Exotic carnivores in Flanders: area expansion or repeated new input ?

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Since 1998, a volunteer network was installed to collect victims of traffic among native Mustelids Mustelidae all over Flanders. Place and date of dead specimen finds deliver basic elements for population distribution, but autopsy of the dead bodies generates additional information about their population ecology. In particular, the difference between erratic or settled animals is quite essential.
Collecting dead animals also allows a correct determination of the species – even when the body is very massacred or decomposed. E.g., the correct distinction between badgers *Meles meles* and other black-and-white rough-coated animals such as raccoon *Procyon lotor* and raccoon dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides* is not always evident, while American mink *Mustela vison* and polecat *Mustela putorius* can easily be confused. These exotic carnivore species are believed to be on the point of colonizing Flanders for some decades yet. So, collecting dead mustelids was extended to all carnivores from the beginning of the research project. Actually, raccoon, raccoon dog and American mink were indeed found as traffic casualties, beside some unexpected species such as striped skunk *Mephitis mephitis*, south American coati *Nasua nasua* and crab-eating raccoon *Procyon cancrivorus*. For none of those animals however, autopsy revealed indications for reproduction in the wild. All of the specimen were most probably escaped animals in the first generation, mostly at very low numbers. However, raccoon and – surprisingly – also striped skunk can be expected to establish wild populations from repeated escapes.

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