

Mink

Mink (*Mustela vison*) found in Britain are descendants of animals that originally escaped from fur farms. The species is native to North America; however, following successful breeding in the wild, mink are now established throughout England and Wales. Control is often necessary because of the damage that they can cause to wildlife, fisheries and game and domestic birds.

Description

Most feral mink are dark brown with a white chin patch but other colour forms, from white to almost black, may also be found. In size and shape, they resemble ferrets.

Adult males average 1.2kg (2½ lbs.) in weight and are about 600mm (24") from the nose to the tip of the tail. Females are only half this weight and about 500mm (20") in length.



Biology

Mink are mainly nocturnal but individuals are sometimes active during the day, particularly in very

cold weather. They usually live near water and they prefer places with dense bankside vegetation and numerous old trees, which provide den sites. An individual will have several dens in its territory; these can be in holes in trees, in rabbit burrows or in gaps in rock or walls. Mink swim well but may move away from water to forage, and they can climb trees easily. An established adult male's territory is usually around 2.4km (1½ miles) of waterway, while a female uses slightly less.

Mink take a wide range of prey including fish, birds and mammals.

- Fish are usually an important part of the diet; both game and coarse species are eaten.
- Birds are taken at all times of the year; young birds and those on the nest are particularly vulnerable. Waterfowl such as ducks, moorhens and coot are taken most frequently, although mink living near the coast will feed on seabirds and waders.
- Rabbits are important prey. Where rabbits are scarce, voles and rats may be the most common mammals eaten.

Mating takes place between late February and the end of March. The young are born in late April or May and are weaned at eight weeks. They stay with their mother

until late summer when the family gradually disperses; individuals may then become solitary. Young mink can travel up to about 50km (30 miles) during the autumn and winter before settling in a new location.

Detection and damage

The effect of mink on local wildlife can be significant. Attacks on stocks of game and ornamental birds or fish can be a problem too. Mink are rarely seen and a decrease in the local waterfowl population, or the killing of ornamental ducks, may be the first indication of their presence.

If mink are suspected of killing an animal, the corpse can provide useful clues:

- Fish are normally killed by biting the backbone between the head and the dorsal fin.
- Mammals and birds are killed by a bite to the neck, usually near the base of the skull.
- In a fresh kill, it is sometimes possible to see the punctures, about 8mm (0.3 inches) apart, made by the mink's canine teeth.

Droppings are a good indication of the presence of mink. They can be firm or shapeless, varying from dark and tar-like to light brown, depending on what has been eaten. When firm, they are dark and sausage-shaped, twisted along the length and pointed at the ends. They are usually 60-90mm (2½"-3½") long and 9mm (0.3") in diameter, and they often contain fur, feathers and fish scales. Mink dens can sometimes be located in warm weather by the smell from the faeces, decomposing animal remains and the mink's strong scent.

Footprints show the marks made by five claws but the complete print is often only visible when made in soft mud. The tracks are smaller than those of an otter and larger than those of a stoat. However, mink and polecat prints are almost indistinguishable.

Prevention of damage

Animals vulnerable to predation by mink can be protected by fencing. However, the proofing of pens and runs needs to be undertaken carefully as mink are good climbers and can squeeze through small gaps. The fence should be made of netting with a maximum mesh diameter of 26mm (1") and it should be at least 1.2m (4') high. The base of the fence should be buried 300mm (1') deep and turned outwards at the bottom. A baffle of sheet metal at least 300mm (1') deep attached along the top of the fence will stop mink climbing over. Fences should be maintained and kept clear of vegetation.

Control

Trapping

Trapping of mink is most effective during the mating season (February - March) and when the young are dispersing (August - November). Both cage and spring traps can be used to catch mink. It is important to choose the trap site carefully. One good position is near the water where a feature such as a fallen tree or large stone directs the mink towards the trap. Natural holes and tunnels also make useful trap positions as these tend to be investigated by mink. Sites under bridges and at junctions of streams are particularly suitable.

Once a good site has been found, a number of mink may be caught there over a period.

Care should be taken to avoid harming protected species such as otters and polecats. It is strongly recommended that only cage traps be employed in areas where these species are present. Traps should not be sited in holes, pipes or other natural features if it is known or suspected that otters are using them.

Traps should be checked regularly and any non-target species released. Traps should be sensibly sited and securely anchored so that they cannot fall into water. Measures should be taken to prevent captured animals being exposed to adverse weather conditions.

Cage Traps

Mink are best caught using cage traps. These are usually made of 14 gauge weldmesh and typically measure 600 x 180 x 180mm (24" x 7" x 7"). They are fitted with a door that closes when a treadle in the floor is depressed, and the mink is caught unharmed.

Agricultural merchants and suppliers of game rearing equipment sell various cage traps which are suitable for trapping mink alive. Traps can be baited with fish, rabbit, pigeon, chicken heads, offal or tinned pet food.

- Traps should be camouflaged to minimise the risk of interference by members of the public, and they should be placed above any possible rise in water level.
- The entrances to cage traps can be restricted to reduce the risk of otters being caught.
- All set traps should be visited at least once a day, preferably in the morning.
- Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is illegal to release a trapped mink, so all mink caught must be killed humanely. This is best done by shooting the mink with a powerful airgun or .410 shotgun whilst it is still in the trap. Mink must not be

drowned and there are no chemicals approved for use as despatch methods.

Spring traps

Only spring traps that have been approved for use against mink under the Spring Trap Approval Order 1995, may be used. These include the Fenn Mk VI (dual purpose), the Springer No 6 Multi-purpose, the BMI Magnum 116 and the Victor Conibear 120-2. They must be set in natural or artificial tunnels, which are, in either case, suitable for the purpose. The Kania 2000 and Payne Mark I may also be used against mink but must be fitted with an artificial tunnel, which is suitable for the purpose. Traps should be visited at least once a day.

Other control methods

Mink can be shot and, in certain circumstances, hunted with dogs, although neither method is as cost effective as trapping. The Hunting Act 2004 prohibits all hunting of wild mammals with dogs in England and Wales, except where it is carried out in accordance with the conditions of the few tightly drawn exemptions intended to allow certain necessary pest control activities to continue. These exemptions, which require the consent of the occupier or owner of the land, include:

- Stalking and flushing out with up to two dogs, provided that the wild mammal is shot as soon as possible after it is flushed from cover;
- Using a single dog under ground to flush out wild mammals in order to protect birds kept for shooting (the “gamekeepers’ exemption”); and
- Using up to two dogs to search for an injured animal, provided that appropriate action is taken to relieve the animal of its suffering as soon as possible after it is found and that it was not deliberately injured in order for it to be hunted under this exemption.

All the specific conditions of each exemption must be complied with if the hunting is to be lawful.

Legal aspects

Orders made under the Destructive Imported Animals Act 1932 make it illegal to keep mink without a licence.

This legislation prescribes the manner in which the animals must be kept and the precautions which must be taken to prevent their escape. Licensees must report any escapes to Defra (for address see under “Further Information”).

The importation of mink is now controlled by The Rabies (Importation of Dogs, Cats and Other Mammals) Order 1974, as amended.

The Hunting Act 2004 makes all hunting with dogs of wild mammals, including mink, illegal, except those limited activities covered by the exemptions in Schedule 1 to the Act, summarised above.

Further information

In England, further advice on dealing with mink problems and licensing, as well as problems caused by other mammals and birds can be obtained by contacting the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Wildlife Management Team at:

Address: Wildlife Administration Unit, Defra, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, BS10 6NJ

Telephone: 0845 601 4523 (local rate)

E-mail: enquiries.southwest@defra.gsi.gov.uk

A range of leaflets on wildlife topics is available online at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates>

The Forestry Commission produces a number of publications and these can be obtained from Publication Section, Forest Research Station, Alice Holt Lodge, Wrecclesham, Farnham, Surrey GU10 4LH (telephone 01420 23337).

The full text of the Hunting Act 2004 can be obtained from The Stationery Office (Tel 0870 6005522) or from the HMSO website: www.legislation.hmsso.gov.uk. In addition, a leaflet about the Act and a short summary of its provisions are available from the Defra website (www.defra.gov.uk) or the Defra publication centre (Tel: 0845 9556000).

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