

## *Nature note: pop goes the weasel*

A small mammal dashed across the path in front of me the other day and instantly disappeared into the ditch. Well, 'dashed' isn't quite right. It *flowed* over the ground in a ripple of movement somewhere between a bound and a slither. Too large for a mouse, too thin and sinuous for a rat. Something lightning fast, with energy to spare and a hint of danger about it. I stood stock still and after a minute or two a small triangular head with black button eyes and little rounded ears popped up from the long grass and inspected me closely. I was clearly neither a threat nor a meal, so with a flick of its tail it vanished again. A weasel.

Weasels are the world's smallest carnivorous mammals, feeding mainly on mice and voles, which they pursue relentlessly down the narrowest of tunnels. In nature, of course, hunters can quickly become the hunted and weasels are themselves preyed upon by cats, foxes, owls and birds of prey. It's a ladder of power, negotiated in violence. The word 'vermin' comes from the Latin word for 'worm', which is at the bottom of this chain, but it expresses the point of view of the top predator in the chain, which is us.

Weasels are often confused with stoats, but are much smaller and lack the stoat's trademark black tip to the tail. They weigh in at just 6 ounces (about the weight of a small banana) and have to eat voraciously just to survive, consuming about a third of their own body weight each day. They have no permanent homes, preferring to lodge in the burrow of whoever they have most recently eaten. They only live two or three years anyway and it's a life of constant hunger, stress and striving.

Most children in towns have never seen a weasel, but they may know of it from the old nursery rhyme, which begins:

*Half a pound of tuppenny rice  
Half a pound of treacle  
That's the way the money  
goes  
Pop! Goes the weasel*



Margaret Holland

*The Weasel*

Great fun, but what on earth does it mean? Is it to do with the habit weasels have of popping up in front of you, like mine did? No, something much more obscure. It seems to date back centuries to a form of Cockney rhyming slang, in which 'weasel and stoat' meant 'coat' and 'pop' meant 'pawn'. Poor people would pawn their coats on a Monday to get the cash to see them through the week, then buy them back at the weekend to have their Sunday best available. A different cycle of need and replenishment.

**Jeremy Mynott**