

HAIDA ERMINE: A NEW SPECIES, BUT WHY WEREN'T ALL CURATORS ON BOARD?

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Introduction

Few naturalists had reported on the fauna of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) when the Reverend John H. Keen (1850–1950) arrived there in 1890 to serve as an Anglican missionary. Armed with a broad interest in natural history and unlimited energy, Keen collected specimens of anthropological objects and animals, from invertebrates to mammals.¹⁻³ Keen had left his native England knowledgeable of the regions in which he would be working, and he was aware that new discoveries were certain to be made on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Indeed, it turned out that some of his specimens represented taxa new to science, and some were named in his honour.^{2,3} Among the “new” mammals was the Haida Ermine (hereafter, Ermine). Keen learned of the Ermine’s presence soon after his arrival in 1890⁴, but had he collected specimens or observed it in the wild, he surely would have commented on its habitat and behaviour, as he did in the accounts of

the other species of mammal recorded in an overlooked, unpublished manuscript prepared in 1897.³ His first of several weasel specimens was not obtained until a few months after that list was prepared.

Deposition of the specimens

Keen knew the Ermine was special, but he also knew that its significance — whether new to science — must be confirmed by a specialist with access to a collection of related species. He needed to find a museum curator with access to such a collection and a willingness to study the specimen. Finding a home for what became the type specimen of this mammal turned out to be straightforward, but attempts to deposit voucher specimens in other museums were not, and they provided a glimpse into the responses of early curators, in British Columbia and beyond, who worked under different constraints of time and resources, including a museum in its infancy.

Keen’s desire was to have his specimens deposited permanently in museums. The Ermines were sent to curators in Washington, D.C. and Victoria, British Columbia. Keen was always anxious to receive news of the

significance of each specimen, whether it was new to science or to the region. Disposition of two of the Ermine was straightforward. Both were sent to Edward A. Preble, an associate of the United States Department of Agriculture, Biological Survey, in Washington, D.C.⁵ Keen began to correspond with Preble shortly before he left the mission at Masset, and continued during the early years of his tenure at Metlakatla on the mainland coast of British Columbia.⁴ In a letter written to Preble dated 5 April 1898, Keen expressed his delight in obtaining a specimen of the Ermine he knew would be of interest to the scientist:⁶

I have not forgotten my promise last summer to send you some skins in return for the small museum traps you kindly gave me at Fort Simpson. But this is the first opportunity I have had of writing, as we have no mail communication during the winter.

I am sorry to say I have been unable to get any woodpeckers’ skins, but I am now sending what I think you will value quite as much — an ermine [Keen’s emphasis] in spirit. It was killed by an Indian on the 18th of last month [March], and is in an interesting stage of change of colour.

As far as I am aware, no ermine from these islands has yet been examined by competent authorities.



FIGURE 1. Examples of Haida Ermine collected several decades after Rev. Keen’s tenure on Haida Gwaii ended. Top, winter pelage (RBCM 10196, female, 1979/1980); bottom, summer pelage (RBCM 21238, 2 July 2008). ©Royal BC Museum/Shane Lightner.

This specimen is therefore worth carefully looking at, and I shall be glad to hear what you make of it.

Preble was indeed interested. This specimen became the type on which Preble based the description of a distinct species of Ermine, *Putorius haidarum*, which he dedicated to the Haida people.⁶ Catalogued in the United States National Museum as USNM 94430, the specimen was taken on 17 March 1898 (not 18 March as Keen had written). Soon merged with the genus *Mustela*⁷, this taxon has since been recognized as a subspecies of the Short-tailed Weasel or Ermine, *M. e. haidarum*.⁸ Initially considered endemic to the Queen Charlotte Islands, results of recent DNA studies revealed that Ermines on Haida Gwaii and islands of the Alexander Archipelago in southeast Alaska are genetically distinct from mainland populations.^{9,10}

Attempts to deposit the other Ermine specimens frustrated Keen, as revealed in letters written to curators at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now Royal British Columbia Museum, RBCM), and to long-time associate and friend, Dr. Charles F. Newcombe, a private collector of natural history and

anthropological objects in Victoria.^{11,12} Although a specimen sent to James Fannin, the Museum's first curator of natural history, in spring 1898, was recorded in the addendum to Fannin's preliminary catalogue of the collections of the Provincial Museum¹³, neither it nor any other Ermine that Keen sent to the Museum was entered into its permanent catalogue, and it was never displayed.

Writing to Newcombe on 15 October 1898 while on furlough in England, Keen announced that the weasel proved to be a new species and, alluding to Fannin's silence on the matter, assumed Newcombe would pass on this information to the curator.¹⁴

I am delighted to be able to tell you that the weasels of the Q.C. Islands, a specimen of which I gave to M[r.]. Fannin last spring, has proved to be a new species.

Mr. Fannin will find the description published in the report of the Biological Society of Washington, Vol. XII, p. 169.

As soon as I get some copies of the paper I will send him one. The new mammal has been called *Putorius haidarum* [underlined to denote italics].

On 18 January 1899, Keen wrote again to Preble, and mentioned the Ermine that was sent to Fannin, but that he had heard nothing.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Keen was "... glad to get [Preble's] printed description of my *Putorius haidarum*, for which I had waited so long. I can now quite understand how the delay occurred."¹⁶ Keen also requested that Preble send a copy of the printed description to Fannin, "... telling him that you send it at my request. I deposited with him a weasel, similar to the one I sent you, for that museum, & I am anxious that he sh[ould] also have the printed description of it." Now stationed permanently on the mainland, Keen wrote again to Preble, on 9 August 1899, stating that, "I shall pay occasional visits to the Queen Charlotte Islands. I hope to cross there this autumn, & shall try, whilst there, to get another specimen or two of the new weasel [Keen's emphasis] you kindly named for me."¹⁶ Although the new species was not named for Keen, Preble expressed his indebtedness to him for sending it.¹⁵ A few years later, Keen sent another weasel to the Biological Survey (USNM 147351), this one in summer pelage, dated May 1905, which he acquired during a visit to Masset.⁴

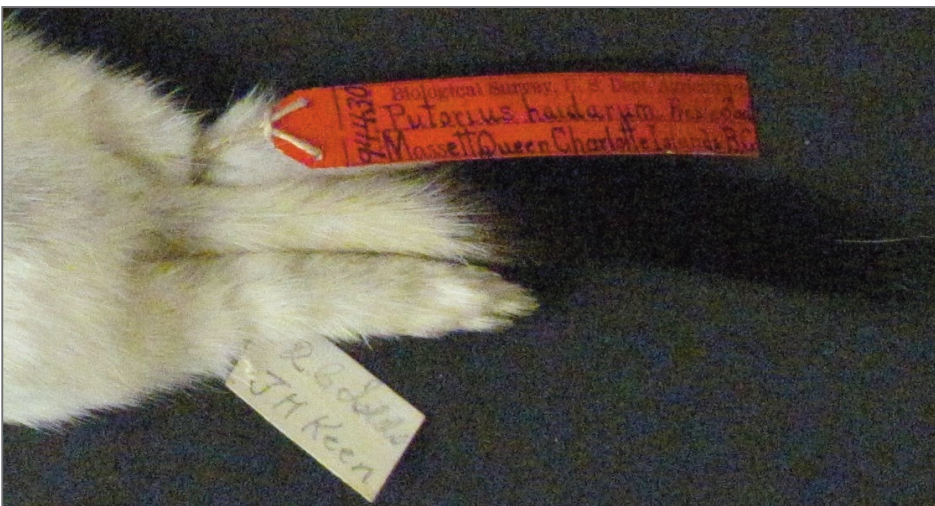


FIGURE 2. Red label denoting the type specimen (USNM 94430) of Ermine (*Putorius haidarum* Preble) collected on the Queen Charlotte Islands by the Rev. John H. Keen, on 17 March 1898. Originally described as a distinct species, the Haida Ermine was merged with *Mustela* and is now considered a subspecies of Ermine, *Mustela erminea haidarum*. This specimen was originally preserved in "spirits", but later was prepared as shown here. Looking closely, a few brown hairs of the summer pelage are visible on the Ermine's head. Courtesy of the United States National Museum.

Fannin's silence continued. In a letter to Newcombe on 5 July 1899, on his return from furlough, Keen wondered why Fannin apparently was not interested in the Ermine specimen, noting that it was the first of this species for the Museum's collection.¹⁷

I paid a hurried visit to the Museum whilst in Victoria, & was disappointed to find that Fannin had not yet set up either of my new mammals – four of which (two mice, bat, & weasel) are now in his hands & have been for about a year. Of course he is busy, but one w[ould] have thought that as new mammals turn up so seldom they w[ould] have received a little more attention.

In a post-script to a letter written to Newcombe on 9 August 1899, Keen expressed his chagrin that he still had not heard from Fannin.¹⁸ He requested Newcombe to “Please persecute Fannin till he has set up my new weasel! I shall have a new mouse to send him shortly.”¹⁸ Did this specimen actually end up in Newcombe's hands? The label of a Haida Ermine catalogued in the American Museum of Natural History (M-19353) bears only Newcombe's name and the date of collection, 1 September 1900, which suggests that Keen had obtained it, but this could not be confirmed from archived records.

On 24 April 1905, Keen sent another Ermine specimen to the Provincial Museum, this one to Francis Kermodé, Fannin's successor as curator of natural history.¹⁹

By this mail I am sending you a weasel. The skin was made & given me by an Indian, so is somewhat rough, but I have no doubt that your skillful hands will be able to make it presentable.

It is a specimen of Putorius haidarum – the new species from the Queen Charlotte Islands described for me years ago by M[r.]. Preble of Washington.

As it is in summer [Keen's emphasis] dress, it will form a nice companion for the same species which you already have in winter dress.

[P.S.] This weasel's distinguishing

feature is the long [Keen's emphasis] black marking on the tail.²⁰

This was the second Ermine specimen Keen sent to the Museum in Victoria and about which he heard nothing. Perhaps naively, he had expected both specimens to be displayed, but neither was and they cannot now be located. However, Keen assumed that Fannin still had this specimen, “... in winter dress”, as stated in his letter to Kermodé, but the provenance of the specimen sent to him remains buried in archived correspondence. Keen speculated later that Fannin's inaction upon receiving mammal specimens may have reflected his primary interest in birds²¹, because he was more forthcoming upon receiving bird specimens.¹

Common or rare?

Although Keen did not collect his first Ermine until late in his tenure on Haida Gwaii, he believed the species was “Common everywhere, but not now hunted for, there being no demand for its skin.”²³ But he never explained what he meant by “common everywhere.” He did note, however, “white skins obtained in winter were formerly much prized, being largely used in making head-dresses and other ornaments for use in the Indian dances.”²³ Their use in ceremonies may have been what led Keen to describe the Ermine as common, assuming the “white skins” were obtained locally, not on the mainland. But Keen was silent on this matter, and the demand for the skins to decorate headdresses and ceremonial clothing had apparently ceased.²²

Numerous authors have commented on the rarity of the Haida Ermine.²³⁻²⁶ Hints of the species' rarity emerged when neither Charles J. Guiguet nor J. Bristol Foster observed or trapped the species during episodes of collecting between 1946 and 1952²⁷, and during eight months of field work throughout the archipelago in the summers of 1960 and 1961.²⁴ Foster noted “The local people observed that ermine were generally very scarce and only one trapper ... claimed that he had recently seen one.” He commented further that “It is difficult to explain the

scarcity of this subspecies over at least the last twenty years, since shoreline food, if taken, would always be available. Small birds also are generally plentiful and, in the last few years, deer mice have been abundant.”²⁴ Cowan's assessment of the status of mammals on Haida Gwaii, led to the conclusion, “... the Haida Weasel is perhaps the rarest of all British Columbia mammals.”²⁴ Knowledge of the Ermine's rarity may have strengthened Keen's efforts to convince museum curators that these specimens were important, not only because the species was new to science.

Epilogue

Keen continued to collect specimens on the mainland through 1915, some of which were new to science, but frustration over the apparent lack of interest and acknowledgement from curators in Victoria continued.¹ Months-long delays between mail deliveries had ended, but postal regulations and the cost of sending specimens, particularly to the United States, remained obstacles.⁴ Keen persevered, however, and under difficult field conditions, and amid the busy schedule of a clergyman, he left a legacy of written notes on the ecology and habitats of several previously unknown species, a prolific correspondence, and specimens deposited in museums in Europe and North America.

Acknowledgements

Anna Chinn (Royal British Columbia Museum) and Eleanor Hoeger (American Museum of Natural History) provided information pertaining to specimens, the latter concerning Newcombe's Ermine specimen from Haida Gwaii. Shane Lighter (Royal British Columbia Museum) and Suzanne Peurach (U.S. National Museum of Natural History) photographed specimens, including the type. Ann ten Cate and Kelly-Ann Turkington made available the Newcombe family papers archived in the Royal British Columbia Museum Archives, and Sheila Norton searched correspondence for information pertaining to Newcombe's specimen.

Margo Hearne (Delkatla Sanctuary Society) responded to inquiries for information. I thank them all.

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POETRY

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