

## Shorter Contributions

*Banisteria*, Number 16, 2000

© 2000 by the Virginia Natural History Society

PREVIOUSLY OVERLOOKED RECORDS OF THE LEAST WEASEL (*MUSTELA NIVALIS*) FROM VIRGINIA.—The least weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) has a Holarctic distribution that extends south in the Appalachians to Tennessee (Tuttle, 1968) and North Carolina (Barkalow, 1967; Lee et al., 1982). Handley (1979, 1991b) identified the subspecies found in Virginia as *Mustela nivalis allegheniensis* Rhoads (see also Sheffield & King, 1994), whereas Linzey (1998) erroneously reported it as *Mustela nivalis rixosa* Bangs, a more northern form. The least weasel is the smallest carnivore in Virginia, attaining a total length of 165–220 mm and a weight of 25–65 g (Linzey, 1998). Handley (1979, 1991a, b) placed this species in the “status undetermined” category for Virginia, noting the need to gather more information on its distribution and natural history in the state.

Knowledge of the distribution of the least weasel in Virginia has accumulated slowly. Patton (1939) first documented *M. nivalis* from the state on the basis of one specimen and a subsequent sighting that he obtained at Blacksburg in Montgomery County. Llewellyn (1942) added two more specimen records from Blacksburg (including one that he captured on the fifth floor of the wildlife building at Virginia Polytechnic Institute!), plus two new records (only one specimen retained) from near Dayton in Rockingham County. Neither Bailey (1946) nor Handley & Patton (1947) provided additional Virginia records for this

species, but Handley (1949) found the skull and skeletal remains of a least weasel in a barn owl (*Tyto alba*) pellet obtained near Blacksburg. Handley (1979) reported that the least weasel was known from eight specimens collected in five Virginia counties (Fauquier, Giles, Montgomery, Roanoke, and Rockingham). A dozen years later, he remarked that there was still only a total of 13 voucher specimens of *M. nivalis* available for the state (Handley, 1991b), with records from seven counties in the Ridge and Valley province (Augusta, Bath, Giles, Montgomery, Roanoke, Rockingham, and Shenandoah) and two Piedmont localities (Appomattox and Fauquier counties). Since 1980, more than 30 least weasels have been captured and released in the Blacksburg area, and a few others have been recorded in Giles County during the past five years (J. A. Cranford, pers. comm.). Linzey (1998) mentioned additional records from Rockbridge (Bridgewater College campus) and Scott (vicinity of Yuma) counties, but did not indicate if the latter record was vouchered. More recently, Bellows et al. (1999) documented this species in Caroline County, the first Coastal Plain record for Virginia.

In the fall of 1997, we learned of two previously unpublished records for *M. nivalis* from the vicinity of Venrick Run at the western base of Sand Mountain in Wythe County (ca. 5 km S of Wytheville). A local landowner reported that his domestic cat(s) had killed two least weasels near his barnyard (elevation ca. 2400 ft/730 m) over a period of several weeks. One specimen was mounted by a taxidermist (Fig. 1) and is currently in the possession of the landowner. The second



Fig. 1. Mounted specimen of *Mustela nivalis* from near Venrick Run, Wythe County, Virginia.

specimen was given to a state game biologist for disposition in the USNM (E. Blankenship, pers. comm.); however, no such specimen exists in that collection (R. D. Fisher, *in litt.*, February 1998) and the current fate of this specimen is unknown to us. The exact dates of the two captures were not recorded, but are thought to have occurred in the 1980s (E. Blankenship, pers. comm.). The Wythe County site is about midway between the previously reported localities of Blacksburg and Yuma in southwestern Virginia.

The USNM contains a partial specimen (#542284) of *M. nivalis* collected by C. E. Tufts in Vienna, Fairfax County, Virginia on 3 May 1981 (R. D. Fisher, pers. comm.); the USNM database indicates that this specimen (not seen by us) lacks a fibula, radius, and all four feet, suggesting that it had been predated before discovery. This represents a previously unpublished county record from the inner Piedmont region of (suburban) northern Virginia. The nearest documented locality for this species is 19 km NW of Glenn Echo, Montgomery County, Maryland (Handley, 1991a).

#### Acknowledgments

We thank Robert D. Fisher for providing data regarding the USNM holdings of *M. nivalis allegheniensis*. Edward Blankenship shared information about the Wythe County records and allowed us to visit his property and photograph the mounted specimen. Funding to conduct field surveys on Sand Mountain was provided by a grant from the Western Virginia Land Trust to the Division of Natural Heritage, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Color slides of the mounted specimen are on file at the Division of Natural Heritage.

#### Literature Cited

- Bailey, J. W. 1946. *The Mammals of Virginia*. Williams Printing Co., Richmond, VA. 416 pp.
- Barkalow, F. S., Jr. 1967. Range extension and notes on the least weasel in North Carolina. *Journal of Mammalogy* 48: 488.
- Bellows, A. S., J. F. Pagels, & J. C. Mitchell. 1999. First record of the least weasel *Mustela nivalis* (Carnivora: Mustelidae), from the Coastal Plain of Virginia. *Northeastern Naturalist* 6: 238-240.
- Handley, C. O., Jr. 1949. Least weasel, prey of barn owl. *Journal of Mammalogy* 30: 431.
- Handley, C. O., Jr. 1979. Least weasel, *Mustela nivalis allegheniensis* Rhoads. Pp. 581-583 *In* D. W. Linzey (ed.), *Endangered and Threatened Plants and Animals of Virginia*. Center for Environmental Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
- Handley, C. O., Jr. 1991a. Mammals. Pp. 539-562 *in* K. Terwilliger (coordinator). *Virginia's Endangered Species: Proceedings of a Symposium*. McDonald and Woodward Publishing Company, Blacksburg, VA.
- Handley, C. O., Jr. 1991b. Least weasel, *Mustela nivalis allegheniensis* Rhoads. Pp. 598-599 *in* K. Terwilliger (coordinator). *Virginia's Endangered Species: Proceedings of a Symposium*. McDonald and Woodward Publishing Company, Blacksburg, VA.
- Handley, C. O., Jr., & C. P. Patton. 1947. *Wild Mammals of Virginia*. Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, Richmond, VA. 220 pp.
- Lee, D. S., J. B. Funderburg, Jr., & M. K. Clark. 1982. A distributional survey of North Carolina mammals. *Occasional Papers of the North Carolina Biological Survey 1982-10*, North Carolina Museum of Natural History, Raleigh. 70 pp.
- Linzey, D. W. 1998. *The Mammals of Virginia*. McDonald and Woodward Publishing Company, Blacksburg, VA. 459 pp.
- Llewellyn, L. M. 1942. Notes on the Alleghenian least weasel in Virginia. *Journal of Mammalogy* 23: 439-441.
- Patton, C. P. 1939. Distribution notes on certain Virginia mammals. *Journal of Mammalogy* 20: 75-77.
- Sheffield, S. R., & C. M. King. 1994. *Mustela nivalis*. *Mammalian Species* 454: 1-10.
- Tuttle, M. D. 1968. First Tennessee record of *Mustela nivalis*. *Journal of Mammalogy* 49: 133.
- Steven M. Roble and Christopher S. Hobson  
Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation  
Division of Natural Heritage  
217 Governor Street  
Richmond, Virginia 23219