



Creature Feature: Winter 2017

By W. Scott Douglas

American Mink (*Neovison vison*)

Recently, I have heard many reports of large, dark furry animals with bear-like ears coming in close to people's backyards. While many believe that they are seeing Fishers (see a previous creature feature), it may be that at least some of these sightings are of mink. Mink like to live near water; they frequent lakes, ponds, rivers, streams and marshes throughout our area. Most of my sightings have been on a riverbank. Fishers, on the other hand prefer the deep woods. We have many mink in the Watershed, and they are not skittish. I have personally seen quite a few and been able to get quite close. I have yet to see a Fisher.



Mink are small, about the size of a house cat, but very dark brown/black in color, are slender and have short legs. Fishers, by contrast, are twice as big, with a much longer, more luxurious tail. Both run in the classic weasel fashion, undulating along with otter-like grace. While both animals climb trees well, the mink is more likely to seek low shelter, whereas the Fisher is more likely to climb when threatened.

The American mink is the most widely distributed member of the weasel family. It ranges from Alaska and northern Canada down to South America and into Asia. It is actually invasive in Europe where it competes with its European cousins the European mink and Polecat. Much to the distress of many, it is the most commonly raised animal for fur. In its natural habitat, the mink is a voracious predator, catching and eating anything it can from rodents to frogs to birds. They are particularly fond of muskrats. Mink are considered semi-aquatic; they are excellent swimmers and can easily catch fish larger than themselves. Man and canids (foxes, coyotes, wolves and dogs) are their primary predators, but bobcats and owls take some as well. Mink typically live 3-5 years in the wild, but in captivity may live 10 years or longer.



Mink are active all year round, and mating occurs in mid to late winter and early spring. Gestation can take anywhere from 40-75 days, with 3-4 kits being born thereafter. Kits are blind and helpless at birth, but grow quickly. They are weaned at 5 weeks and learn to hunt at 8 weeks. They become sexually mature in time for the next winter's breeding season.

Mink are opportunistic about dens, using hollow logs, rock crevices, old muskrat dens or windfalls, pretty much any sheltered area as long as it is near the water. If necessary, they will dig tunnels, ending in a small chamber lined with feathers and straw. Mink do not call, but make squeaky noises when chasing prey and will scream loudly when threatened. They mark their territory with musk scent from their anal glands and will not hesitate to empty these glands at their enemies, much like a skunk. Mink will stand their ground when cornered, and try to scare you off with a combination of teeth baring and screaming. You would think this would make them hard to care for, but the fact is that they can make suitable pets if handled from an early age.

If you want to see a mink, you need to spend some time in the parts of the watershed where the woods and water intersect. A tree stand would give you the perspective to scout out larger areas, but I like the thrill of coming upon them simply by chance, when cruising a riverbank or kayaking. Keep your eyes peeled, walk quietly, and you will be rewarded.

