Common Small Mammals of Northeast Iowa

All mammals give birth to live young (not eggs), they all have hair, and they all produce milk to feed their young. There are many different mammals in Iowa.

Striped Skunk

Has black body fur with 1-2 long white stripes on back and tail. Tail is thick and bushy. A thin white stripe runs down the face and along nose. Has short legs and paws with long, straight claws. Will eat just about anything, including insects, small mammals, birds, plants, and garbage. Will even scratch at honeybee hives, and then eat the guard bees that come out to protect the hive. Known for using scent glands under tail for defense when threatened, and can spray its odor up to 20 feet! Creates a den by burrowing under protected places like logs or buildings.

Least Weasel

Has a thin, long, flexible body, large eyes, short legs, and a short tail with no black on the tip. For camouflage, fur changes color with the season: in summer it's chocolate-brown, in winter it's white. Has white feet year-round. Only six inches long, making it the smallest true carnivore in the world. Eats primarily mice, voles, and other small rodents, but can kill rabbits 5-10 times its own size. Doesn't dig its own den, but nests in abandoned nests of moles or rats. Stays active all winter.

Mink

Chocolate-brown fur with a white chin. Long and flexible body, large, bushy tail, and long claws. Larger than a weasel, weighing about the same as a small cat. Preys on fish, crayfish, frogs, small mammals like rabbits, birds, or eggs. Hunted by great horned owls, bobcat, and foxes. Lives near water, especially riverbanks, lakes, and marshes. Historically, mink fur, which is very dense and slick, has been used in coats and other clothing, and mink are often raised now just for that purpose. Fur does not change color in winter.

Raccoon

Has a black "mask" on a white face, long whiskers, and a long, bushy tail with light and dark rings. Body fur is usually grayish, sometimes brown. A nocturnal animal, so active during the night. Has very sensitive front paws it uses to explore and feel. Can be found nearly everywhere, including forests, empty barns, and even attics. Omnivorous, and will eat fish, eggs, mice, insects, nuts, berries, crops, or even trash. Doesn't hibernate, but will grow a thick coat and spend lots of time sleeping during the winter. Like squirrels, can climb down trees headfirst by rotating its back feet to point backwards.

Foxes: Red and Gray

The red fox has long, soft, rust-colored fur, a white belly and neck, dark legs, and a fluffy tail with a white tip. The gray fox has rust-colored fur only on the legs, ears and neck, and has grizzled gray fur on the back and a black-tipped tail. Both are about the size of a large cat, but the red fox is a bit larger. The gray fox is one of only two species of dogs that can climb trees Foxes are omnivores and feed on a wide variety of foods, including mice, voles, rabbits, birds, and fruits like wild blackberries, raspberries, and grapes.

Red Fox

Gray Fox

Squirrels: Gray and Fox

Gray and fox squirrels have dark gray bodies that camouflage them in woodlands and a white belly. Gray squirrels have large, bushy tails with gray hairs. Fox squirrels have large, bushy tails with orange-tipped hairs, and are the largest squirrel in Iowa. Squirrels have 4 fingers on their front feet and 5 on the back. They hoard food, like seeds, acorns, nuts, corn, and birdseed, in small caches to eat later and can create thousands of caches every season. Like raccoons, they can climb down trees headfirst by rotating their back feet to point backwards.

Gray Squirrel

Fox Squirrel

13-lined Ground Squirrel

A small, brown body with alternating solid or broken white and dark brown lines running down the back. Often found in short grass, golf courses, and roadsides, where they are active during the day, especially when it's warm outside. Eats mostly seeds and insects like caterpillars and grasshoppers. Stands straight up outside of its burrow watching its surroundings, then dives down when it senses danger. Hibernates over the winter, when it will slow its breathing to only once every 5 minutes.

Eastern Chipmunk

Has a reddish-brown back and head and a white stomach. Has light stripes below and above eyes and 2–4 dark and light stripes running down the back. Has a long, bushy, dark tail. Eats seeds, fruits, nuts, plants, insects, and worms. Carries food in cheek pouches, which can hold a lot. Lives in deciduous forests or bushy or rocky areas. Builds its nest underground, usually with multiple tunnels and entrances. Hides its burrow by carrying away the dirt in its cheek pouches, and by disguising the entrance with rocks and leaves.

Woodchuck

Has a thick, heavy body covered with grayish-brown fur. The light gray guard hairs on the top coat of fur give the woodchuck a "frosted" look. Its feet are darker than its body. Has a dark, bushy tail that is relatively short, only about 1/4 of body length. Has short, powerful limbs and thick, curved claws, which make it a very strong digger. Eats mostly grasses, berries, and sometimes crops. Will create a large, intricate den to use for sleeping, raising young, and hibernating over the winter. Dens can be long and deep enough to undermine building foundations. Also known as a groundhog, or Punxsutawney Phil!

Cottontail Rabbit

Has brownish-gray fur throughout the year. Has white fur on the underside of the tail, which looks like a ball of cotton. Ears are no longer than 3 inches. Has a pair of large, chisel-like front teeth and no canine teeth. The front teeth never stop growing, so it gnaws on wood to keep them from getting too long. Eats a variety of plant material. Lives in tall grass, brush piles, bushes, or holes or dens abandoned by other animals. Gives birth to large litters of blind, nearly naked young. Hops and runs in a zigzag pattern to escape predators like foxes, owls, and coyotes.