

Mink

Cuddly? No! Friendly? Not at all! A member of the mustelid family, the mink is characterized by its scent glands. The family includes skunks as well as badgers, wolverines, sable, weasels, otters and others. These smallest member of the carnivore group use their scent glands to mark their territory and, in the case of the skunk, for defense. A number of mustelid species, especially mink, are sought for their lustrous fur while many members of the group share a reputation for toughness and a challenging temperament.

The mink is a reclusive, territorial, solitary, opportunistic hunter. He may be nearby, but we don't often see him. Typical of the group, he has a long body, short legs, and an exceptional coat. His short ears are an adaptation to his burrowing behavior. The mink has an excellent sense of smell and teeth that confirm his classification as a "carnivore." Males can be considerably larger than females, attaining a length of 13-1/2" to 21-1/2" as compared to females at 12" to 18". Their weight ranges from 1.1 pounds to 3.3 pounds. Mink have been hunted for their fur for centuries. While their cousin the ermine (stoat) turns light in the winter, the mink's fur gets darker during that season.

The mink is semi-aquatic with partially webbed feet. Its

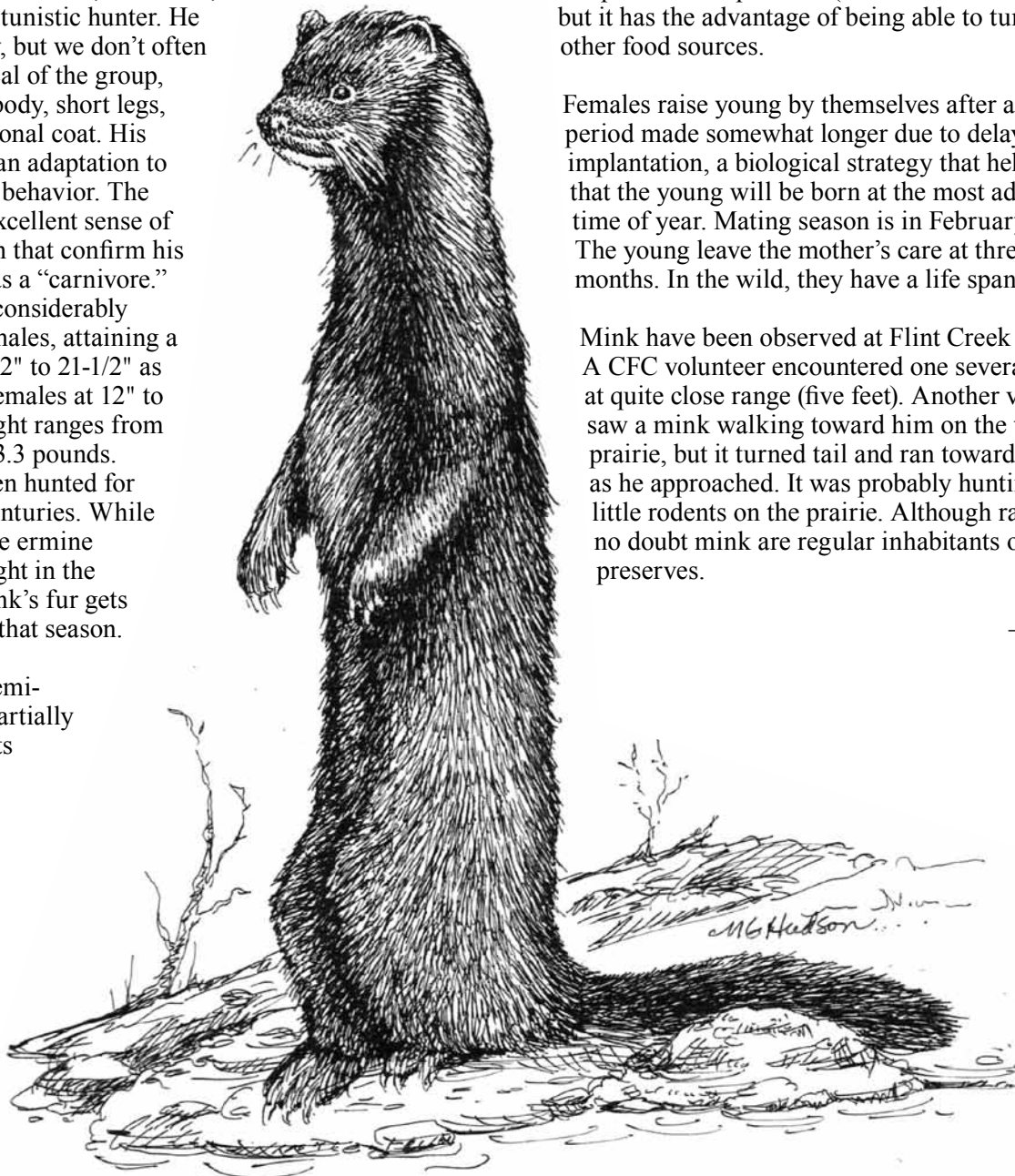
territory is along the water's edge where it defends one-half mile to two-and-a-half miles of shoreline and which includes several dens. Its diet consists of small mammals, fish, waterfowl, and crustaceans, and it hides any extra prey in a cache.

Studies have observed the mink's greater dependence on muskrats and less on fish during the winter. Some mustelids specialize in certain foods, but the mink is a generalist which allows it to prey on a wide variety of animals. The mink is at a disadvantage if it tries to compete with a specialist (such as an otter – for fish), but it has the advantage of being able to turn to many other food sources.

Females raise young by themselves after a gestation period made somewhat longer due to delayed implantation, a biological strategy that helps to insure that the young will be born at the most advantageous time of year. Mating season is in February and March. The young leave the mother's care at three to four months. In the wild, they have a life span of six years.

Mink have been observed at Flint Creek Savanna. A CFC volunteer encountered one several years ago at quite close range (five feet). Another volunteer saw a mink walking toward him on the trail at the prairie, but it turned tail and ran toward the creek as he approached. It was probably hunting for little rodents on the prairie. Although rarely seen, no doubt mink are regular inhabitants of CFC's preserves.

— Carol Rice



Mink illustration by Margaret Hudson.