



## Tale of the Longtailed Weasel

(*Mustela frenata*)

by Daniel Perry

Occasionally I get out of the office long enough to keep my birding skills sharp by helping with the bird census for the Refuge. You may have noticed our bird count board that is updated once a week during the winter with the number of sandhills and snow geese. The Refuge counts ducks, geese, shorebirds, and raptors year 'round on a weekly basis.

I haven't been able to get out very much this summer though, and when Jon Morrison asked me to join him to try to help sort out those eclipse plumage summer brown ducks, I jumped at the chance. Summers are also challenging in that the shorebird migration begins in August and there are lots of little brown sandpipers and peeps running around out there.

The great blue herons were still feeding their young in the large dead cottonwood tree and the Swainson's hawks had fledged. One pond had hundreds of birds including black-necked stilts, avocets and long-billed dowitchers not to mention all of those coots. Oops! Here is a tour group that set up 200 brown ducks and they're leaving. Quickly scan them for white speculums (gadwall), large size (mallards) blue in wings (cinnamon or blue-winged teals), or whatever else you can get on them before they get out of sight.

Later, a brown-looking mallard along the roadside appeared to be hurt and couldn't fly. He was kind of running away from us flapping his wings but to no avail. I suddenly remembered that during the summer molt some ducks lose all of their flight feathers at once and can't fly for a few weeks until they grow back in. I realized that this duck wasn't hurt, he just needed to get back into the water because he couldn't fly.

As Jon and I drove up one of the dike roads we saw more action ahead of us in the tire

tracks. I quickly identified the animal as a longtailed weasel. I remember when I saw my first southwest longtailed weasel. I thought I was one of the chosen few to ever see a black-footed ferret. The striking thing about the weasel is the facial mask. I was gently corrected by Peggy Mitchusson and have used her technique several times since with other people. Black-footed ferrets live in prairie dog towns and do not now occur in our area. They are an endangered species. The Peterson's guide to Mammals in North America shows the face of the southwest form of the weasel which is marked similarly to the black-footed ferret's. This is what threw me.

Usually when you see a weasel, you see a flash and it's out of sight. This little guy was unusual in that he was as curious about us as we were of him. He started running toward our truck trying to figure us out. As he came toward us. I put the truck in reverse and he quickly turned and ran up the tire tracks away from us. As I approached him again in the truck, he turned and came toward us again sniffing the air and rising up as if to get a better view. I reversed again with the same result. Eventually, he jumped out of the tire track and I felt it was safe to pass but alas, as I approached where he was, he jumped back into the tire tracks and came toward me again. Again, same result, reverse truck, run away weasel. Finally after a standoff of a few seconds, he gave the right-of-way to the truck and went into the bushes looking for his usual feast of rodents, insects, and birds.

What a pleasant bonus. This was the best look I have had at this animal. I was also awestruck at his curiosity and bravery at standing up to our big truck. I wonder what wonders next week's count will bring.