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Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



THE MINK



The wild mink is one of the most valuable fur bearing inhabitants here in the upper Midwest. Its fur has been highly prized for centuries because it is almost uniform in color, a deep rich brown except for a small white area under its chin. At one time mink coats and stoles were an expensive status symbol of the rich. Mink collars on coats and fringes on gloves and hats were also common. This fur was so highly valued that mink were domesticated and the occupation of mink ranching was a very profitable business up until the 1960's when it declined. In captivity mink were selectively bred and many different fur colors were obtained such as white, blue, pastel and platinum. The size of the mink ranching industry has dwindled but many trappers still trap wild mink, although their numbers have diminished in the last several decades. At today's prices a very large male mink pelt in prime condition might bring up to 25 dollars while the average price would be between 10 and 15 dollars.

The mink is a member of the weasel family as indicated by the generic name *Mustela*, which in Latin means weasel. Its common name comes from the Swedish word "maenk." The mink, like all members of the weasel family, are very alert and agile hunters. A large male mink may weigh over three pounds and grow to 25 inches in length while the female rarely exceeds 20 inches in length and two pounds in weight. The mink is one of the few mammals where the male becomes substantially larger than the female. They possess another characteristic of weasel family, anal musk glands. During breeding season or periods of anger or excitement, this musk is excreted and many consider it more obnoxious and offensive than the odor of a skunk.

Mink occur in almost all of North America except for the southwest and the tundra of the far north. It is a semi-aquatic mammal and water, either streams

or lakes, is essential for its survival. They exist almost exclusively along the water's edge except for an occasional cross-country excursion from one lake to another. Mink are very inquisitive as they travel along the water's edge, sniffing or crawling into every nook and cranny around. Mink are not commonly seen for they are nocturnal for the most part, feeding and moving about during the night and resting during the day. Their dens are under stumps or logs, in old muskrat lodges, or in holes in the bank.

These animals are solitary except during breeding and the period when the young are being raised. The male may assist in caring for the young. The males have a home range more than five miles in diameter with several temporary dens. He may travel over his entire range every two or three weeks. In comparison, the female has a range of 20 to 40 acres and usually has only one den where she also raises her young. Mink breed in late February to April. They have a highly variable gestation period which ranges from 40 to 75 days. Three to five young are born in May and are very small and helpless. Their eyes open when they are about five weeks old when weaning usually begins. Soon the kits are ready to accompany the mother on hunting trips. The young family remain together until late summer when they each go their separate ways.

The principal food of mink is frogs, mice and small fish but they also eat crayfish, eggs, muskrats, snakes and almost anything they can catch. They are able to move very quickly but depend mostly on their sense of smell, for their eyesight is relatively poor. The mink is one of our most valuable and beautiful animals. If you keep a watchful eye out while fishing or hiking along a lake or stream you may be in for a treat, especially if you are one of the lucky ones to see a mink.



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