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Author(s): A. Scott Bellows, John F. Pagels and Joseph C. Mitchell
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FIRST RECORD OF THE LEAST WEASEL, 
*Mustela nivalis* (CARNIVORA: MUSTELIDAE), 
FROM THE COASTAL PLAIN OF VIRGINIA

A. SCOTT BELLOWS 1, JOHN F. PAGELS 1, AND JOSEPH C. MITCHELL 2

ABSTRACT - The first record of the least weasel, *Mustela nivalis*, for the Coastal Plain of Virginia is reported for a site more than 100 km from the nearest Piedmont records. The least weasel in now known in Virginia from seven sites in the mountains, two in the Piedmont, and this Coastal Plain record.

The least weasel, *Mustela nivalis*, has a circumboreal distribution that includes most of northern North America (Sheffield and King 1994). In the eastern United States, the range of the subspecies *M. n. allegheniensis* Rhoads extends down the Appalachians to North Carolina and Tennessee (Sheffield and King 1994). At the time of the second symposium on Virginia's endangered species, *M. nivalis* was known from Virginia on the basis of 13 specimens from two sites in the Upper Piedmont and widely scattered localities in the mountains (Handley 1991:598). This report is on the first known specimen from the Coastal Plain of Virginia.

On 31 March 1997 an adult female *M. nivalis* was collected (Virginia Commonwealth University Mammal Collection number 12617) 4.2 km northeast of Bowling Green, Caroline County (Fig. 1). This site is 108 km southeast of a piedmont record near Rectorstown in Fauquier County, Virginia (Handley 1991:598), and 105 km south of a lower piedmont site in Montgomery County, Maryland, 19 km west of Glen Echo on the north bank of the Potomac River (Handley 1991:555). The site is 15 km east of the Fall Line. The altitude of the study area ranges from 30 to 70 m above sea level, and flat areas are interrupted by rolling and occasional steep hills. The weasel was collected in a 3.8-liter pitfall trap as part of a study of small mammal assemblages at Fort A. P. Hill, a U.S. Army training installation. Sampling in the study was conducted with pitfall arrays (modified after Handley and Varn 1994) and Museum Special mouse traps in 11 habitat types (three sites/habitat type; 33 sites total) that ranged from grassy meadow to mature deciduous forest. Trapping conducted from 1 March 1997 to 20 October 1997 amassed a

1 Department of Biology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2012; 2 Department of Biology, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA 23173.
total of 28,616 trap nights. A trap night represents the amount of time between trap checks, approximately 24 hr in this study.

Habitat at the site where the specimen was captured was forested by a mix of conifer and deciduous species. Trees with a dbh of 4 cm or greater were American holly (Ilex opaca, 18.4%), loblolly pine (Pinus taeda, 15.5%), Virginia pine (P. virginiana, 13.8%), sweetgum (Liquidambar styraciflua, 17.8%) dogwood (Cornus florida, 11.5%), red maple (Acer rubrum, 5.2%) southern red oak (Quercus falcata, 5.2%), white oak (Q. alba, 4.0%), northern red oak (Q. rubra, 3.4%), black cherry (Prunus serotina, 2.9%), sassafras (Sassafras albidum, 1.7%) and black oak (Q. velutina, 0.6%). Canopy openness was 27% and a subcanopy was present at 47% of 200 points on a line intercept (method modified after Canfield 1941). Blueberry (Vaccinium spp.) was present at 38.0% of the points. Downed woody debris consisting of logs and limbs that ranged from 0.5 to 15.5 cm in diameter (mean 5.1 cm) was present at 24% of the points.

Other small mammal species captured at the site for both trap types were Peromyscus leucopus (N=34, 66.7%), Blarina brevicauda (N=6, 11.8%), Sorex longirostris (N=6, 11.8%), Microtus pennsylvanicus (N=1, 2.0%), M. pinetorum (N=1, 2.0%), Glaucomys volans (N=1, 2.0%), and Tamias striatus (N=1, 2.0%). Considering both pitfall traps and snap traps, there were collectively 886 trapnights associated with

Figure 1. Counties with known records (after Handley 1991) of Mustela nivalis in Virginia (circles) and a nearby record in Maryland (square). The Coastal Plain record for Caroline County is indicated with a star. The Fall Line is indicated by line FL. Insert illustrates the North American distribution of M. nivalis (after Sheffield and King, 1994).
the capture site. Sheffield and King (1994) observed that *M. nivalis* is known from very diverse habitat types and that its home range is primarily determined by prey availability, especially the small rodent assemblage. The trapping and habitat analysis suggest the Caroline County site is suited for this species.

It cannot be ascertained whether the least weasel’s presence in Caroline County is a result of recent range expansion, or if this record is the result of trapping an uncommon mammal in an area previously unstudied. A record reported by Choate et al. (1979) for *Mustela n. campestris* in Kansas supports Sheffield and King’s (1994) expectation that discovery of range extensions along the northern and western boundaries may continue.

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