A scenic landscape view of a river valley. In the foreground, there is a hillside covered in tall, dry, golden-brown grasses. A river flows through the middle ground, surrounded by a mix of green pine trees and yellow autumn foliage. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with light clouds.

River-bank Critters: A Tracker's Guide for the Lower Flathead River

Sx^wix^wúytis X^wix^weyúł

A Guide to the Some of the More
Common Mammal Tracks

River-bank Critters: A Tracker's Guide for the Lower Flathead River†

Sx^wix^wúytis X^wix^weyúł

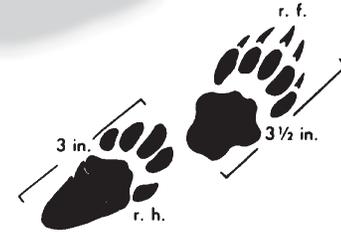
six^weyx^wó (Salish)

nał mit' (Kootenai)

Badger

Taxidea taxus

Badgers like open grasslands and shrub grasslands, terrain very much like that found throughout much of the river corridor. They favor non-forested habitats with soils suitable for burrowing and that support plenty of prey. They are tremendous predators of digging rodents and rabbits, but they are also opportunistic and will eat non-digging mammals, birds, eggs, reptiles, amphibians, and plants. They are mostly nocturnal but can be active during the day. Babies are born from February to May and have litters of one to four.



†Much of the text in this guide is adapted from *Identification of Montana's Furbearing Mammals* by Michael R. Frisina Kurt Alt. Used with permission.

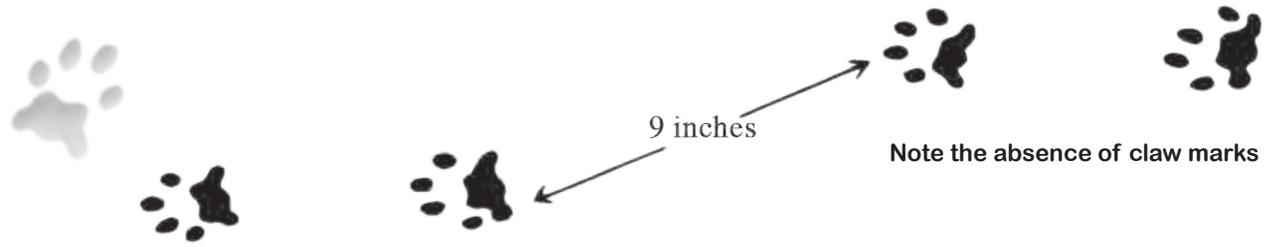
píçn (Salish)

kañæu pus (Kootenai)

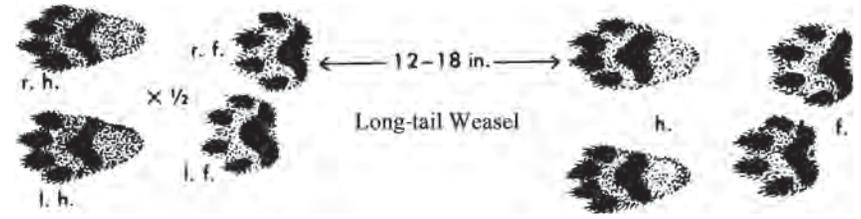
Bobcat

Felis rufus

Bobcats use a wide variety of habitats, including those along the river. They like rimrocks and grassland/shrubby areas with dense understory vegetation and lots of prey. They den in rocky areas and eat mostly cottontails and snowshoe hares, although they'll also eat any rodents or birds they can. They are primarily nocturnal, mate in the spring, and average 2 to 4 offspring, which are generally born in April or May.



łćim(qłćé) (dark phase) (Salish)
 łpa(pqłćé) (white phase) (Salish)
 ʷikatitaʃ (Kootenai)



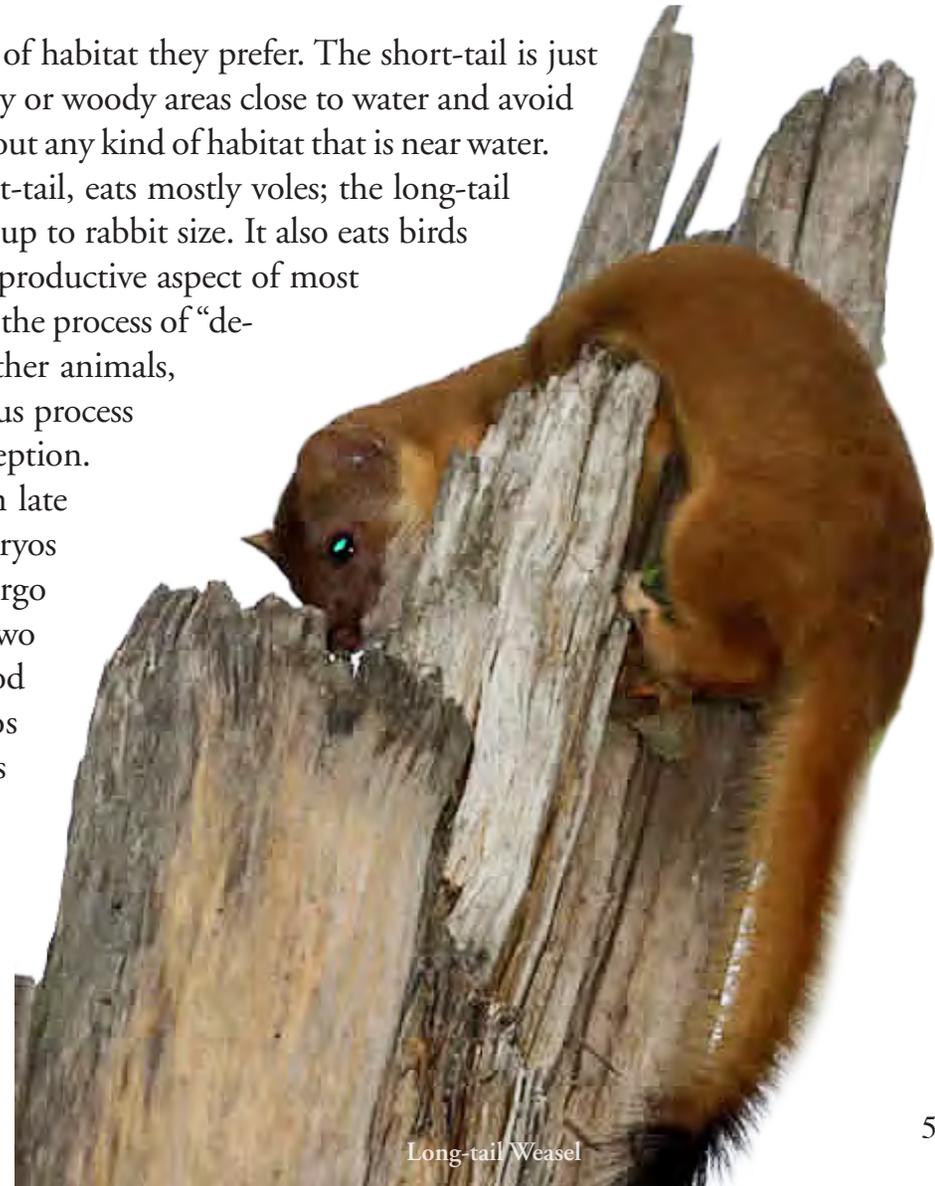
Short-tail Weasel and Long-tail Weasel *Mustela erminea* and *Mustela frenata*

These two species of weasel differ in size but they overlap in the kinds of habitat they prefer. The short-tail is just 7 to 13 inches long; the long-tail 11 to 16.5 inches. Both inhabit brushy or woody areas close to water and avoid dense forests, although the long-tail can be seen in just about any kind of habitat that is near water.

The smaller of the two, the short-tail, eats mostly voles; the long-tail eats any kind of small mammal up to rabbit size. It also eats birds and other animals. A unique reproductive aspect of most members of the weasel family is the process of “delayed implantation”. In most other animals, fetal development is a continuous process which begins at the time of conception. Weasels mate in the period from late summer to mid-winter. The embryos resulting from fertilization undergo an initial development of about two weeks. Then, a long, dormant period occurs during which the embryos remain free in the uterus. After this delay, the embryo becomes implanted in the uterus and development resumes. The young are born in the spring about a month after the delayed implementation occurs.



Short-tail Weasel



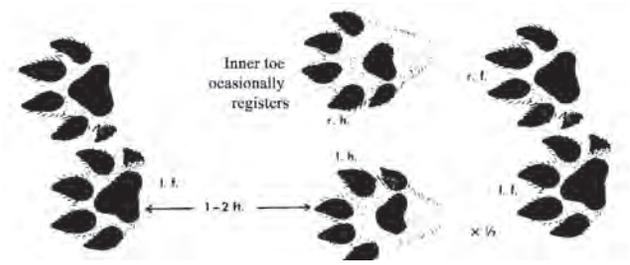
Long-tail Weasel

čx̌lé (Salish)

ʔinuya (Kootenai)

Mink

Mustela vison



Mink, semi-aquatic foragers, are usually found along streams and lakes, often where you find muskrats. They eat small mammals, birds, eggs, frogs, fish, and in the summer, waterfowl. They have no trouble killing prey larger than they are. They mate from January to March and average four to five offspring per litter. Mink mate from January to March. They have a 40- to 79-day gestation period, and like weasels, have delayed implantation. The young are born during April or May. They average four or five babies per litter. By 8 weeks of age, the young may accompany their mother on hunting trips.



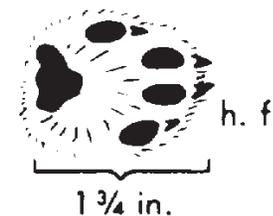
x̣^wa x̣^waá (Salish)

na'kyu (Kootenai)

Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes

Foxes use a range of habitats and are often found around agricultural land. They prefer a mix of forest and open country near water. They are opportunistic, mostly nocturnal predators that hunt by smell and eat small mammals, birds, and eggs. Red fox breed during winter (in western Montana, they breed from February 8 to March 8, but mostly in February). They have a 51- to 53-day gestation period, giving birth from late March to April. Their litter sizes average four to eight.



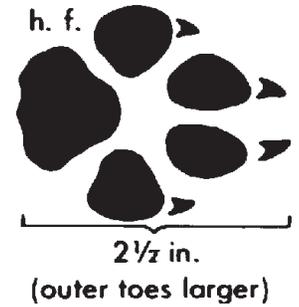
snčlé (Salish)

skinkuꞤ (Kootenai)

Coyote

Canis latrans

Coyotes utilize almost any kind of habitat where prey is readily available, although they prefer prairies, open woodlands, brushy or boulder-strewn areas. They eat mammals, fawns, plants, birds, and invertebrates. During winter, coyotes often prey on deer. They are mostly nocturnal. Coyotes breed from January to March. They have a 60-to-63-day gestation, giving birth from March to May. Mated pairs usually produce pups each year; both adults help with the care of the young. Typically coyotes have four to seven pups.



mhúye? (Salish)

namqatku (Kootenai)

Raccoon

Procyon lotor

Raccoons live in stream and lake borders near woodlands or rocky cliffs. They are most abundant in riparian and wetland habitats. Raccoons are mostly nocturnal and very intelligent. They breed during February and March and their two to four young are born in April or May.



ᵿstéyye (Salish)

xaxas (Kootenai)

Striped Skunk

Mustela mephitis

Skunks live in a variety of habitats, including semi-open country, mixed woods, brushlands, and open prairie. They are most abundant in agricultural areas. They eat mice, insects, eggs, berries, and carrion. In winter, when food is scarce, skunks spend extended periods in their dens, although they do not hibernate. They mate from February to April and bear young from May to June. Five to six kittens is the usual litter size.



ččl^w (Salish)

hanqu (Kootenai)

Muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

Musk rats are really large voles adapted to aquatic conditions. Their name comes from the musky secretions that come from their perineal glands. They are the most widespread of North American microtine (a subfamily of mice). They live in marshes, at the edges of ponds, lakes, streams, and rivers and in thick stands of cattails and rushes. Water has to be deep enough or moving fast enough to prevent freezing. They are primarily herbivorous and eat almost any vegetable matter—shoots, roots, bulbs, and leaves of aquatic plants. They build dome-shaped houses. They breed from March to October with March to June being the peak period. Five or six young are born after a 22- to 30-day gestation. They may have two or three litters per year.



sqlew (general term) (Salish)
sina (Kootenai)

Beaver

Castor canadensis

Beavers occupy a variety of habitats. Though native to the river, now, because of Kerr Dam, they are contributing to the shift in river vegetation away from the natural cottonwood gallery and mixed conifer-deciduous forests to conifer dominated forests. Beavers are strict herbivores. Willows, aspen, cottonwood, and alder are important foods. They breed from January to March and have one litter of two to four after a 105- to 107-day gestation period (which means they generally give birth from March to May). Two-year-olds are eventually driven from or leave the parental home to start life on their own.

4 in. ±
between
tracks.

3-6 in.



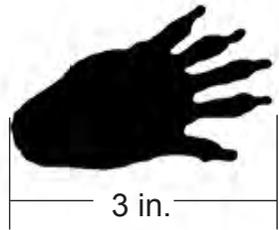
sk^wil (general term) (Salish)

napkaʔ (Kootenai)

Porcupine

Erethizon dorsatum

Porcupine were once common in riparian areas along the river but are now uncommon. They use brushy areas and sagebrush flats bordering riparian areas, with rock fall caves, ledge caves, hollow trees, and brush piles serving as dens. In winter, porcupines eat cambium, phloem, and foliage of woody shrubs and trees, including ponderosa pine. In spring and summer they eat the tender reproducing parts and foliage of aspen, forbs, grasses, sedges and succulent wetland vegetation. Predators along the river corridor include humans, mink, mountain lions, and bobcats. Porcupine are solitary most of year, but may den communally during the winter months.



Itk'wú (Salish)

'aqawxaʔ (Kootenai)

Northern River Otter

Lutra canadensis

River otters are aquatic animals that inhabit streams, rivers, and lake borders. They use bank dens created by beavers; their dens have entrances below the water surface. Their diet is mostly fish, but they eat just about any other aquatic organism. Active day and night, otters are sociable creatures. They probably breed every 2 to 3 years. Breeding dates not known for Montana, but researchers think they breed in early Spring. Like mink and weasels, the river otter's reproductive cycle involves delayed implantation of the fertilized egg (during delayed implan-

tation means development and embryo growth is halted for a while.

This process is not fully understood, but delayed implantation results in a gestation period of 290-380 days. The young are born fur-covered, but blind, they are weaned in approximately 91 days, and they are ready to fend for themselves at eight months of age.



ḥámqə? (Salish)

'aqawxa# (Kootenai)

Black Bear

Ursus americanus

Black bears favor a mosaic of open meadows, swamps, berry patches and forests. During the winter months, they den in dense brushy thickets, dead fall, hollow trees, caves, and underground chambers. They are omnivores and tend to be opportunistic in their feeding habits. Plant foods like berries, roots, succulent greens, and pine nuts make up the major part of their diet. They prefer plants or plant fruits high in sugar but also eat insects, rodents, carrion, and given the opportunity, will kill young deer, elk, and moose. In the middle of winter, while still in the den, females give birth to one to five cubs, though two is the most common. Cubs stay with their mother until their second spring, then disperse before she mates again.

