



A YEAR ON A MINK FARM

Although the basic activities which focus on providing the mink with a comfortable and stress-free environment remain the same year-round, such as providing clean water and well balanced diets, and maintaining good health, many other activities change based on the season and where the mink is in its life cycle. There are four main seasons on a mink farm:

Conditioning & Breeding (December – March)

- Mink are brought into good breeding condition. Diet and feeding programs are adjusted to remove excess weight and encourage increased exercise. This is important for good production and a successful whelp.
- Some ranches choose to blood test (Aleutian disease) or vaccinate at this time.
- Mink are positioned in barns depending on the breeding system practiced. This often involves small sections of male mink surrounded by larger sections of female mink. Most farms breed a ratio of 4-5 females for every male.
- Females are *always* placed into the males' pens for breeding – never the reverse – as the males should remain in their own territory.
- The act of mating stimulates ovulation. This is similar to domestic cats but different from other domestic species. At 9 days after the first pairing, the ovaries have been replenished. Thus, most ranchers practice a breeding program of Day 1 and Day 9. Many ranchers also mate the day after Day 9 (Day 10), as they feel that the extra mating results in the fertilization of more eggs.
- Breeding records are often kept for tracking the mating dates, but also the genetics of parents, grandparents, etc., and selection information.



Whelping & Weaning (April – June)

- Gestation varies from 40-70 days (due to a delayed implantation). This period may be shortened by extending the daylight period with the use of lights immediately following breeding.
- Nests are prepared and females kept comfortable. Unnecessary stresses and noises are avoided.
- Females birth an average of 5-6 kits (varies with colour-type). Newborn kits are very tiny (size of your pinky finger), have no fur, and cannot see.
- Females spend most of their time in the nest boxes caring for their kits.
- Nest boxes are checked regularly to ensure females are in good health, are lactating properly, and that all kits are getting ample milk, are being kept warm, and are growing well.
- Female health is also monitored by feed consumption. Sudden decline in consumption is a sign that the female (and litter) requires immediate attention.
- Kits are fostered if litters are large or milk supply is inadequate to support growth of all kits.
- Entire litters may be fostered if the female is sick, is not lactating properly, or is not caring for her kits. Female mink are normally very accepting of fostered kits.



- The correct balance of fat and protein are critical for proper lactation (thus kit growth) and maintenance of the females. Females are fed based on litter size, age of kits and physical condition.
- Feed is introduced to kits between 4-5 weeks of age. They quickly transition to a diet consisting more of feed and less of mother's milk. Kits will also become familiar with the water source (dish or nipple).
- It is important that nests are kept dry, that feed and water is readily available, and that the kits are content.
- At approximately 6-8 weeks of age, kits are weaned from mothers. When they are able to maintain body heat in smaller groups, they will be broken into pairs.



Growth & Furring (July – October)

- Main activity during this period is feeding. Feed rations are designed to promote growth. Mink are fed multiple times a day to ensure fresh feed is always available.
- In July, all mink (kits and adults) are vaccinated. In Canada, a 3-Way vaccine, protecting against Pseudomonas, Enteritis and Botulism plus a Distemper vaccine are used.
- In August, growth of the winter fur begins. The diet changes to support hair growth.
- At the end of August, the mink's bodily development has by and large been completed. Subsequent growth consists primarily of fat.
- It is important to keep nest boxes clean, the mink well fed, and content. This is critical in protecting the valuable fur coat.



- By fall the fur thickens (more hair per square inch). Fur growth begins at the tail and continues up the back and to the head. During furring the minks' skin appears blue. When the fur is complete the skin changes to a creamy white.
- Mink fur has two components, the longer shinier guard hair that is most visible, and the shorter softer underfur that is hidden beneath.
- The winter furring process is not stimulated by cold temperatures, rather the shortening of the daylight period. This change stimulates the production of melatonin, a hormone that activates hair follicles to produce new hair.

Grading & Harvesting (November – December)

- Mink are graded in November or early December, depending on colour-type and sex. Grading involves the physical evaluation of a mink's fur coat.
- Characteristics considered often include texture, density, nap length and colour. Market demand at the time will drive which characteristics one should focus on.
- Grades are used to determine which mink will be pelted, and which will be kept as breeding stock for the next season. Fur grades are often used in conjunction with size/weight, litter size, reproductive history of parents, temperament and disease history/presence.
- Mink selected for breeding stock will be singled into pens.
- Mink selected for pelting will be euthanized by exposure to carbon monoxide. This method is humane, works quickly, and creates minimal stress.
- Pelting may occur on site or mink may be shipped to a pelting operation offsite for processing.
- With few exceptions, the processed pelts are shipped to auction houses for sale.



Student Reflection Questions

Name:

What do you find most interesting about mink farming?

Mink farming is hard work. Why do you think a person would choose to raise mink as a career?

Mink farmers put a lot of effort into keeping their mink healthy and comfortable. Do you think this important? And if so, why is it important?

Mink fur is used to make warm, long-lasting clothing. Did you know that mink fur is 100% biodegradable? Do you think this is important? If so, why?