

MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

No. 3, 2024

\$3.00



**Yellow Garden Spider,
Fisher, Meet the Mustelids,
Photography Fundamentals**

**Reserve this New License Plate now
with the Mass. State Chapter of NWTf**



Since November 2023, the Massachusetts State Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) has been promoting and taking reservations for a new license plate being introduced in the Bay State. Proceeds from the sale of the plate will support the NWTf Massachusetts Chapter, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization established in 1983, in its work to improve habitat and protect more open space with MassWildlife and other like-minded organizations and to ensure the continued conservation of the Eastern wild turkey, arguably one of the state's greatest restoration and conservation success stories. Beginning in 2019, the NWTf Massachusetts Chapter has been working with the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) to develop a Massachusetts Wild Turkey license plate. The design has now been approved and the plate is available for pre-order to hunters, conservationists, and others who love having wild turkeys throughout our state. The new plate's design features a full-color Eastern wild turkey and was created by the graphic design team of the NWTf. To get this specialty plate into production, the NWTf Massachusetts Chapter must receive reservations for 750 plates and provide the names and addresses of the people who intend to purchase them to the RMV. Production will not begin until 750 plates have been reserved, processed, and paid for, so please share this opportunity with your family, friends, and colleagues. Individuals who reserve the first 750 plates will also receive a free, one-year membership to the NWTf. The initial cost of the license plate will be \$40, with \$28, which may be tax-deductible, going directly to the NWTf Massachusetts Chapter to support its habitat conservation and restoration work for the wild turkey in the Commonwealth. A \$20 swap fee will also be collected by the RMV when the new plates are ready.

To learn more about this specialty license plate, the work of the NWTf, and how you can participate in its efforts, contact Joe Judd at jjontheridge@comcast.net or Keith Fritze at centralmassnwtf@gmail.com. They can discuss past and current land and habitat conservation projects with you, help you reserve this beautiful and impactful specialty number plate, and explain the potential tax deduction.

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MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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FEATURES

WEAVER OF WORLDS

— Troy Gipps

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The pull and push of an “arachniromance” sent this smitten author on a trepidatious search of a late summer meadow where the beauty and horror of an orb weaver’s world was revealed.

DEMYSTIFYING THE FISHER

— Alyssa Grayson

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Reports of terrifying screams in the night, missing pets, and full-grown deer being taken down by this elusive predator pervade communities and spread like wildfire online, but the truth paints a much different picture of this most misunderstood mustelid.

MEET THE MUSTELIDS

— Meghan Crawford, Alyssa Grayson

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If you have ever caught a fleeting glimpse of a long, slender, energetic carnivore with short legs; small, rounded ears; and a long tail and said to yourself, “What was that?” this guide is for you!

PHOTOGRAPHY FUNDAMENTALS

— Troy Gipps

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After 40 years behind a camera, the author sheds some light on the fundamentals of photography, from composition to light management and visual storytelling, that will help anyone become a better photographer, regardless of what type of camera they own.

Correspondence

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On the Cover: A mature female yellow garden spider (*Argiope aurantia*) hangs in the center of her web shortly after dark. This common species is one of the largest orb weavers in Massachusetts, with a body length of one inch and over two inches in total with its legs included. Photo © Troy Gipps, Canon EOS 5DSR, Tamron SP 90mm Di Macro VC USD, Canon Speedlight 430EX III-RT, f/11, 1/200 second, ISO 1250.

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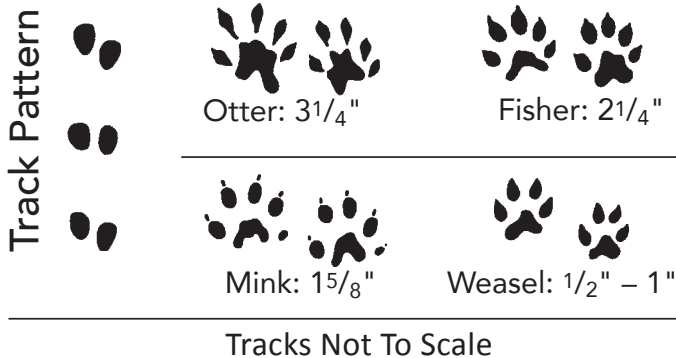
Meet the Mustelids

by Meghan Crawford and Alyssa Grayson

Members of the weasel family belong to a scientific clade called Mustelidae and are collectively referred to as mustelids. The Mustelidae family is the largest family of Carnivorans, with over 50 species spread across every continent except Antarctica and Australia. It consists of a diverse array of small to medium-sized predators, including weasels, badgers, wolverines, and otters, but they all share a few common characteristics. Mustelids generally have long bodies with short legs, strong-smelling scent glands, and thick fur. They can be found in a variety of habitats, from swamps and riversides to forested mountain ranges and rocky deserts. The well-known and charismatic sea otter, found in the North Pacific Ocean, can live an exclusively aquatic lifestyle at sea.

Skunks were formerly thought to belong to the Mustelidae family but are now classified separately in their own family (Mephitidae) after DNA research revealed they are more distantly related to mustelids than previously thought.

There are five mustelids that currently occur in Massachusetts. The largest Massachusetts mustelid is the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*), measuring around 3–4 feet and weighing upwards of 30 pounds. Fishers (*Pekania pennanti*) are the second-largest, followed by the much smaller American mink (*Neogale vison*). Long-tailed weasels (*Neogale frenata*) and American ermines (*Mustela richardsonii*), also called stoats or short-tailed weasels, are the two smallest. Massachusetts was also once home to the American marten (*Martes americana*) and the wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), both of which have since been extirpated, and the sea mink (*Neogale macrodon*), which is now extinct.



Tracks will show considerable variation depending upon conditions of ground (snow, mud, dust, sand, etc.) and movement of animal. Tail marks may be present.

North American River Otter

Lontra canadensis

Photo © Josh Gahagan



■ **APPEARANCE:** Length 3–4 feet. Tail is about 1/3 of total body length. Weight 11–30 pounds. Coat is dark brown, water-repellent; lighter-colored belly, and silver-gray throat. Body is long, slender with short legs and webbed feet. Thick tail that tapers to a point makes otters efficient underwater hunters. ■ **HABITAT:** Marshes, lakes, rivers, swamps, and estuaries. ■ **DIET:** Fish, crayfish, snakes, frogs, insects, crustaceans, amphibians, and mammals.



Photo © Josh Gahagan

Fisher

Pekania pennanti

■ **APPEARANCE:** Length 2–3 feet. Tail is about 1/3 of total body length. Weight 4–16 pounds. Coat is rich brown to black fur with grizzled grayish coloring on the head and shoulders; can have white patches of fur on their chest and lower abdomen. Body is long and slender with short legs and furred tail. Pointed face with large, rounded ears set close to the head. Sharp, retractable claws that make them well-adapted for climbing trees. ■ **HABITAT:** Upland forests. ■ **DIET:** Small rodents, squirrels, rabbits, birds, eggs, fruit, porcupines, and carrion.



American Mink

Neogale vison

■ **APPEARANCE:** Length 1½–2½ feet. Tail is about 1/3 of total body length. Weight 2–3 pounds. Coat is dark brown and waterproof with a white spot on the chin; occasional white markings on the throat, chest, or belly. Body is long and slender with short legs and partially webbed toes. Ears are short and rounded. Nose is pointed. Tail is moderately bushy, near-black at the tip.

■ **HABITAT:** Lake shores, creeks and streams, swamps, salt and freshwater marshes, and coastlines. ■ **DIET:** Fish, frogs, crustaceans, muskrats, and small mammals.



Long-tailed Weasel

Neogale frenata

■ **APPEARANCE:** Length 1–1½ feet. Tail is about 2/3 total body length. Weight 3–11 ounces. Summer coat has brown fur with white underbelly and black-tipped tail; winter coat has white fur with black-tipped tail. Body is long and slender with short legs and small rounded ears. Long-tailed weasels are more common than ermines in Massachusetts. ■ **HABITAT:** Woodlands, brushy areas next to fields, and grassy areas alongside wetlands. ■ **DIET:** Rabbits, snowshoe hare, rodents, shrews, moles, and eggs.

American Ermine

Mustela richardsonii

Photos by NPS/Jacob W. Frank



■ **APPEARANCE:** Length 6 inches to 1 foot. Tail is about 1/3 of total body length. Weight 1.3–3.7 ounces. Summer coat has brown fur with white underbelly and black tipped tail, winter coat has white fur with black-tipped tail. Body is long and slender with short legs and small, rounded ears. American ermine are also referred to as short-tailed weasels.

■ **HABITAT:** Deciduous forests, riparian woodlands, stream banks, forest edges, and rocky areas. ■ **DIET:** Rodents, shrews, rabbits, red squirrels, and insects.



About the Authors

Meghan Crawford is MassWildlife's Community Engagement Biologist. Alyssa Grayson is a wildlife biologist with experience working with multiple government agencies and wildlife organizations.



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This image may at first appear to be an acrylic or oil painting, but by setting a slow shutter speed and panning up during the shot the photographer's digital sensor was "painted" with the vibrant autumn colors of this Massachusetts wetland. To learn more about the fundamentals of photography, see page 26. Photo © Troy Gipps, Canon EOS 7D Mark II, Canon EF 70–200mm IS USM at 165mm, f/22, 1/3 second, ISO 100.

