

# American Mink

*Mustela vison*



## Other common names

None

## Introduction

The American mink is a member of the weasel family. Mink pelts have been in high demand for centuries, as mink fur coats have long been associated with high social status and wealth. They were originally trapped in the wild, but demand was so high people began farming mink, which has resulted in them being introduced in Europe and South America.

## Physical Description and Anatomy

Like other members of the weasel family, the American mink has a long, thin body, short legs, and a long, bushy tail. It has a flattened head, small round ears, and beady black eyes. Mink feet have five clawed toes that are partially webbed, which aids them in swimming and navigating through the water. Their fur is very soft and lustrous. They have a dense layer of underfur, protected by oily guard hairs that help waterproof the pelt. The fur is dark brown on the back, and lighter on the belly, with a distinctive white patch on the chin. The body of a full grown mink is 18 – 28 inches (45.7 – 71.1 cm) long, and the tail is 6-8 inches (15.2 – 20.3 cm) long. Adults can weigh anywhere from 5 – 56 ounces (0.7 – 1.6 kg). Males may be up to twice as large as females.



Mink skull

## Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Mink are easily confused with other small members of the weasel family. One of the main identifying factors is the white patch of fur on the chin. Mink often travel in a loping gate, which leaves a double print or paired tracks. In snowy conditions, they will slide down hills on their belly, and if snow is deep enough, they will tunnel through it. Slides look similar to those of otters, but mink slides are much narrower. Look for signs of their travel along streams and creeks where they investigate crevices and overhangs that might contain prey. They also have anal scent glands that produce a strong odor, which they use to mark their territory and communicate with other individuals.



American mink tracks.

Front:  $1 \frac{1}{8}$  –  $1 \frac{7}{8}$  inches long by  $\frac{7}{8}$  –  $1 \frac{3}{4}$  inches wide.



Hind:  $1 \frac{3}{16}$  –  $1 \frac{3}{4}$  inches long by  $\frac{15}{16}$  –  $1 \frac{5}{8}$  inches wide.



Mink scat.



American mink pelt.

## Habitat

Mink live in a variety of wetland habitats, including streams, rivers, lakes, fresh and saltwater marshes, and along coastlines. They are usually found in forested areas near bodies of water with rocky cover.

## Behavior and Diet

Mink are generally solitary animals, only associating with other adults during the breeding season in late winter. They are mainly nocturnal carnivores, feeding on small mammals like

muskrats, rabbits, and rodents. They also eat fish, birds and their eggs, amphibians, and a variety of invertebrates like crayfish. They may cache prey in times of plenty.

Mink are very active, curious creatures, and they have a keen sense of smell. They do not hibernate, but they will den up for several days during extreme winter weather. Mink dig burrows, always near water, or use abandoned burrows of other mammals like muskrats. They will also den in hollow logs, brush piles, and abandoned beaver lodges. They are capable climbers and swimmers, and spend much of their time in the water, where they can dive down to 15 feet. On land, they can run up to 8 mph (13 kph).

## Human Interactions

Up until the 1950s, there was a large demand for wild-caught mink to provide pelts for fur coats. At this point, there was an increase in captive production of pelts through ranching of mink to meet the high demand. The increased supply drove down the cost of mink coats and other products, allowing individuals of more moderate means to purchase them.

Wild mink populations were affected by the fluctuations in mink farming and fashion. They are still trapped today, but numbers taken from the wild are managed so they are taken at reasonable rates. Mink ranching continues to provide pelts for mink coats and other products as well.

## Reproduction

American mink breed in late winter and early spring. After a gestation period of about 51 days, females give birth in a den to an average of 4 kits between April and June. Young are born hairless and with their eyes closed. They open their eyes between 3-4 weeks, and they are able to eat meat by 5 weeks, though they continue nursing from the mother. They begin accompanying the female on hunting trips at about 2 months. The young begin dispersing in August and September, and they are sexually mature at 10 months. In the wild, they generally live between 3-6 years, but they are capable of living up to 16 years.

## Fun Facts

American mink can swim 50 feet (15 m) or more under water.

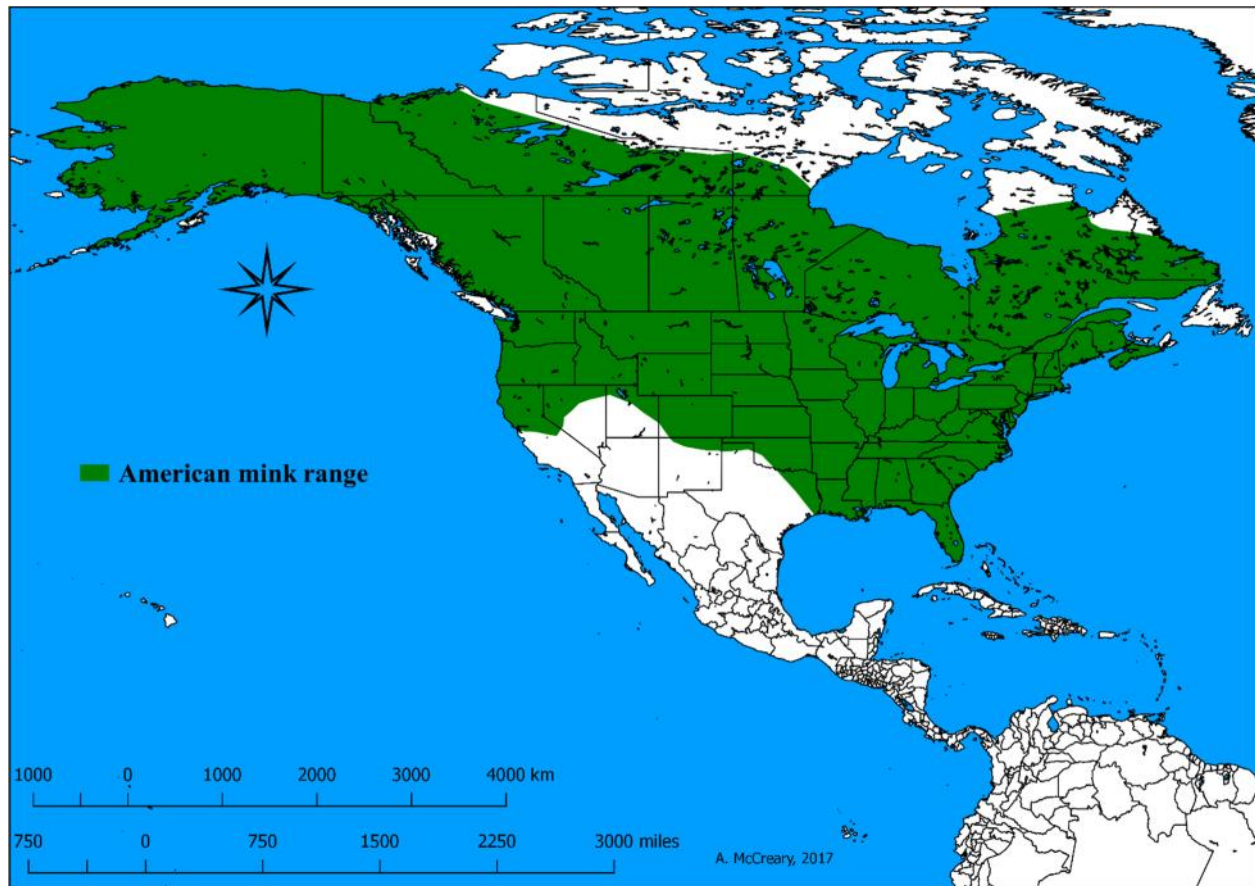
Mink have dense, soft fur that is used to make fur coats and stoles.

## Range and Status

Mink are native to North America, from Alaska across Canada, throughout most of the United States except the southwest. They have been introduced to portions of Europe and Russia through farming operations, where individuals escaped into the wild, as well as intentional introductions.

Mink populations are stable in New York and across much of their range. However, they are at risk of reduced habitat resulting from alteration and development of wetlands. They are also at risk of harm from environmental contaminants, including mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls

(PCBs), and a number of pesticides like DDT, DDE, and dieldrin. These contaminants can result in weight loss as well as reproductive difficulties.



## Management and Research in New York

Mink trapping is permitted in New York with proper permits and restricted to certain seasons. Every year, the DEC conducts surveys of trappers across New York State, recording numbers and locations of mink harvested to estimate wild populations.

## At Dyken Pond

Mink are commonly seen in Otter Cove along the shoreline of Dyken Pond, in all of our wetlands, and along stream corridors.

## Sources

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