

Plate LXXIX.



FERRET.

## THE WEASEL\*.

THE weasel is as common in temperate and warm climates †, as it is rare in the northern regions. The ermine, on the contrary, abounds in the north, is seldom met with in temperate climates, and never in warm countries. These animals, therefore, form two distinct species. The common weasel sometimes turns white during the winter, even in our climate. This circumstance might give rise to its being regarded as of the same species with the ermine. This mark is common to both: But there are others in which they differ. The ermine is reddish in summer, and white in winter; but the end of its tail is uniformly black. The end of the weasel's tail is yellow, even when the animal

\* The weasel has small rounded ears; the whole upper part of the body is of a tawny brown colour, and the under part is entirely white. It has a brown spot beneath the corners of the mouth. The length of its body is between six and seven inches, and of the tail two and a half.

In Greek, *Fax*; in Latin, *Mustela*; in Italian, *Deusola*, *Ral-lottola*, *Devola*; in Spanish, *Conidreia*; in German, *Wiesel*; in French, *La Belette*; in English, *Weasel*, *Wiggle*, *Fennari*, *Whitred*. *Mustela* proprie sic dicta; *Göfner. Hist. Quad.* p. 752. *Icn. Quad.* p. 99.

*Mustela vulgaris*; *Ray, Synopf. Quad.* p. 195. *Klein, Quad.* p. 62. *Mustela supra rutila, infra alba*; *Brisson, Regn. Anim.* p. 242. *Mustela nivalis*, pedibus fuscis, corpore albo, caudæ apice vix pilis ullis nigris; *Lin. Syst.* p. 69.

† The weasel is found in Barbary, and is called *Fert-el Steile*; *Shaw's Travels*.

turns white in winter. It is, besides, always of a smaller size, and its tail is much shorter than that of the ermine. The weasel dwells not, like the ermine, in woods and deserts, but near the habitations of men. I have kept both species together; but animals which differ in climate, in constitution, and in disposition, never intermix. It is true, some weasels are larger or smaller than others; but the difference never exceeds an inch in the whole length of the body. But the ermine is two inches longer than the largest weasel. Neither of them can be tamed, but are kept wild in iron cages. Neither of them voluntarily eat honey, nor attack the beehives like the polecat and martin. Thus the ermine is not the savage weasel, nor the *iclis* of Aristotle, which, he says, is easily tamed, and very fond of honey. The weasel and ermine, instead of being easily tamed, are so wild, that they will not eat when any person looks at them: They are in perpetual agitation, always endeavouring to conceal themselves: And, if a man wants to keep them, he must furnish them with a bundle of wool or flax, in which they wrap and hide themselves from the light. Thither they drag every thing they can lay hold of, and never eat but in the night. They allow fresh meat to lie three or four days, and even till it corrupt, before they touch it. They sleep three fourths of the day, and watch their prey during the night. When a weasel gets among the poultry, he attacks not the cocks or old hens,  
but

but singles out the chickens and young birds, whom he kills with a single bite on the head, and then carries off the whole one by one. He likewise breaks the eggs, and sucks them with incredible avidity. In winter, they generally live in granaries and barns, where they often remain during the spring, and bring forth their young among the hay and straw. During this period the female makes war, with more success than the cat, against the rats and mice, who cannot escape her, because she follows them into their holes. She mounts the pigeon-houses, and destroys the pigeons, sparrows, &c. In summer they retire farther from houses, especially into low grounds, about mills, along rivulets, conceal themselves among brush-wood, in order to surprise birds, and often take up their abode in old willows, where the female brings forth her young: She prepares for them a bed of straw, leaves, and other herbage, and litters, in the spring, from three to five. The young, like those of the polecat, pine-weasel, and martin, are brought forth blind; but they very soon acquire growth and strength enough to follow their mother in the chase. The weasels attack serpents, water-rats, moles, field-mice, &c. and, over-running the meadows, they devour quails and partridges, together with their eggs. Their motion consists of unequal and precipitant leaps; and, when they want to mount a tree, they make a sudden bound, by which they are at once ele-

vated several feet high. They leap in the same manner when they attempt to seize a bird.

These animals, as well as the polecat and ferret, have a disagreeable odour, which is stronger in summer than in winter; and, when pursued or irritated, their smell is felt at a considerable distance. They move always with caution and with silence, and never cry, but when they are hurt. Their cry is sharp, rough, and very expressive of resentment. As their own odour is offensive, they seem not to be sensible of a bad smell in other bodies. A peasant in my neighbourhood took three new-littered weasels out of the carcase of a wolf that had been hung on a tree by the hind feet. The wolf was almost entirely putrified, and the female weasel had made a nest of leaves and herbage for her young in the thorax of this putrid carcase.

## S U P P L E M E N T.

THE author here ingenuously quotes a letter he received from the Countess of Noyan, dated at the Castle of Manceliere in Britany, July 20, 1771, in which that Lady assures him, that he had injured the character of the weasel, by alledging that no art could reclaim or render him docile; because she had tried the experiment upon a young weasel taken in her garden,

den, which soon learned to recognise and to lick the hand from which it received its food, and became as familiar, caressing, and frolicksome, as a dog or squirrel.

This fact the author had still farther confirmed by a similar experiment made by M. Giely de Mornas, who trained a young weasel so completely, that the animal followed him wherever he went. The method of taming them is, to stroke them often and gently over the back, and to threaten, and even beat them, when they bite. Their odour is never offensive, but when they are irritated. They are fed with milk, boiled flesh, and water; and unless they be starved, never eat honey, although presented to them.