



## **Creature Feature: Summer 2010**

By W. Scott Douglas

### **Mink (*Neovison vison*)**



The first time I ever saw a mink, I was kayaking on the Lehigh River near Lehighton. It was sunning itself on a large rock and scrambled out of sight once I got close. I looked back over my shoulder as I passed and saw him peeking out at me from under a rock. Since that time I've seen them around Springtown and even saw one last summer on the coast of Maine. They are fascinating creatures, cautious but curious, and always in a hurry about whatever they are doing. Mink are about the size of a house cat, but more sinuous and lower to the ground. Their pelt is a luxurious brown about an inch to inch and a half long, with a white patch under the chin. The tail is moderately long and bushy. They

can excrete a nasty smelling musk from their anal glands which they do to mark territory or when they are excited or frightened.

Mink are found along streams and rivers and in wetlands all over this part of Pennsylvania, despite the fact that very few people have actually seen them. I know I have seen their tracks much more often than I have seen the animal. They live in burrows dug into the stream bank; either ones they have dug themselves or appropriated muskrat or foxholes. These tunnels are 8 to 12 feet long, have multiple chambers and may have as many as 5 entrances. Mink are tireless and agile hunters, taking prey as large as muskrats, rabbits and ducks, but frogs, fish, birds, crayfish, mussels, turtles, snakes and lizards make up the majority of their diet. They will store food in the den, but are careful to not urinate or defecate in it. They do not hibernate, but forage under the ice in winter. Each mink will take up 1 to 2 square miles of habitat, so there are not very many at any one time in the watershed; if you have one you are indeed lucky. It also means that there is plenty of prey about, so the quality of the water and riparian areas is very good.

The breeding season for mink is late February to early April, with the litters being born in early May. At birth the kits are blind, naked and helpless, but they grow fast. The eyes open approximately 25 days after birth, and they are weaned at 5 to 6 weeks. By 8 weeks the young can capture their own prey. They are fully grown by four months. The young are taken on hunting trips by the parents and are active and playful. The parents sometimes carry the young about by the scruff of the neck (like cats or dogs carry their young). By August, the families disperse. Mink usually live from three to six years in the wild.

