

Mink Fact Sheet

IDENTIFYING MINK & THEIR PRESENCE

Mink (*Mustela vison*) have dark brown fur and a long tail that becomes progressively darker towards the tip. They also may have white patches on their chest and throat. They weigh 1.5-3.5 pounds and have elongated slender bodies with short, stocky legs. Females are slightly smaller than males. Males grow to be about two feet long (22-28 inches). Evidence that mink may be present in an area include dark brown or black droppings that are 5-6 inches long, roughly cylindrical, with occasional segmentation and bits of fur or bone that are deposited on beaver lodges, rocks, logs and near dens. Burrow holes in streams and riverbanks that have a four-inch diameter opening also are an indication that mink are present. Mink tracks are nearly round with a width of 1.25-1.75 inches for the front feet and 2.25 inches long for the hind feet. The stride length of their tracks is 12-26 inches apart and both hind and forefeet prints almost touch. Skulls from mink have 34 teeth. Mink can emit a strong musky odor with their scent glands, like skunks, but the distance the odor can be detected is more limited.

LIFE HISTORY & FEEDING HABITS

Mink are most active at night, early dawn and late dusk. They are excellent swimmers and spend most of their time hunting in ponds, streams and other wetland areas. They have oily guard hairs that waterproof and protect their coats. Predators such as foxes, bobcats, great horned owls and alligators are not a serious threat to mink populations. Mink may hiss, snarl, screech and/or excrete an odorous fluid from their scent glands when threatened. Mating season for mink occurs around January and March with an average of 3-4 young, called 'kits,' born in late April and May. Adult females can have one litter, ranging from 1-8 kits, each year. Kits are very playful and are weaned 8 - 9 weeks after birth, but stay together as a family group until autumn.

Considered carnivores, mink are 'opportunistic' feeders, meaning they will readily consume a large variety of both aquatic and terrestrial prey, based on availability. They will consume fish, crawfish, insects, frogs, snails, muskrats, rats, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, snakes, young snapping turtles, waterfowl and other birds, bird eggs and in saltwater areas, crabs.

HABITAT AND RANGE

Mink are found in almost all 49 continental states, although they may be extremely sparse or absent in dry areas of CA, NV, UT, NM, west TX and all of AZ. Typically, they occupy various water sources and wetland areas such as rivers, streams, creeks, beaver ponds, lakes and saltwater and freshwater marshes. Home ranges include areas immediately surrounding 1-4 miles of stream length and average about 1.5 miles of stream length. Males tend to occupy larger ranges and have more den sites than females. The availability of dens has been found to limit mink distribution in some regions. While mink can dig their own burrows, they highly prefer to use ready-made den sites such as burrows under tree roots, bridge crossings, rock piles, log jams, ditches, crevices, as well as abandoned beaver dams, muskrat burrows, hollow logs and holes in streams and river banks. Food and den availability

can readily affect habitat selection by season. In Georgia, mink most commonly are found in the Piedmont, Ridge and Valley, Blue Ridge Mountains, and Atlantic Coast Regions while absent in much of the Upper and Lower Coastal Plain.

HISTORICAL & CURRENT SIGNIFICANCE

Mink, as well as several other species of furbearers, have an important place in the history of mankind. For thousands of years, furs and furbearer trapping were necessary for human survival and still are in many places around the world. However, uncontrolled use of DDT, PCPs, DDE and other pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s caused widespread pollution throughout America's waterway systems that resulted in extremely low wild mink populations. These low wild populations, combined with the high demand for fur products and its production efficiency led to a high number of mink ranches in the United States (~7,200 ranches according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture).

Because mink habitat is closely associated with aquatic systems and since they are particularly sensitive to pesticides and pollution, mink have and can continue to serve as an 'indicator species' for environmental contamination in watersheds. Modern day furbearer trapping provides ecological, cultural, biological, recreational and economic values for society. Trappers can provide biologists with valuable data to help monitor areas for the presence of environmental contamination, such as mercury. Wetland conservation, like that promoted by waterfowl and wetland conservationists, is currently the most valuable initiative for maintaining healthy mink populations.