

Exploring Ohio Wildlife: The Mink

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It is time once again to explore the outdoor features of our great state with another installment of Exploring Ohio Wildlife. So far, we have examined several animals that call Ohio home such as the coyote, skunk, deer, black bear, and the wild turkey with many more animals left to explore! This installment will feature the American mink which is an animal found in each of Ohio's 88 counties. We will explore some basic facts about the mink, its habitat and behavior, its diet, along with many other features of this animal.

According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), the mink likely had a presence in Ohio well before the state was settled and that due to its preference of streams with wooded banks or vegetation, its highest occurrence of mink will be found in both eastern and southeastern Ohio where these habitats are found. The mink is highly valued by many trappers for the soft fur of this animal and is an animal that easily eludes any predators or trappers as its instinct will be to quickly get away to a secluded place that they can hide in.

The mink is similar in appearance to the weasel or ferret as defined by their long, slender body. ODNR writes that the main characteristics that set the mink apart from the weasel and ferret is that it has a larger body and a bushy tail. Mink are further identified by their dark brown fur, short legs, sharp claws, and a flat, pointy face. They have a white patch on their chest and chin in addition to rounded ears and small beady eyes. The male of this species is typically larger than the female with the mink species weighing anywhere from 1.25 to 3 pounds and appearing 1-1.5 feet long. The average life span of the mink is typically between 3-4 years, but it can live as long as 5 years.

For the most part, the mink lives a solitary lifestyle. Males of this species have been documented to be intolerant of one another when it comes to interaction and quite possessive of their territory according to New Hampshire PBS. Males will fight with one another when one mink invades the territory of another which is commonly marked by a unique scent. Mink are typically found near forested areas with any kind of water source such as a stream, lake, or pond to which the mink will spend a large amount of time in as it hunts for food. In addition to their aggressive nature, the mink can also defend itself by spraying an unpleasant smelling liquid much like the skunk, although it is not nearly as accurate in spraying as the skunk, according to New Hampshire PBS.

Minks begin their mating season in January which continues through April. Female minks will typically have between three to six offspring per litter on average. Female mink will make themselves a burrow along the bank of most streams or lake during their gestation period. According to ODNR, young mink are born with closed eyes which are not opened until they reach five weeks of age and that it is the responsibility of the female mink to care for the young until they reach an age of five months. By the age of five months, the mink is considered to be fully grown.

How can one tell the mood of a mink? If the mink is content and happy, it will make a purring sound like a cat. Should the mink be angered or threatened, it will make more of a screech, hiss, snarl, or barking sound. Minks are a nocturnal animal, usually at dawn or dusk. The mink is classified as a carnivore type of consumer which means that they will only have meat included in their diet. Typical foods of the mink include rabbits, mice, snakes, frogs, fish, or chipmunks. They have been known to store extra food in their den which is usually dug on the river bank, abandoned beaver dam, or hollow log.

One question that gets asked is the status of the mink population. Habitat destruction is one thing that has hurt the mink population. According to the University of Michigan, wetlands are shrinking in size which is taking away one habitat that mink depend on. Restoration and enhancement of wetland areas is one thing that can be done to ensure a healthy population of mink. Concerns also arise with trapping mink for their valuable fur. The University of Michigan writes that several states in the U.S and several Canadian provinces have set limits on trapping seasons to ensure a healthy population.

Stay tuned for the next installment of our Ohio Wildlife series where we will explore more amazing animals that are found in our great state.