



Mink occupy areas near rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and marshes. Often preyed upon by larger predators, including owls, bobcats, fox and coyote, they seek safety and shelter in logs or hollow trees.

The mink has a long, sleek body about 2 feet long. This shape allows it to enter burrows in search of prey, but is also hydrodynamic underwater. As skilled tree climbers, they can jump tree-to-tree as well as descend trunks head first.



The mighty Mink

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TY SMEDES

As a resident of Iowa's wetland and creek-side habitats, this elusive member of the weasel family is a savage little predator—feared by many animals its size or smaller.

It's afternoon in late September, and central Iowa's drought is well into its second year. A quiet pool, carved deep by an adjacent culvert's flow, still holds water. It's a calm day with nary a breeze in the woods, but an odd rustling of leaves catches my attention. A small dark form emerges, and a weasel-like animal quickly scurries to the edge of the pool, bouncing onto a log that protrudes into still waters. It's a little animal, with short dark fur and long slender body. Pausing for a moment, it slips into the depths of the pool

and reappears a few seconds later with a minnow clenched between its teeth. After quickly consuming his catch, the fierce little hunter swiftly returns to the water and reappears with a minnow. Again and again he executes his routine, each time emerging quickly with another small fish. The pool is a honey-hole, teeming with refugees from the drought—including crayfish, frogs, turtles and many species of minnows and larger fish. This little carnivore is an American mink (*Neovison vison*), a savage predator, member of the weasel family and a common Iowa resident.



FISH STICKS: To catch fish, mink are wonderful underwater swimmers using an undulating body motion for propulsion. Capable of diving as deep as 16 feet and swimming underwater up to 35 yards, most fish catches occur after a short chase. Its soft, thick fur is covered with oily guard hairs that make a waterproofed coat.

A Hunter With a Large Catch

It's a warm day in early December, and I'm hunting deer from a neighbor's tree stand, no more than 100 yards from Beaver Creek just south of Granger. It's another one of those quiet days, and in the distance a rustling of leaves and a slight movement catch my attention. It's a mink—and he's struggling mightily—dragging something ever closer to my position. His progress is labored, and as he draws closer, I'm finally able to determine the identity of the animal he is so determined to carry off. It's a catfish, and it's nearly as big as him. The valiant little predator continues towards me, panting heavily, and pausing to catch his breath before trudging another 20 to 30 feet to his next rest stop. As this wildlife spectacle continues to unfold, his route brings him directly beneath me. With mouth agape and tongue hanging out, he again struggles to catch his breath. Continuing past me, he eventually lugs his prey towards a distant embankment, where he most likely has a den.

As I watch the determined little predator drag his prize into the distance, I can only marvel at the strength and tenacity of this feisty little hunter. Today, my camera is at home, but my disappointment is mild. I've been left with memories of this special day, and a special little animal.

Mighty Mustelid

The American mink is a mustelid and belongs to the weasel family. Mustelids include 65 species (and 25 genera) of weasels, badgers, ferrets, fishers, martens, otters, minks, wolverines and more. The earliest mustelids appeared during the early Oligocene Epoch, roughly 35 million years ago. Built much like its larger relative the otter, the mink has a long, sleek body about 2 feet long. It has short, stubby legs, a long neck, small ears and eyes and a long, thick tail. In fact, one third of the mink's length is tail. It has brown to black fur with white on its chin and throat. Its fur is soft, thick and covered with oily guard hairs that make it waterproof. This little mammal is an accomplished swimmer with slightly webbed feet to nab underwater prey.

Find Mink across Iowa from Mighty Rivers to Creeks and Marshes

Mink can be found in most of the United States and Canada, excluding Hawaii, Arizona and parts of several other western states. In Iowa, it makes its home near most any marsh or river, including even the tiniest meandering creeks. I have spotted them bouncing along



the narrow creek that flows beneath our Urbandale driveway, and along the backwaters of Beaver Creek just northwest of Des Moines. They love a marsh environment, and I've been visited by mink in the doorway of my duck blind. They have been spotted crossing from one island to another in the Mississippi River, and popping out of small culverts beneath suburban bike trails. Road-killed mink have even been spotted along the Des Moines freeway, near downtown. A primarily nocturnal animal, they are most active at dawn and dusk to avoid human detection.

All for a Mink-Sized Meal

The mink is a carnivore, and preys upon mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, frogs, crayfish and even muskrats and rabbits as large as itself. It kills prey by biting the neck, and sometimes stockpiles extra food in its den. It occasionally feeds upon carrion. Mink often use empty riverbank dens, abandoned by beaver or muskrat, or a hollow log. Its dens often have more than one entrance and are typically located close to water. It never uses the same den for long. A mink spends a lot of time in or near water, hunting its next meal. It's an excellent swimmer and can dive as deep as 16 feet and swim under water up to 35 yards. It's a skilled tree climber and can jump from tree to tree, as well as descend trees head first. Like the skunk, the mink sprays intruders with a foul-smelling liquid. However, unlike the skunk, the mink can't aim its spray. When a mink is happy, it purrs like a cat. Males are very

Excerpts from the classic nature writing of famed Iowa State University wildlife biology professor Paul L. Errington (1902-1962) in *Of Men and Marshes* published in 1957. Order at iowapress.org or 800-621-2736. 178 pages. \$22

"I like to watch minks as much as any of the marsh dwellers, although opportunities for direct observations of minks are variable.

One may spend day after day for months on a marsh without seeing a mink, then see minks every day for several days. Sights of minks may be only of an animal running along the shore or sticking its head out of a hole in a muskrat lodge. It is more of an event when a mink stands erect on hind feet to look, or maybe to approach out of curiosity, alternatively running back and returning. To that extent, it shows its kinship with the weasels, but I never have known any mink to be quite as curious and bold as the weasels.

The most boldness a free wild mink ever showed me was to snatch from my hands some of its food I was examining at the entrance of its den. In another instance, a screaming mink jumped toward my face as I looked into a hole in the top of a muskrat lodge.

The minks are specialists in seeking and exploiting dead creatures. They are adept at detecting the scent of the dead as it penetrates to the outside from snowdrift or muskrat lodge or burrow. They are also sufficiently good diggers to break through many frozen surfaces and they can eat away the accessible flesh of coots, ducks, and muskrats partly imbedded in ice."





HEAVY MEAL: Mink prey upon muskrats, mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, frogs, crayfish and even rabbits and birds. They are very active—seemingly in perpetual motion. Like the skunk, mink spray aggressors with a foul-smelling liquid. But, unlike skunks, are unable to aim the spray. When content, they purr like a cat. Very territorial, they mark turf with scent, and fight other mink that invade their area.

territorial, marking their home range with scent, and fighting other males that invade their space.

The Making of the Next Generation

Female mink reach sexual maturity at about one year, but males are not mature until around 18 months. Mating occurs January through April, with kits born April through June. The female uses delayed implantation, with fertilized eggs not implanting in the uterus or developing right away. Although embryo development takes just 30 to 32 days, gestation may span 39 to 78 days, becoming shorter during warm weather, with increased



temperatures. Females give birth to a litter of three to six young in a fur-lined nest. Babies are weaned when 5 to 6 weeks old, learn to hunt at about eight weeks and stay with their mother until fall. Their life-span is three to four years in the wild.

Prized for its Luxurious Fur

Mink fur has historically been prized for use in clothing, with fashionable mink coats fetching between \$2,000 to \$7,000. According to DNR records, “The proportion of mink in the total Iowa fur harvest has remained relatively constant since the 1930s. Mink harvests reached a high of 60,397 during the 1946-47 season as a result of a sudden increase in value from the previous season (\$6.75 to \$28.16 per pelt). During World War II, European demand for furs collapsed, and within two seasons, Iowa mink harvests fell dramatically to 16,571. Mink harvests

stabilized in the early 1950s and averaged around 16,000 through the next four decades. Since the mid-1990s, harvests have remained below the long-term average. Harvests in the early and mid-2000s showed steady decline, although the 2010-11 harvest topped the five- and 10-year averages at 11,262.”

The 2012-13 mink harvest was just 7,609, a significant decrease from the previous season despite nearly identical season dates. “Dry weather conditions were likely the main reason for the recent decline in the mink harvest,” says DNR furbearer biologist Vince Evelsizer. The average mink pelt price in Iowa was \$15.91 (\$9.20-29.00), which was higher than the 2011-12 price (\$12.62).

Mink hunting and trapping have been somewhat replaced by mink farming, although “the pulse of mink farming in Iowa has greatly subsided,” says Evelsizer.

Surviving Disease, Flood and Drought in Today's Wild Weather

As a smaller predator, mink occasionally become prey for owls, bobcats, fox and coyote. According to Evelsizer, “CRP habitat helped mink a lot. Conversely, recent reductions in CRP acreage have hurt mink populations in Iowa. There was a pulse of mink ranching in Iowa’s past, although there aren’t many mink farms left today. Aleutian disease is also a concern.” First recognized in ranch-raised mink in 1956, the disease came by its name because it was initially found in mink with the Aleutian coat color gene, having a gun-metal grey pelt. It was assumed that the disease was a result of poor genetics, but was later found mink with other coat color variations were also susceptible to the disease—despite a lower mortality compared with Aleutian mink.

Recent research shows domestic mink escaped from mink farms that have hybridized with wild mink, can potentially spread the disease to wild mink populations. The disease reduces fitness in wild mink by reducing the productivity of adult females and survivorship of juveniles and adults. Extreme weather events can also affect populations, and Evelsizer says “a spring flash flood can drown kits caught in a den as waters rise quickly. And drought conditions severely affect and diminish much of their food source, as streams and wetlands dry up. They are well adapted to handle these adversities and have done so for thousands of years, but I think what’s perhaps different now than in the past is that the flashiness and dynamics of our weather and altered landscape increase these kinds of events, which does likely affect their ability to grow their numbers.”

And for the mighty mink, this might be their greatest challenge yet. 🐾



LEFT: Mink dig dens along river banks or use hollow logs or abandoned beaver or muskrat dens. They rarely use the same den for long. Females have litters of three to six kits in fur-lined nests. Kits are weaned at five to six weeks, learn to hunt around eight weeks and stay with their mother until fall. Youngsters take to the water as soon as they begin hunting with their mother.