

Stoat ID Guide

(*Mustela erminea*)



Stoats are not native to Orkney and were first recorded here in 2010. They are a serious threat to Orkney's native wildlife.

It is important to report sightings of stoats in Orkney to understand their distribution.

Here's how to identify one

- Long body up to 32cm long (males slightly larger than females)
- Long tails (at least one third as long as body), always with a black tip

Summer: Brown with a pale chest



Winter: May turn white (ermine) or partially white. Sometimes remain brown.

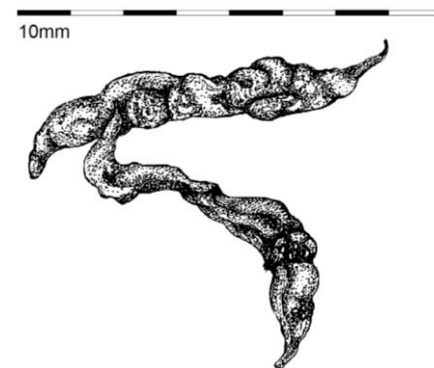


Move with a distinctive bounding gait:

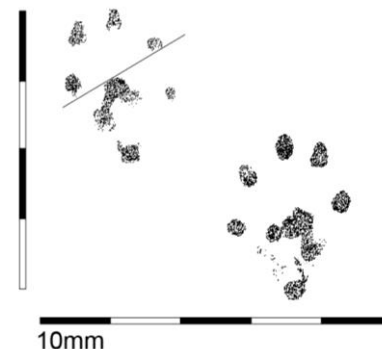


Field Signs

Scat: Appears elongated and thin. It is twisted and tapers at both ends. Deposited singly, often contain fragments of bone or fur, and sometimes insect remains. Has a musky smell. Often in conspicuous positions to mark territory.



Footprints: Five toes per foot, claws non-retractable. Can be mistaken for rat but if a line from the first to fourth toe crosses in front of the footpad, as shown below, it is a stoat.



Stoats in Orkney

Diet: Stoats are generalist predators. They:

- Mainly eat small mammals, birds and eggs.
- Are skilled hunters capable of taking prey much bigger than themselves
- Are messy eaters and often store food.

Stoats need to eat 12-30% of their body weight daily (about one vole) – but for females feeding young it can be up to 200%.

Ecological impact:

Orkney voles are endemic, meaning they are found only in Orkney. They are easy prey for stoats, so are at risk of suffering large declines in numbers.



Birds such as hen harriers and short-eared owls also rely on Orkney voles, particularly when feeding young, so their populations are likely to suffer too through competition with stoats for food. Stoats also pose a huge threat to Orkney's many ground-nesting bird species, as they eat both eggs and chicks, including waders including curlews, red-throated divers and seabirds such as Arctic terns.

Reproduction: Females are nearly always pregnant. Males enter nursery dens in early summer and mate with the female adult and young (kits). The stoats then postpone their pregnancy (known as delayed implantation) and give birth to a large litter of 6-12 kits the following spring.



Life-span: Up to five years, exceptionally six to eight. Typically one to two years.

Behaviour: Stoats are territorial and solitary, the exception being a few weeks in spring when females can be observed with kits. Males will range further in spring to find partners. Stoats are capable swimmers – they have been recorded swimming up to 3 km in open water.

Habitat: Stoats occupy a wide-range of habitats and have been recorded across most of Orkney Mainland.

Range and conservation status: Globally, stoats have a wide distribution including North America, Europe and Asia. In Orkney, stoats are outside their natural range and are classed as an invasive non-native species.

Confusion Species

Rats: If you only catch a brief glimpse, stoats may be confused for rats because they are similar in size. Look for the stoats' black tip to their tail and the distinctive bounding gait.

Otters: Even young otters are much larger than stoats and while otters have light fur on their chest/belly it is not as pale as stoats and the demarcation is not as clear.

Weasels: Slightly smaller and shorter tails without the black tip. No weasels in Orkney.

Have you spotted a stoat?

Stoats are a serious threat to Orkney's native wildlife.

All sightings are important as they give an insight into the distribution of stoats across Orkney. Please get in touch if you think you have seen a stoat (dead or alive).

Remember to include the number of stoats, date, time and precise location (including six figure grid reference if possible). It is also useful to include any behavior noticed eg carrying prey.



Report a Stoat

☎ 01856 881451

✉ stoatsightings@rspb.org.uk

📘 [facebook.com/StoatsInOrkney](https://www.facebook.com/StoatsInOrkney)

🌐 ONWP.org.uk

Protecting our native wildlife together:



The RSPB is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654. Front cover: Stoat Richard Steele, stoat with vole Martin Lever, scat Sarah Sankey. Internal summer stoat and back cover: Michael Flowers; Ermine stoat: Sergei Golyshev, Orkney vole: Alastair Skene; Illustrations: S.Frimmel