

Species Factsheet: American mink (*Neovison vison*)



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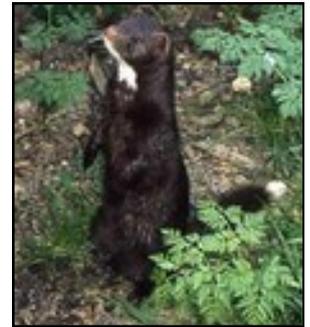
Quick Facts

Recognition: Usually dark brown fur, looking black when wet. Small, variable white patches on chin, throat, chest and groin, more evident on a carcass. Short fluffy tail. Similar size to ferret or polecat.

Size: Average 56cm head & body, tail 29cm.

Weight: Kittens 100—160g at birth. Adult males 5kg & females 4kg.

Life Span: Average 10—12 years in the wild.



Distribution & Habitat

Mink are found throughout Great Britain and Ireland. They are an invasive non-native species, originally brought to fur farms from their native North America and subsequently escaping or being misguidedly released. Mink are essentially amphibious, and are typically found along rivers and coastal areas.

General Ecology

Behaviour

The mink's success is in part a result of its ability to exploit a very wide range of prey, and especially to take advantage of any species that is locally or seasonally abundant. Mink are strictly territorial, males occupying exclusive ranges of 1-6 km in length. Females have smaller territories within or overlapped by those of males. They use their scats to mark the boundaries of their territory, and the neighbourhood of their den, which is usually within 10 m of the water.

Diet and Feeding

Mink eat a wide range of mammals, birds and fish, typically about a third of the diet coming from each; in some areas they also eat invertebrates, such as crabs and crayfish.

Reproduction

The female has just one litter a year, and young mink are born blind and hairless, in litters of 4-6, in May. They begin to take meat from 5-6 weeks, and reach adult size by the autumn. They can breed at one year old.

Pest Control

In the early years of its establishment in Britain and Ireland, mink appeared to do little serious damage, despite much concern about their potential impact. However, at least two serious impacts have been recorded. Some seabird colonies on offshore islands within the swimming range of mink have suffered severe losses of both adult and young birds. In some cases, birds have moved to other, more remote, islands, but, for instance, black guillemots, which nest sparsely in scree slopes, seem to be very vulnerable. Water voles, confined to a strip of riverside habitat, have proved to be very vulnerable, and their population plummeted in the 1990s.

As a consequence, serious attempts have been made to remove mink from river systems where water voles might be favoured, and from offshore islands, especially the Outer Hebrides, where ground-nesting birds should be abundant (in the absence of all the usual terrestrial predators). Effective control is based on the use of mink rafts; these have clay floors, enclosed in a tunnel, which reveal when mink are present; the clay tray can then be supplemented by a trap, and any mink caught can be shot. In the Outer Hebrides, a cage-trapping campaign has already eliminated them from North Uist.