



# Wind in the Willows Fact File: Weasel

## In Wind in the Willows:

Crafty, cunning and rather scary.

## In the wild:

### Appearance

The weasel, *Mustela nivalis*, is the smallest species of carnivore in Britain – measuring about 20 centimetres long from nose to tail. They have a long slender body, short tail, short limbs, long neck and a small head giving them a snake-like appearance when moving. They are reddish-brown in colour with a cream belly. These slinky animals are found throughout mainland Britain, living in a variety of habitats ranging from farmland and woodland to moors, marshes and even towns.

### Diet

Weasels eat small rodents such as mice and voles, also rats, moles, frogs, small birds, eggs and occasionally fish. Because weasels aren't much bigger than their prey they can squeeze into the tiny underground tunnels of mice and voles in pursuit of them. They are even known to make dens in the nests of their victims. Weasels hunt mainly at night alone, in pairs or in family parties. The weasel is a relentless killer and will attack animals much larger than itself.

### Behaviour

The weasel is mostly nocturnal, but sometimes active by day. It is a good climber and swimmer. It is courageous and ferocious and will put up a fight if attacked. The weasel's voice is only heard on rare occasions – a guttural hiss when alarmed and a short bark when disturbed.

Weasels breed between March and August. Usually two litters of three to eight young are born after a six-week gestation. They are weaned at around five weeks old and taught to hunt and kill by their mother.

### Dangers

Because they are so small they fall prey to predators such as hawks and owls. Larger predators such as foxes and cats don't like the taste of weasels, and only kill them by mistake.

Humans once were the most important enemy, but it is now realised that the weasel does more good than harm. Weasel population numbers fluctuate depending on the abundance of their primary food source, voles.

