

Nature Notes 18: A Large Weasel Awakens

British members of the weasel family (Mustellidae) are rarely seen. Our smallest is the russet-brown weasel, on average 19cm long with a 5cm long tail which is brown right down to the tip. They weigh only 72g and run frenetically through a network of tunnels at the base of ground layer vegetation hunting the mice, voles and shrews which made the tunnels. They are often only



*Stoat having caught an adult rabbit
(dailymail.com)*

seen when dashing across a road. Their lightning speed is amusingly illustrated by “Ozzy the Weasel’s War Dance” on Youtube, which depicts a real weasel “hunting” a furry toy on a large double bed.



*Weasel carrying a common lizard
(justfunfacts.com)*

The stoat is larger, similarly coloured, 28cm long, weighing 270g, with an 11cm long tail always tipped with black. (If you forget the difference between stoats and weasels, you could try

remembering: “weasels are weasily distinguished because stoats are stoatly different!” (Oh dear! that is what my daughter, with stinging contempt, would call a “Dad joke”). Stoats mostly feed on rabbits, which are on average six times heavier than their predator. Rabbits often become mesmerised by the sight of a hunting stoat, sitting stock-still, sometimes emitting a piecing “terror scream”, until the much smaller predator dispatches them.



“Time out” Who needs giant pandas with natives like this on the doorstep? (ptes.org)

Badgers are the largest mustelids in Britain and although culled at a rate of approximately 70% of target populations per year in some dairy farming areas in the west, have steadily increased in East Anglia, as shown by the number now killed here on the roads. Over the whole country an estimated 50,000 badgers are killed by vehicles per year out of the national population of nearly 500,000.

We have at least three badger setts in Swannington. Smaller ones may only be used as temporary diurnal shelters on route to distant night time feeding

grounds (the badger equivalent of B&B). Setts used for breeding are more elaborate and usually have multiple entrances.

Badgers do not hibernate completely during the winter as they often venture out on warmer nights for a quick “snack” of earthworms, their most frequently eaten food. Active setts can be identified in spring by signs of “spring cleaning” in the form of very large mounds of freshly dug soil, sometimes accompanied by bundles of used winter bedding. The presence of well-worn badger paths leading off towards favoured feeding grounds is one of the key indicators of how actively occupied a sett is. Another sign is that they dig small latrine holes near their setts.

To watch badgers one needs to sit, in total silence, downwind of a well-used tunnel entrance, getting settled in a little before sunset. It can help to take a torch fitted with a red filter. Badger watching can be a very exciting, particularly when they trot by only a few metres away.



*Cubs emerge for the first time in May
(wsbg.co.uk)*

Mark Hassall (June 2019)