

# Conservation Corner

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As we were driving to church last Sunday, an animal quickly crossed the road a short distance in front of the car. My first thought was a 13-lined ground squirrel, but it was too big. My second thought was a squirrel, but it was too dark. Its bounding gait soon gave me my third and correct thought and this week's mammal friend, the American mink. Did you know the word mink comes from the Swedish word *meank*?



American minks may appear cute and cuddly, even purring like cats when content, but they are actually savage predators. The American mink, *Neovision vision*, is a member of the Mustelidae family that first appeared in the fossil record 35 million years ago. Except for the far southwestern states, American mink are found across Canada and the United States. Other common mustelids include weasels, badgers, ferrets, fishers, martens, minks, and wolverines. Here in Iowa, American mink may be found near any marsh or river including the smallest creeks and, as was the case last Sunday, drainage ditches.

The American mink may be identified by its long, sleek body, short stubby legs, long neck, small ears and eyes, and long, thick tail as well as its brown to black coloring with a patch of white under its chin and throat. In the wild, the mink's sleek body shape is perfect for entering burrows in search of prey and for swimming underwater. Also useful in the water are its webbed feet and waterproof coat. Using an undulating body motion for propulsion, minks can dive up to 16 feet deep and swim up to 35 yards underwater. Did you know minks are also skilled tree climbers? They're especially good at jumping from tree to tree as well as running down the trunks head first.

American mink are semi-aquatic carnivores. As solitary and nocturnal hunters, mink prey upon fish, frogs, crayfish, muskrats, snakes, mice, chipmunks, and rabbits, one of their favorites. They kill prey by biting its neck, may stockpile extra food, and will feed on carrion if necessary. Their natural predators include great horned owls, bobcats, and foxes. Like many mustelids, minks are very territorial and mark their home range and spray intruders with a foul-smelling liquid.

Minks have just one litter per season, giving birth to 3 – 6 kits in a fur-lined nest. Minks also practice delayed implantation of fertilized eggs. So while the embryo develops in just 30-32 days, gestation may span 39 to 78 days.

Here at Conservation, we have a mink stole and coat, fashion and status symbols of days gone by. Minks are still harvested or raised for their furs today.

On May 4, Linda Anderson of Palmer helped rescue a bobcat, one of the mink's predators, that was lying injured alongside the highway east of Manson. Hopefully the bobcat will recover and be released back into its natural habitat.

I'll close with this caution: Stay alert while driving—you never know what will cross the road here in wild Iowa!

