

American mink *Neovison vison*

“It was an early, overcast morning, and aside from the occasional cyclist there wasn’t too much else moving along the North Branch Trail. We had stopped to take a closer look at some large mussel shells on the river’s edge when we noticed a rustling on the opposite bank. There he sat, brownish-black and skinny staring back at us—a mink! Seconds later the mink ran into the long grasses overhanging the river and out of our sight. The mussel shells were cool, the red-bellied woodpeckers we saw were beautiful, but seeing the mink felt like an extra prize for being in the woods that day.”

The above mink encounter was had by Jen Pagnini, our newsletter illustrator and friend of the river. Inspiration for her nature-based artwork is gained through first-hand experience. Mink are an important part of the native ecosystem in Chicago. A sighting of a top predator like a mink is always memorable. It is a species that needs space if it is to thrive and coexist with humans.

Mink are members of the Mustelid family (which includes weasels, otters, wolverines, martens, badgers and ferrets). The American mink will live in a wide range of habitats and is common throughout the contiguous United States, Alaska, and Canada.

The American mink prefers forested areas near rivers, lakes, and marshes. They are very territorial. Males will fight other minks that invade their territory, which they mark with their scent. They are not fussy over their choice of den, as long as it’s protected and close to water. Mink construct dens with multiple entrances and twisting passages for safety. They sometimes inhabit vacated burrows dug by muskrats, badgers, or skunks.

The American mink is carnivorous, feeding on rodents, fish, crustaceans, amphibians, and even birds. In its natural range, fish are the mink’s primary food source. Mink inhabiting wetlands and marshes will also prey on frogs, tadpoles, and mice.

The mink has a long, sleek body about two feet long. They have short legs, a long neck, small ears and eyes and a long thick tail. In fact, one third of the mink’s length is its tail. They have brownish-black fur with a little patch of white on the chin and throat. Their fur is soft and thick and covered with oily guard hairs that make the mink’s coat very warm and waterproof. Because of these traits, its fur is prized for clothing, more popular than silver fox, sable or marten. The fur trade, of which the mink was a driving force, sped the settlement of the Midwest.

The American mink has slightly webbed feet, making them good swimmers. Mink can swim for up to three hours at a time while hunting. They are formidable predators of muskrats, which they will pursue underwater and even into their own burrows. When on land, they use a bounding gait to run quite quickly. They can run over four mph and can be difficult to catch.

Friends of the Chicago River

