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OUR SMALLEST CARNIVORE.*

ALBERT A. WRIGHT.

On the 23d of January, 1904, there was brought to me a diminutive weasel in full white winter pelage. It was captured alive by Mr. Clarence Metcalf upon his farm four miles south of Oberlin. It was in a corn field and was chased out from one of the shocks of corn, where it may have gone in pursuit of the rodents that habitually pilfer the grain. It was accompanied by a second specimen, of similar size, but of a brown color above, with some white on the under parts. This one escaped and could not be critically examined.

The white one was without any visible spots of brown or black upon it. Even the black tip of the tail which characterizes most weasels, both in their winter and summer pelage, is wanting. A careful examination with a lens, however, will show that there are a few darker hairs present. The vibrissæ and the few long hairs of the eyebrow are of an inconspicuous brown color. The ghost of a spot an eighth of an inch across, consisting of a few submerged brown hairs can be detected upon the crown of the head. At the tip of the tail about ten distinctly black hairs can be counted, concealed by the more abundant white. There is no evidence of a brush of longer hairs at the end of the tail. The

* Read before the Ohio State Academy of Sciences, Nov. 26, 1904.

sex of the specimen is male, as was ascertained at the time it was mounted. It measured just six inches (152 mm.) in length for the head and body; the tail one inch, or, including the longest hairs, an inch and a quarter, making the total length seven and a quarter inches (184 mm.). In size this is the smallest of the weasels, and therefore of the carnivores.

The nomenclature of the weasels has been in great confusion for several reasons. The animals are nowhere very abundant, and the collections have been rather meager and carelessly made. The great disparity in size between the sexes makes the positive determination of the sex an essential matter in order to interpret correctly the measurements. The most thorough revision of the species is that of Mr. Outram Bangs,† published in 1896. Up to that date there were only two species recognized as belonging to our northern Ohio region, namely:

The New York Weasel, *Putorius noveboracensis* Emmons.

Bonaparte's Weasel, *P. cicognani* (Bonaparte).

The New York Weasel has a total length in the male of sixteen inches, and in the female of thirteen inches. Bonaparte's weasel measures eleven inches in the male and nine inches in the female. Both of these species have black tips to their tails both summer and winter. It is clear, therefore, that our specimen can not belong to either of the commonly recognized species.

In the year 1901, Mr. Samuel N. Rhoads published‡ a description of a much smaller species from a few specimens taken in the vicinity of Pittsburgh, Pa., giving it the name of *Putorius allegheniensis*. Our specimen agrees in dimensions with this species, and falls in with two other specific characters which may be mentioned, viz.: (1) the tip of the tail is never black, but of the same color as the rest of the body. (2) the two sexes are essentially of the same size.

Hitherto only seven specimens of this Alleghenian weasel have been brought to the notice of scientific men and placed on record in publications. These were all from Washington and Allegheny counties in Pennsylvania, and Jefferson county, Ohio. Six of these specimens were exhibited together at the February meeting of the Pittsburgh Academy of Science and Art, by Mr. Frederic S. Webster, who gives an account of the meeting in the issue of Science for May 27th last. Our specimen constitutes the eighth and extends the range of the species towards the shores of Lake Erie.

It is hardly possible that this should be so rare a species as the present figures would indicate. Other specimens have doubt-

† A Review of the Weasels of Eastern North America, by Outram Bangs. Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington Vol. X, pp. 1-24, Feb., 1896.

‡ Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila. for 1900. Issued Feb. 7, 1901. Also Rhoads, Mammals of Penn. and New Jersey p. 173. 1903.

less been taken, but in the formerly confused condition of the nomenclature they may have been considered as immature, or as females of Bonaparte's weasel. But since the publications of Bangs and Rhoads there should be no further difficulty in separating them from all other species. Careful collecting, with measurements made in the flesh, the sex determined, and the skulls cleaned and preserved, are necessary in order that the distribution of this species may be correctly determined. The principal object of this notice is to suggest the need and the value of much additional work upon the entire group of weasels.

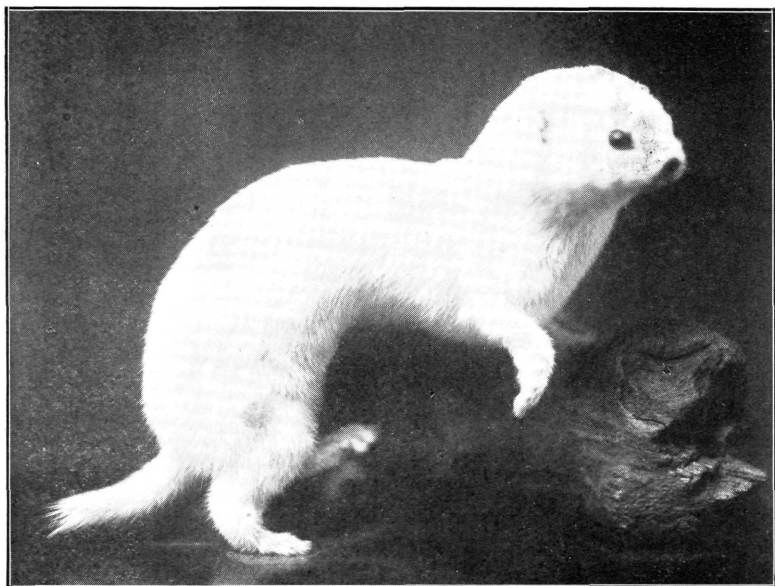


Fig. 1. *Putorius allegheniensis* Rhoads.

It remains to be stated that, as Mr. Rhoads observed when he first described the Pennsylvania specimens, the characters of *P. allegheniensis* agree essentially with those of *P. rixosus* of Bangs, a species whose type locality is Osler, Saskatchewan, and whose distribution is "Arctic and boreal America from Alaska south at least to Saskatchewan and Moose Factory."* The justification for the publication of the species *allegheniensis* must lie wholly in the fact that there is so vast a gap of territory between the Saskatchewan and the Pittsburgh region, crossed by one or two life zones, in which *P. rixosus* is not known to occur. The

* Bangs, loc. cit. p. 21

task before collectors is to show whether this territorial gap cannot be filled in; and if it is filled in, to ascertain whether the southern specimens have even a varietal difference from the northern type *rixosus*. The crowding of the mandibular incisors so that the second one is forced to take a position posterior to the others, which has been noted in some of the southern specimens, "can be found in many examples of any species"* and accordingly cannot be diagnostic of any one. Unless some substantial difference is found, the name *allegheniensis* will ultimately have to retreat, and all the specimens be called *rixosus*.

However, while this task is in progress, we may very properly make the most of this rare and beautiful addition to our local fauna, and let the designation stand as *allegheniensis*.

* Bangs, loc. cit. p. 12. The second lower incisors are so displaced in the Oberlin specimen.

Oberlin, O.
