

AMERICAN MINK (*Neogale vison*)



Geographic Range

The American Mink is a semiaquatic species of mustelid native to North America. Mink are found throughout the United States, appearing in parts of every state except Arizona. They are also present in most of Canada, including an introduced population on Newfoundland. Only along the Arctic coast and some offshore islands are they absent.

Physical Description

Mink fur is usually dark brown with white patches on the chin, chest, and throat areas. The fur is soft and thick, with oily guard hairs that waterproof the animal's coat. The body is long and slender with short legs and a pointy, flat face. The toes are partially webbed, showing the mink's semi-aquatic nature. Body length is usually around 2 feet with up to half of this length being the tail. Females, on average, are substantially smaller than males. Adult females weigh between 1.75 lbs to 2.5 lbs, while males range from 2.25 to 3.5 lbs.

Habitat

Although mink are found throughout North America, they tend to frequent forested areas that are in close proximity to water. Streams, ponds, and lakes, with some sort of brushy or rocky cover nearby are considered optimal territory.

Lifespan/Longevity

The maximum lifespan for a mink is usually around 10 years.

Behavior

Mink are primarily solitary animals, with males being particularly intolerant of one another. They mark the boundaries of their home range using musky secretions from enlarged anal glands. They are mostly active at night, especially near dawn and dusk. Mink are also skilled swimmers and climbers. In searching for food, they can swim up to 100 feet underwater and dive to depths of 16 feet. Mink dig their burrows in the banks of rivers, lakes and streams, or they may utilize the old dens of other mammals, such as muskrats. Mink may line the interior of their home with dried grass and leaves, as well as with the fur from past prey.

Communication and Perception

Mink communicate using a variety of cues, including chemical, visual, and auditory signals. They are fairly quiet, but rely heavily on chemical signaling for communicating territorial boundaries and reproductive status. Mink have excellent senses of vision, smell, and hearing.

Diet

The diet of mink varies with the season. During the summer it consists of crayfish and small frogs, along with small mammals such as shrews, rabbits, mice, and muskrats. Fish, ducks and other waterfowl provide additional food choices. In the winter, they primarily prey on mammals.

Predation

Mink have few natural enemies. They are occasionally killed by coyotes, bobcats and other carnivores, but their main threat remains humans. Mink, like most mustelids, are aggressive and fearless predators. They do not hesitate to defend themselves against animals larger than themselves. Mink may be occasionally taken by birds of prey, or young in a nest may be taken by snakes, but they are agile, cryptic in coloration, and secretive.

Ecosystem Roles

Mink are important predators of small mammals throughout their range.

Conservation Status

The main threat towards mink survival is the continued existence of the fur market. Forty-seven states and all Canadian provinces currently conduct limited trapping seasons on mink, with the length of the season varying from area to area. Quotas on catch size have also been set in many places. Both of these tactics allow the limited removal of mink in order that population densities will remain constant.

Another threat includes the destruction of mink habitat. Mink depend heavily on aquatic areas. Creating, enhancing, and maintaining such habitat allows for the continued existence of healthy populations throughout the range of the species.