

Mink Require Savvy to Raise; Market Is a Roller Coaster

By Hugh Travis and Richard Aulerich

Fur farming began as an extension of the trapping of wild animals prized for their fur. Species that have been successfully and profitably raised for their pelts in the United States are the silver fox and mink. Imports from South America—the chinchilla and the nutria, or coypu—also have been raised.

Mink is currently the primary fur animal raised for its pelt, making up about 75% of the dollar value of the U.S. fur trade. So we will devote our chapter to the raising of this species.

Mink have been kept in captivity as far back as 100 years, but were not raised in large numbers until the 1930's. Numbers increased until the mid-1960's when more than 8 million pelts were produced each year in the United States. Starting in the late 1960's, the supply of mink exceeded the demand and prices dropped below the cost of production.

From 1963 to 1973, the number of U.S. mink farms decreased from over 5,000 to 1,300. Those that went out of business were primarily the small producers or hobbyists. At the same time, average production of mink farms increased from 1,800 to 2,900 pelts per year. Currently there are about 1,000 mink farms producing 3 million pelts.

During the 1970's, prices received by mink farmers have averaged \$15 to \$30 per pelt. Cost of production is about \$20. Capital investment per animal for equipment is about \$30 to \$50 for an average size farm, excluding land and operating costs.

Most fur farms are located in the northern states. Wisconsin is the number one state producing about 30% of the mink raised, followed by Minnesota, Utah, Illinois, and Washington.

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While fur animals can be raised on a small acreage, their husbandry is different from other enterprises described in this book.

Raising fur animals requires specialized knowledge that is more difficult to obtain than on other species of livestock. Few state or federal experiment stations have personnel qualified to advise on their raising.

Capital investment required to conduct a profitable business is large. Odors from mink and fox farms are objectionable and may require a buffer area between you and your neighbors. And unlike most enterprises in this book, producers cannot use the products for home consumption.

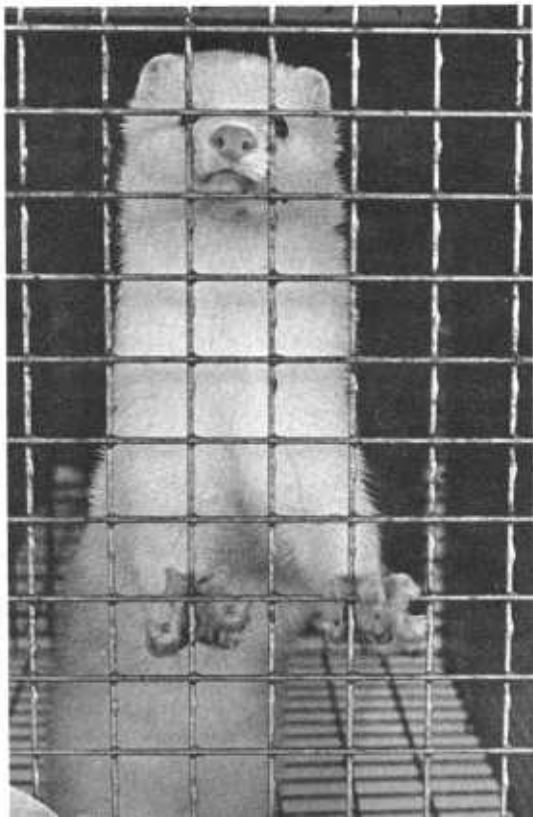
Market values are based on the whims of the fashion industry. There may be several years of good prices followed by several unprofitable years. These cycles are impossible to predict. They can be very discouraging if you happen to enter the business on a down cycle.

Starting Out

So—if after reading the previous information, you are still interested in entering the fur business, how do you go about it? The best way to learn to raise fur animals is to get a job on an established farm for at least a year.

You also can start by buying a few animals and gradually

Mink are kept in individual wire pens most of the year so they won't bite each other and damage the pelts.



building up the size of your herd. This is difficult if you don't have previous experience or a qualified person to guide you.

The best place to start a fur farm is in an area where other farms are located. This will allow you to learn from others and be able to cooperate in buying materials needed for fur farming. In several areas of the country there are cooperatives that mix and distribute feed to fur farmers on a daily basis (Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Utah, Washington, Oregon).

Purchase animals from a reputable, established breeder who has obtained high average pelt prices over the years. Field days, live animal shows, and pelt sales at auction houses are excellent places to observe animals and pelts of known quality. Prices for breeders are usually two to three times the pelt price.

There are many colors of mink produced from various mutations that have occurred from the original dark mink. It is advisable to start with the easier-to-raise color types such as darks or pastels.

Raising Mink

Mink are kept outdoors in raised wire cages, one to a pen during most of the year. Usually the cages are covered with a roof to form an open shed.

For raising young, the mother is supplied with a nest box about one foot in each dimension, which contains bedding for a warm nest. Pens for mothers and litters are about 30 to 36 inches long x 18 inches high x 18 to 24 inches wide. Individual pelt pens are about 24 to 30 inches long x 15 inches high x 14 to 18 inches wide.

Cages have a water cup or automatic waterer and a door. Sometimes a feeder is supplied.

Besides pens and sheds, mink raisers need a place to pelt and to store mink pelts. They also need an area for feed preparation and storage. Size depends on the numbers raised, type of feed, and length of storage.

Mink usually are fed a combination of fresh or frozen packing-house and fisheries byproducts along with cereals and vitamin and mineral supplements. This is mixed to a hamburger consistency and fed in a feeder or on top of the cage. Mink are also fed dried or pelleted feed which can be purchased from feed companies.

Raising mink is a vigorous outdoor activity. Mink are savage, difficult to restrain, and have a musky odor unpleasant to many people. They must be fed and watered every day, and the caretaker must expect to perform physical labor in all kinds of weather.

There is a yearly cycle of husbandry duties. The breeding season occurs in March. Young are born in May, usually four to six in a litter. Generally one male is kept for each three to five females. The young start taking solid food at about three weeks and may be weaned after six.

Young mink grow their marketable pelt during the autumn months, and the fur becomes prime around Thanksgiving. They are graded at this time, the better animals being kept for breeders.

Pelting consists of killing, skinning, scraping excess fat from the skin, and drying and stretching the pelts so they can be easily stored. After the pelts are sent to market they are further processed to be suitable for garments.

Pelts generally are sold through auction houses, which match the pelts into uniform bundles suitable for making garments. The bundles are then sold at public auction.

Mink are healthy animals, seldom sick when properly fed and cared for and if reasonable sanitary methods are followed. The pens are raised off the ground, which reduces chances of disease.

Mink can contract food-borne and infectious diseases such as botulism, distemper, and virus enteritis, which can be prevented by vaccination or antitoxins.

They also are subject to a slow-acting virus which produces Aleutian disease. While this disease cannot be treated, it can be diagnosed. Thus it is possible to eliminate infected animals from your herd, and to purchase animals free of Aleutian disease.

Mink kits are born in May and reach mature size by Thanksgiving. Adult males weigh about 4 pounds and females about 2.

