Tracking Woozles

"Pooh!" cried Piglet. "Do you think it is another Woozle?"

"No," said Pooh, "because it makes different marks. It is either Two Woozles and one, as it might be, Wizzle, or Two, as it might be, Wizzles and one, if so it is, Woozle. Let us continue to follow them."

—Winnie-the-Pooh, A. A. Milne

Among the most exciting tracks to follow are those of the members of the weasel clan. These energetic mammals travel far, and their high metabolic rate means they are busy seeking fuel at all hours. Five members of the Mustelidae family can be found in our region. They are an interesting group because they demonstrate the way that natural selection has shaped these species, with their similar body plans, to excel and co-exist in our region. This specialization takes place within each species, too, since the males are a size larger than the females.

The smallest, the ermine, Mustela erminea, is indeed a dainty beast. A female ermine is chipmunk-sized, though she will weigh less. A male is similar in length to a red squirrel, but only half the weight. These weasels move comfortably between the worlds above and below the snow as they hunt mice, voles, chipmunks, and other prey. These littlest of our mustelids are brown in the summer and turn white in the winter, with black tail-tips year-round.

Next up in size, the long-tailed weasel, Mustela frenata, also wears white in winter. A female long-tailed weasel could be an inch or two smaller than a large male ermine. The best way to tell them apart is the ermine's short tail. A male long-tailed weasel is about the same length as a gray squirrel (18- 20 inches), but weighs less than half as much. Like the ermine, Long-tailed weasels spend time in tunnels beneath the snow, and hunt mice and voles. They are more likely to seek prey as large snowshoe hare.

The semi-aquatic American mink, Neovison vison, is the next up. The size of a small female will be similar to that of a large long-tailed weasel, 18 inches. The male mink may be up to 27 inches in length. The mink, however is a heftier animal; a large weasel might weigh 12 ounces, while the smallest mink weighs 1.5 pounds. Mink are highly aquatic, and though they frequently hunt in forest habitats, a body of water will be the centerpiece of their range.

With the fisher, Martes pennanti, we move up a full step in size—a female fisher at just over 30 inches is already several inches longer than a male mink. At six pounds, she will weigh almost twice as much as that large mink. A male fisher might be forty inches from nose to tail tip and weigh as much as 12 pounds, and equivalent in weight and length to a typical red fox.

Fishers are at their most acrobatic in the arboreal realm, competing with squirrels for agility in the treetops. They hunt prey as large as raccoons and porcupines.

The northern river otter, Lontra canadensis, and fisher overlap in size and weight, but a male otter, at 48 inches in length and weighing 30 pounds, is the giant of our region's mustelids. Otters fall within the length and weight range of coyotes. The most aquatic of the clan, if you encounter otter tracks away from water, you may be fairly confident that they will be traveling directly to the next body of water on their itinerary.

Biologists speculate that the size difference between males and females has developed for a couple of reasons: to reduce competition by allowing females to fit into smaller spaces in pursuit of smaller prey, while males hunt larger prey; and to allow females to spend fewer calories maintaining their own bodies and more on producing young, and rewarding larger males with more opportunities to mate.

The mustelids' morphology gives them distinctive track patterns. All can move in a bounding gait that leaves trails that are unique to the group; because their hind feet land in the spot just vacated by their front feet, their trails are made up of pairs of prints next to each other, with one slightly ahead of the other. The two small weasels do most of their traveling in this gait. Fisher and otter are more likely to lope as a basic travel gait, unless the snow is deep. This results in tracks arranged groups of three or four prints. The easiest way to recognize otter tracks is their weakness for sliding on their bellies.

March sunshine may offer excellent opportunities to follow tracks in soft snow. If you are lucky enough to come across the tracks of a member of the weasel tribe, I suggest you take Pooh's advice and continue to follow them. The size variation might make it difficult to tell a Wizzle from a Woozle, at least at first, but following mustelid tracks is always and adventure.