day and night, so there is a much better chance of seeing them than some of the other mammalian predators.

They are often confused with each other, so how do you tell a stoat from a weasel? First you need a small rabbit and a large mouse; then stretch both out to about 30cm long. The rabbit is now about the size of a stoat and the mouse is the size of a weasel. Why this analogy? Well, rabbits and mice are their favourite prey and being the same size as them allows the predators to access their underground burrows.

There is one other difference: a stoat has a long black-tipped tail and a weasel has a tiny and very hard to see tail with no black tip.

Weasels mate in the spring and usually have one litter, but when vole populations are high they may have a second litter in late summer, and the first litter may even breed at this time. They will nest in other small animals' holes and burrows. Four or five kits are the norm for a litter and they are independent after a period of about nine weeks.

Weasels are excellent climbers and their small size allows them to explore the tiniest of cracks and hollows. Their small size has drawbacks, though. Weasels need to eat almost a third of their bodyweight each day, so they are incredibly active both day and night in the pursuit of mice, voles and shrews, as well as rats and small rabbits. It is this quest for food that may give you a glimpse of them. Their fast-paced life is short and weasels only live for about three years.

Stoats have one litter, usually of seven to 12 kits, depending on the amount of food available. They use rabbit burrows, other hollows or even buildings. The kits are independent in about 11 weeks and they usually mate before becoming independent. They are often pregnant before leaving the nest, although the pregnancy does not progress until the spring.

Stoats' larger size means they need to eat less often than weasels. The best times to see stoats are during the rearing of the young, when adults are hunting continually, or when kits are leaving the nest. During the winter though, when vegetation is low, they are very conspicuous.

Unfortunately Wiltshire is too far south to see the stoat at its most regal. During winter in northerly areas, they turn white but retain the black tip to the tail. The winter fur is known as ermine. In some areas of the Midlands this can be a partial change, giving a scruffy appearance. Location does affect the occurrence of ermine, but the exact trigger is not fully known.

Ermine was used to make the ceremonial robes of kings and queens. Seeing a stoat in ermine is a special and rather rare occurrence; so much so that one winter I made a 1,000-mile round trip to see one in Scotland.

Spying a stoat or weasel is often a chance encounter, so when walking through Wiltshire this winter look out for them. If you do have a lucky encounter with one of these amazing creatures, enjoy it.

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• For mammal info visit www.mammal.org.uk.