

DISTRIBUTION OF THE LEAST WEASEL
(MUSTELA NIVALIS) IN ILLINOIS

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ABSTRACT.--Twenty-five unpublished specimens of the least weasel constituting seven new county records are presented. The least weasel is now documented for 20 Illinois counties, and is well distributed in the northern half of the state. Future collecting in the central counties would provide valuable information on the southern limits of this species in Illinois. White or molting specimens of the least weasel were taken in Winnebago, Carroll, Knox, Livingston, and Champaign counties.

INTRODUCTION

The first documented specimen of the least weasel (Mustela nivalis) from Illinois was captured on 3 February 1925 in a house in Highland Park, Lake County (Gregory and Sandborn 1929). This specimen was reportedly mounted and displayed in the Elm Place Grammar School in Highland Park. The second and third Illinois specimens were also recorded by Gregory and Sandborn

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(1929). The second specimen was taken on 30 September 1927 in a house in Northfield Township, Cook County. The skull of this specimen was given to the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH), Chicago. The third specimen was trapped by L. J. de Woody near Beach, Lake County. This specimen was also given to the FMNH. Mr. de Woody reported that he captured the specimen on 10 January 1928 in a steel trap set for mink. He also stated that he caught five other least weasels during that winter.

The data published since 1929 were scattered and not readily available until Warnock and Warnock (1973) reviewed the recent literature on the southward range extension of the least weasel in central and eastern United States. Since this review several new Illinois records have been published and a number of unreported specimens have been located. Figure 1 shows the present distribution of the least weasel in Illinois based on literature records and specimens the authors have seen.

DISCUSSION

Necker and Hatfield (1941) reported the least weasel from Lake, Cook, McHenry, and Lee counties. The Lee County specimen was taken on 27 July 1939 near Henkel, and is housed in the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS 189) collection. Ten years later, Hall (1951) examined six Illinois specimens of the least weasel in the FMNH collection (Cook Co.: LaGrange, 1; Northfield, 1; Lake Co.: Deerfield, 3; no specific locality, 1). Currently, only two Illinois specimens of the least weasel could be found in the FMNH collection (Lake Co.: Tower Lake, 8 April 1951, FMNH 38033; Deerfield, 23 April 1932, FMNH 77480).

Hoffmeister (1956) reported a least weasel captured in a window-well in a house in Urbana, Champaign County. This specimen was collected on 26 November 1954 and is specimen no. 7358 in the University of Illinois Museum of Natural History (UIMNH) collection. Since this collection four other specimens of the least weasel have been reported from Champaign County (Parmalee and Munyer 1966). Only one (UIMNH 26295) of the four was prepared as a specimen, it was captured on 14 July 1961. In addition to the above-mentioned records seven unpublished Champaign County specimens were located including two in the Illinois State Museum (ISM) mammal collection (Urbana, 2 December 1961, ISM 614480; Urbana, 8 March 1961, ISM 614169, molting specimen; 5 mi. NE of Urbana, 10 March 1951, UIMNH 26260; 1 mi. S. of Urbana, 12 July 1965, UIMNH 32838; Champaign,

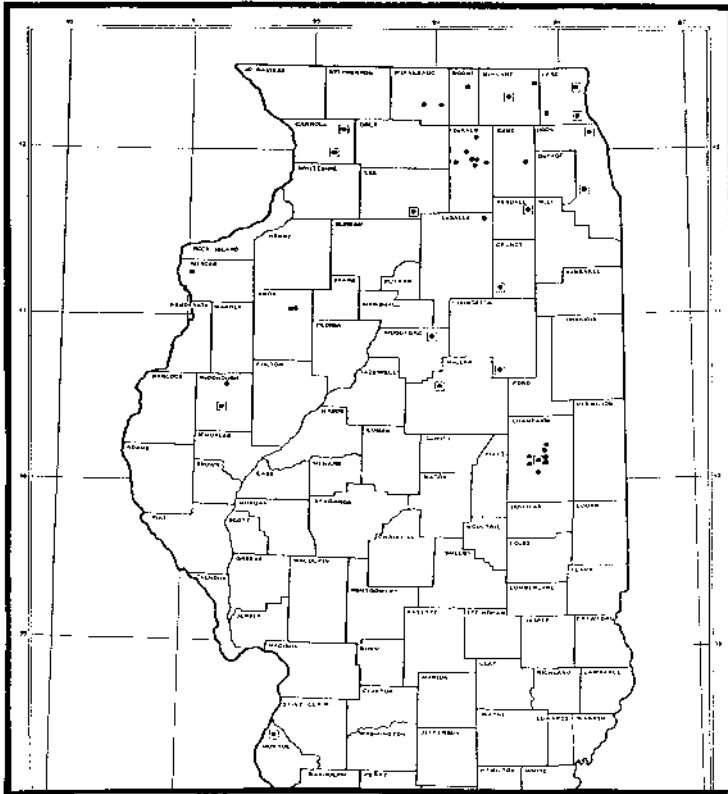


Figure 1. Distribution of the least weasel in Illinois. Rectangles indicate published records, dots represent previously unreported specimens.

1 March 1970, UIMNH 42016; Champaign, 11 September 1973, UIMNH 50113; 4.5 mi. NE of Urbana, 3 November 1976, UIMNH 53929).

Verts (1960) reported the collection of two least weasels from northwestern Illinois. Both specimens were from Carroll County and are housed in the INHS collection. The first specimen was taken on 13 March 1958 in Cherry Grove Township (INHS 634). The second specimen, in white pelage, was taken near Chadwick on 2 December 1959 (uncatalogued).

A lower mandible and skull fragments of a least weasel were recovered in July 1961 from an excavation in a limestone bluff southwest of Columbia, Monroe County (Parmalee and Munyer 1966). This collection is undoubtedly prehistoric, nevertheless it represents the southern most verified collection of the species in Illinois.

The only record for Woodford County is a specimen (ISM 68457) retrieved from the stomach of a wintering short-eared owl (Asio flammeus) collected near Minonk (Munyer 1966, Parmalee and Munyer 1966).

McLean County is represented by four specimens collected near Normal (Schmidt and Lewin 1968). Three of the specimens were trapped on 28 March, 26 May, and 17 July 1967. The fourth, a mummified specimen, was found on 14 September 1967. The three trapped specimens are housed in the mammal collection at Illinois State University (ISU 377, 378, and 379).

Warnock and Warnock (1973) collected a road-killed specimen of the least weasel on 13 March 1971 near Macomb, McDonough County and reported a specimen collected by Calhoun (1971) on 8 March 1969 from Oswego Township in Kendall County. An unpublished specimen from McDonough County was collected on 7 June 1974 one mile west of Walnut Grove Village. All three specimens are in the Western Illinois University (WIU) mammal collection.

Harty and Stains (1975) reported a specimen of the least weasel found dead near Kinsman, Grundy County on 10 November 1973, and a specimen in white pelage collected in Belle Prairie Township, Livingston County on 6 February 1956. The Grundy County specimen was deposited in the Southern Illinois University (SIU) mammal collection at Carbondale (uncatalogued), and the Livingston County specimen is no. 612 in the INHS collection.

The following unpublished specimens establish new county records for the least weasel in Illinois.

Boone County: One specimen was collected on 2 November 1976 three miles northeast of Poplar Grove (SIU uncatalogued).

DeKalb County: Seven specimens were located including three housed in the Northern Illinois University (NIU) mammal collection (0.5 mi. S of Malta, July 1946, UIMNH 963; 5 mi. E of DeKalb, May 1970, NIU 899; DeKalb, Spring 1961, NIU 098; 2 mi. E of Clare, 20 December 1966, NIU 097; DeKalb, no date, INHS 190). One specimen of the least weasel was found in the Russel Forest Preserve Nature Center near Genoa. The specimen was reportedly captured in the preserve. The seventh specimen was collected on 23 August 1974 and is in the personal collection of H. D. Walley.

Kane County: A specimen of the least weasel was collected near St. Charles on 9 June 1970 (ISM 614418).

Knox County: Two specimens of the least weasel were collected four miles south of Victoria at the Knox College Biological Field Station. The first specimen, collected on 14 April 1972, had white flecking around both shoulders. The second specimen was taken on 2 April 1974. These specimens are catalogued K898 and K936 in the Knox College vertebrate collection at Galesburg.

LaSalle County: The only record for LaSalle County was taken five miles south of Sandwich on 10 February 1974 and is in the personal collection of H. D. Walley.

Mercer County: A frozen specimen of the least weasel, in the possession of B. Allen, was collected two miles west and one mile north of Joy. This specimen will be donated to WIU.

Winnebago County: Two specimens of the least weasel were found in the Burpee Museum of Natural History at Rockford. Mr. M. Mahlburg, curator of the museum, stated that one specimen was taken in the late 1950 and the other specimen (white pelage) was taken about 1960.

Since acceptance, an additional McHenry County specimen of the least weasel was collected on 29 May 1978 by C. N. Becker 2 miles north of Spring Grove, and an additional specimen from Carroll County was collected by Ruth Daehler on September 28, 1978. These specimens will be deposited in the ISM.

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