



Volume 28/Issue 4

American Mink

December 2014

AMERICAN MINK

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American Mink

Have you ever been walking or fishing along the edge of a pond or stream and thought you smelled a skunk? Only the smell was worse? What you smelled could have been an American mink. Mink stink!

Mink have two glands on their bottoms that make a foul-smelling liquid called musk. Mink use musk to mark their homes or territories. Mink are animals that like to live by themselves; so they mark their homes with the smelly odor to tell other animals to stay away. Mink may also emit musk when they are excited, threatened or frightened. One good thing is that mink can't aim and shoot their musk like a skunk.

Mink are very comfortable around and in the water. They have a long slender body, short stumpy legs, and partially webbed feet perfect for swimming. Mink may swim up to 100 feet across a pond and dive up to 16 feet down in the water.

Mink are not huge animals. They average about two feet in length and about one-third of that is tail! They weigh about two to three pounds. Mink have a beautiful, silky brown to black fur coat with a patch of white on their chins.

The best place to look for mink is near a stream, river, pond or lake during dawn or dusk. They like to come out during the twilight hours to hunt. Mink have excellent senses to help them find dinner. Muskrats, fish, crayfish, frogs, ducks, or voles may all be on the menu. Mink kill their prey by quickly biting the animal on the neck. Mink are pretty strong for their size, so pulling an animal as big as a muskrat out of the water is no problem.

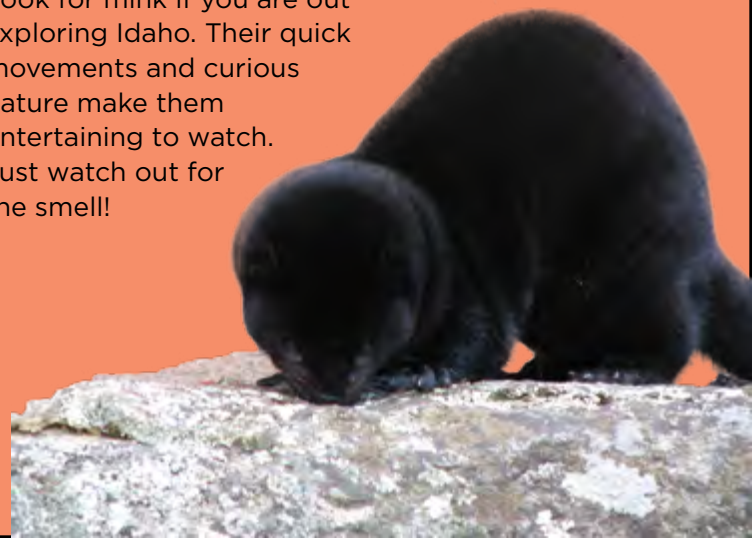
Mink live in burrows and dens. They may live in an old muskrat burrow, abandoned beaver lodge, hollow log or dig their own burrow. A burrow dug by a mink is about four inches in diameter and may extend for 10 to 12 feet in the side of a river bank. Dens at the end on the burrow are about a foot in diameter. Dens are lined with soft grass, feathers and fur. The warm den is the perfect place for mink to give birth.

Baby mink are called kits. Usually three to four kits are born in the

cozy den. Kits are blind at birth and have a short coat of fine silvery-white hairs. They only weigh about as much as two crayons when born but will grow fairly quickly drinking their mother's milk. Their eyes will open in about 25 days. By the time they start to venture out of the den at seven weeks old, their coats will be a rich brown color. They start to hunt with mom when they are about eight weeks old. If the kits can avoid trouble, they may live up to ten years in the wild.

Mink are formidable animals, so they have few predators. Coyotes, bobcats or other larger animals may eat mink. Humans use mink pelts to make luxurious coats, hats and gloves. Most mink fur used to make coats are now raised on mink farms and not trapped from the wild.

Look for mink if you are out exploring Idaho. Their quick movements and curious nature make them entertaining to watch. Just watch out for the smell!



Wolverine



The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat, so they eat a lot. As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a “cache” (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

The Weasel Family

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, “mustela” means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasels, marten, mink, and otters. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third grader to the least weasel which weighs about as much as two pinkie erasers. Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. Short-tailed weasels are the smallest. They are eight to 14 inches long and weigh two to seven ounces.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move freely through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate. It is also used to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying time in Idaho’s wild lands. These active, curious and strong creatures can be very entertaining to watch!



Badger

Furbearers in Idaho History

Furbearers are animals that are trapped or hunted for their fur. Furbearers are the reason European people first came to this area.

In the early 1800s, fur was used to make coats, hats, gloves and other pieces of clothing. Many animals, including mink, were trapped during this time for their warm, dense fur. They played an important part in the fur trade. However, when people talk about the early fur trade, they usually talk about beavers.

Beaver trapping had a huge impact on Idaho history. Beaver hats were very popular. Every man wanted one. Soon beavers were harder to find in the Eastern United States and Canada. This brought trappers to what we now call Idaho.

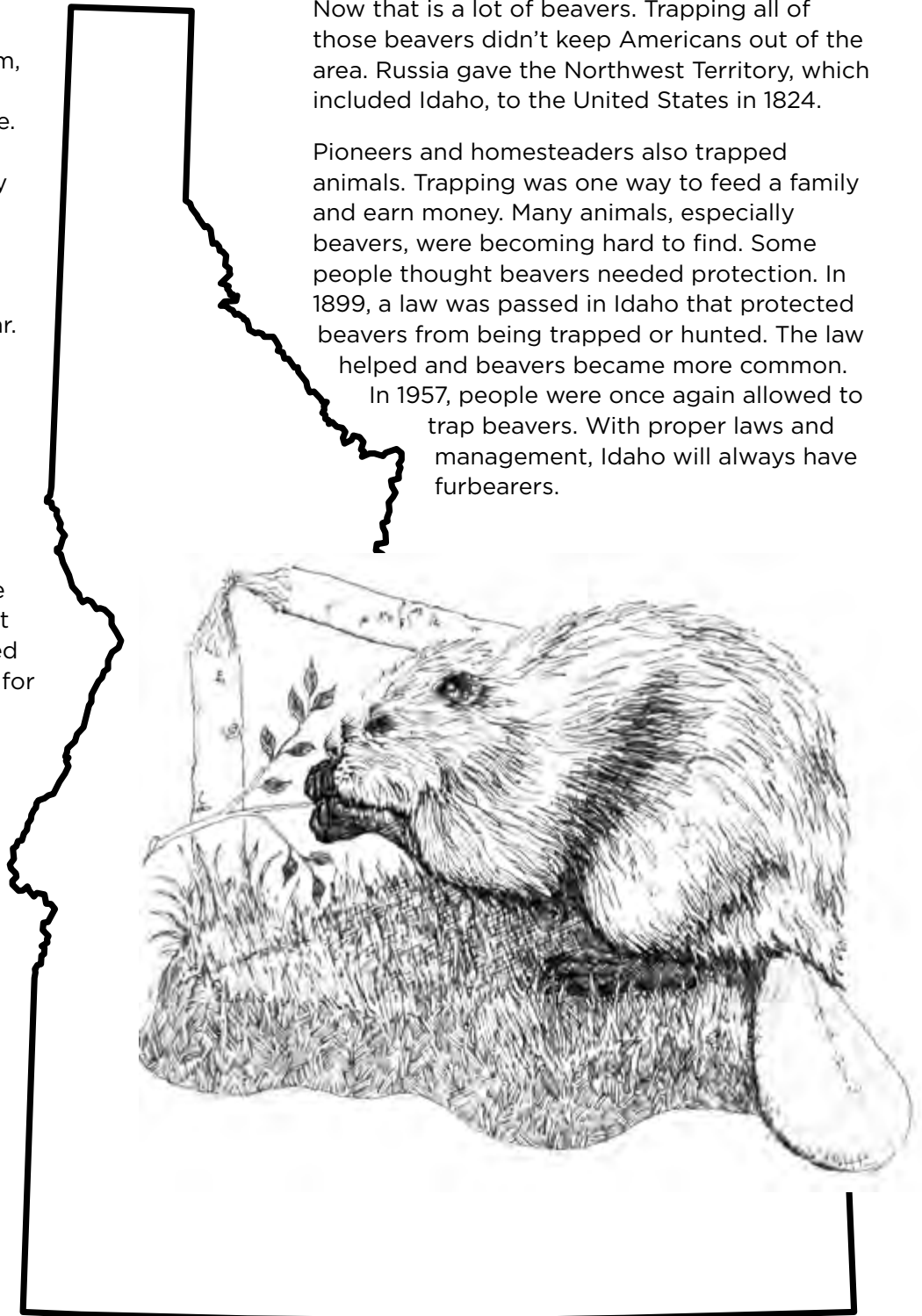
In 1809, David Thompson built Kullyspell House by Lake Pend Oreille. This was the first European building constructed in Idaho. The house was built for the Northwest Fur Company. Soon other trappers heard about all the beavers in the area. By 1811, four fur companies were trapping beavers and other animals in Idaho. Mountain men that were not members of fur companies were also trapping animals.

At the time, Idaho was unclaimed territory. The United States and Great Britain signed a treaty in 1818 that let people from both countries live on the land, but both countries wanted to own the land. Great Britain operated The Hudson's Bay Fur Company.

They wanted to create a "fur desert" to keep the Americans out of the area and claim the land for Great Britain. They thought that if they trapped all the beavers, no Americans would want to live here. Between 1818 and 1827, they trapped 85,000 beavers out of the Snake River alone! Now that is a lot of beavers. Trapping all of those beavers didn't keep Americans out of the area. Russia gave the Northwest Territory, which included Idaho, to the United States in 1824.

Pioneers and homesteaders also trapped animals. Trapping was one way to feed a family and earn money. Many animals, especially beavers, were becoming hard to find. Some people thought beavers needed protection. In 1899, a law was passed in Idaho that protected beavers from being trapped or hunted. The law helped and beavers became more common.

In 1957, people were once again allowed to trap beavers. With proper laws and management, Idaho will always have furbearers.



Fantastic Fur

Many animals are covered by what is called fur. You know what fur looks like. Mink, bears and coyotes are all covered by fur. It looks like long, soft hair. However, there is more to fur than meets the eye.

Fur is made up of two different layers of hairs. Guard hairs make up the top layer. Guard hairs do just what their name says. They guard and protect the animal's second layer of fur and skin from weather and water. Often guard hairs are shiny, because animals put oil on them. Animals that spend a lot of time in water, like mink, don't want their fur and skin to get wet. They might get too cold. Water hits the oily guard hairs and runs off the animals' backs keeping their fur dry.

Some animals, like beavers, have special glands that make oil just for spreading on their fur. Beavers' oil glands are at the base of their tails. Other animals have very small oil glands all over their skin to help keep the guard hairs oily.

The second layer of fur is called underfur. Underfur is shorter than the guard hairs. It is usually very soft and fluffy. Underfur keeps animals warm. Animals fluff up their underfur and trap air in it. The animals' bodies warm the trapped air. The warmed air acts like insulation, and the animals stay nice and cozy. This is what happens when you put on a coat. Your body heats the air trapped by the coat, and you stay warmer.

Some animals with fur also have other special hairs on their bodies. Can you think of any? Porcupines may come to mind. Porcupines have fur with quills. The quills are special hard hairs that protect porcupines from their enemies. When danger is near, porcupines will arch their backs and tuck their heads under their bodies. This makes the quills stick straight up in the air. If an animal tries to touch the porcupine, it will get a nasty poke from the quills. Porcupines cannot shoot quills out of their bodies. Remember a quill is just a hair. You can't shoot hairs out of your head, so porcupines can't shoot quills out of their bodies.

Fur sure is a fantastic way for animals to stay warm during the cold winter.



© Charles Homler

Hurray *for* Hair

Some animals have hair on their bodies instead of fur. Fur is made of two different layers of hairs. Hair is usually just one layer, and all the hairs look alike. Hairs are usually thick and stiff. Deer, elk, pronghorn and you, all have hair.

If you looked closely at a deer hair, you would see that it looks a bit like a straw. The hair is hollow. Animals with fur trap air to stay warm. Well, so do animals with hair. When they are cold, they stick their hairs up. They trap air inside and in between all of their hairs. The air trapped in the hair and in between the hair makes a nice coat of insulation against the cold.

Have you ever gotten goose bumps when you were cold? Look at a bump next time you have goose bumps. You will see a hair sticking up in the middle of the bump. Your body gets cold and tries to trap air by making your hair stand up. We are not very good at trapping air in our hair. Our hairs are too thin and short to trap air.

Many animals grow a thicker layer of hair for the winter. More hair means they can trap more air and stay warmer. Some animals with hair grow a thick woolly layer of special hair close to their skin. Caribou do this. The woolly layer of hair is similar to the underfur that animals with fur have. In the winter, caribou are out in temperatures that can get down to 60 degrees below zero! Now that's cold. Their woolly layer of hair insulates them from the cold and helps to block the icy wind.

In the spring, animals will shed their winter hair and grow thinner summer coats. Animals often look shaggy and strange when they are shedding their long winter coats. People may even think an animal is sick. Once the silky summer hairs grow in, the animal will look good again.

Holiday Gifts

During the holiday season, our thoughts are about the things that are closest to us—our family and friends. We think about what gifts we can give them to show we care. If you were to add wildlife to your gift-giving list, what might you give?

Habitat is the most pressing need for wild animals. A good habitat will provide food, water, shelter and space. These four things must be arranged so the animal doesn't have to travel too far to find them. What things could you do to improve habitat in your area?

Conserving natural resources is important. Conserve means to protect or preserve, or to use carefully or sparingly. If you recycle paper, fewer trees will need to be cut down to make new paper. Recycling plastic decreases the amount of oil needed to make new plastic. You also reduce the amount of trash you throw away when you recycle. If you turn your thermostat down, you're conserving energy. You can also pick

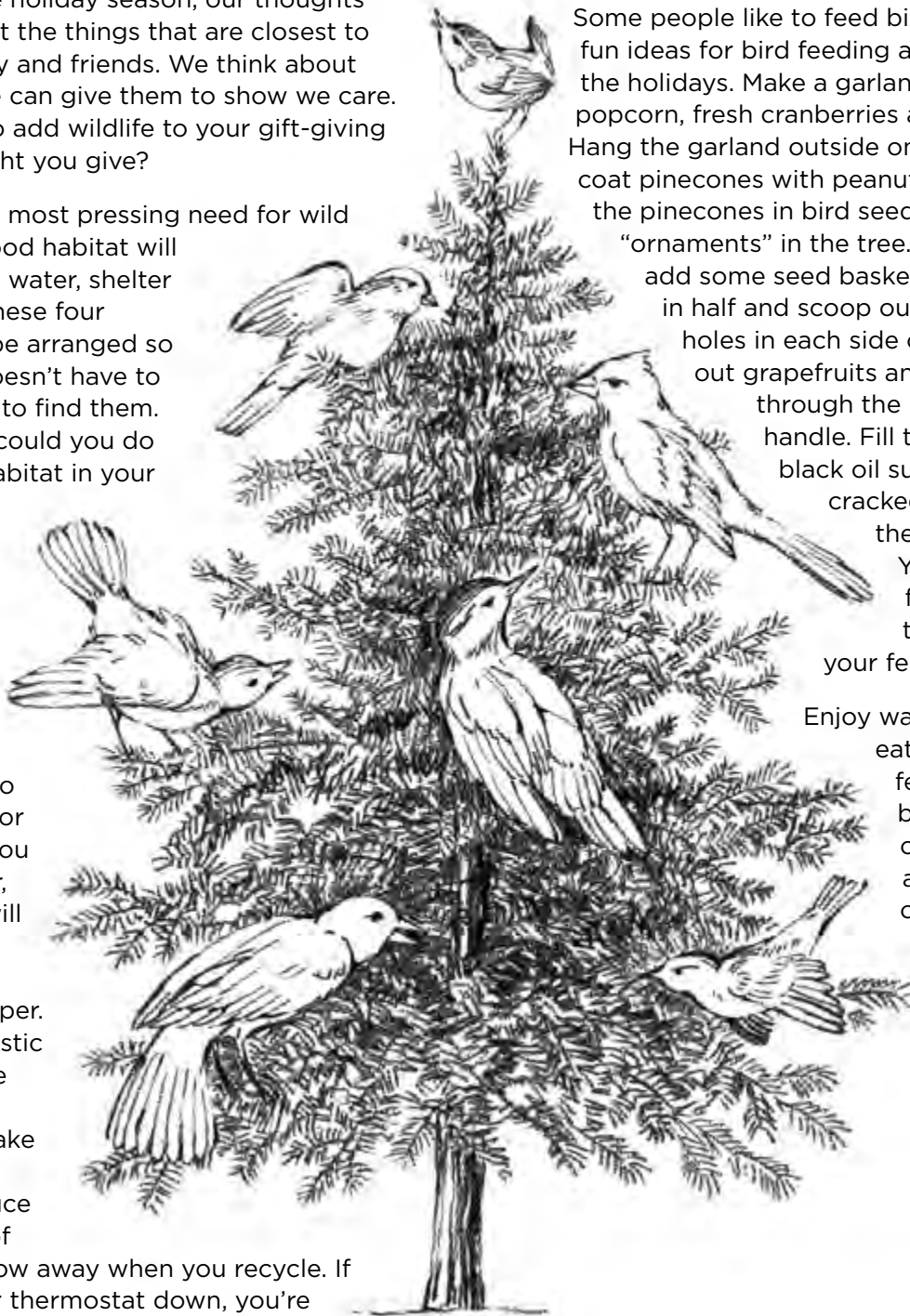
up garbage or plant a tree. You will be helping wildlife and will be helping to keep the planet healthy. What other "gifts" could you give wildlife?

Some people like to feed birds. Here are some fun ideas for bird feeding and decorating for the holidays. Make a garland of air-popped popcorn, fresh cranberries and orange slices. Hang the garland outside on a tree. Then coat pinecones with peanut butter and roll the pinecones in bird seed. Hang these

"ornaments" in the tree. You may want to add some seed baskets. Cut grapefruits in half and scoop out the pulp. Poke holes in each side of the hollowed out grapefruits and string yarn through the holes to make a handle. Fill the baskets with black oil sunflower seeds or cracked corn and hang them on the tree.

You now have a festive holiday tree and a treat for your feathered friends.

Enjoy watching the birds eating their holiday feast. Remember, by taking care of habitats, you are taking care of wildlife and giving them a wonderful gift.



Be Outside: Stargazing



BE OUTSIDE
KIDSD CHILDREN IN NATURE

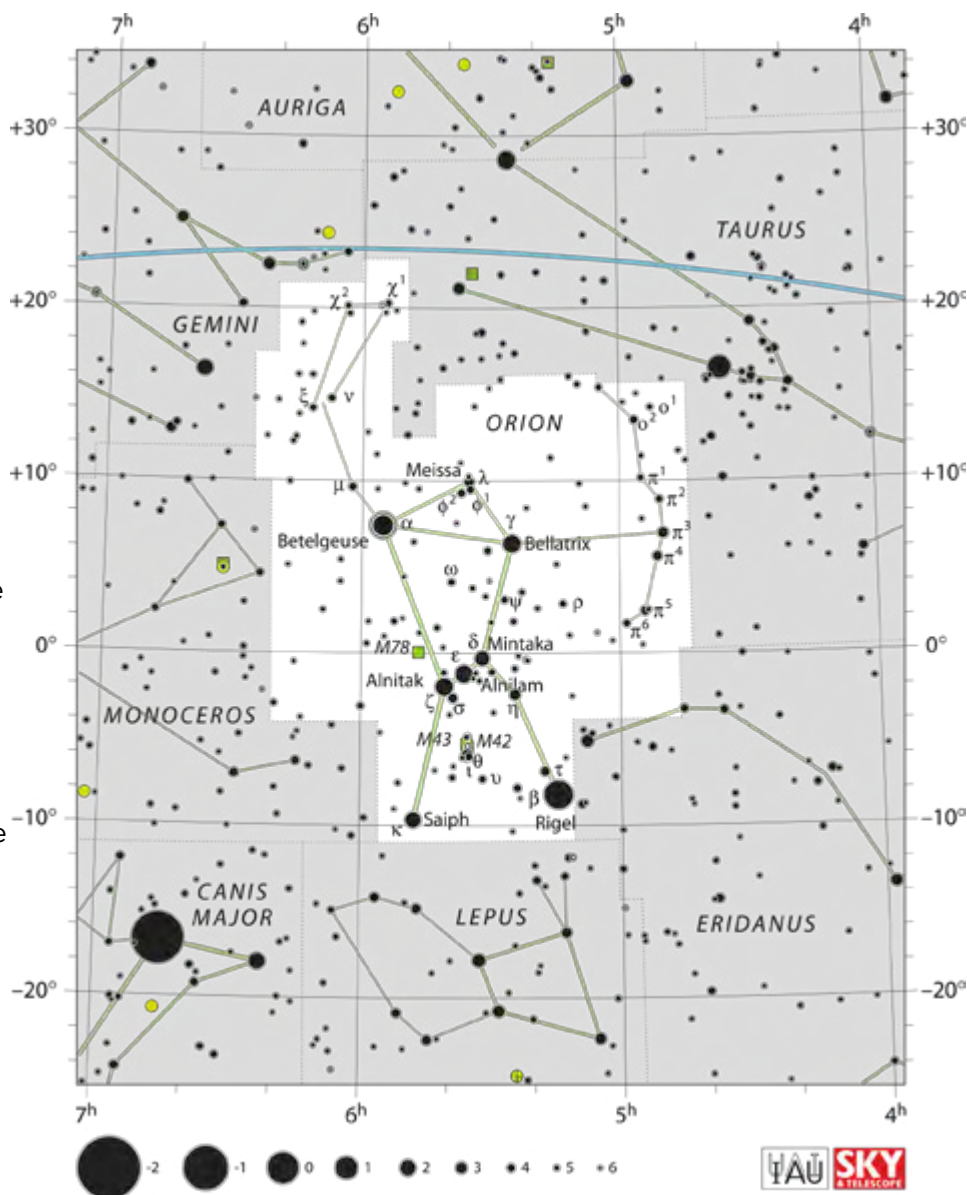
If you find yourself far away from city lights this December, you might want to look up.

Winter is a wonderful time to do some stargazing. Night objects are actually easier to see on a cold, clear night. Dress warmly, bring a pair of binoculars and grab an adult. Then head out to look for these heavenly objects:

The Moon: The moon becomes full on December 6. A moon that is becoming full is called a “waxing” moon. Once the full moon has passed, it is a “waning” moon. As the moon wanes, it becomes less and less visible in the night sky until it is no longer visible. The moon is not visible because it is positioned between the Earth and the Sun. This is called the new moon. The new moon will happen on December 22. The moon may not be visible, but the dark skies make for some nice stargazing. The week before and the week after the new moon are the best times to go stargazing. Watch the different phases of the moon as it waxes and wanes this December.

Winter Constellations: Use a starchart for December to find the constellations of Orion, Taurus, Gemini, Cassiopeia, Pegasus, Big Dipper or Ursa Major, and Little Dipper or Ursa Minor. Orion is a large rectangular constellation. It is also called “The Hunter.” Orion is easily found by looking for three stars lined up together that form Orion’s Belt. Several stars make up Orion’s shoulders. Betelgeuse (beetle juice) is the very bright star on the northwest corner of the constellation. It is one of the brightest and largest stars in the night sky. It is at least 300 times bigger than our Sun!

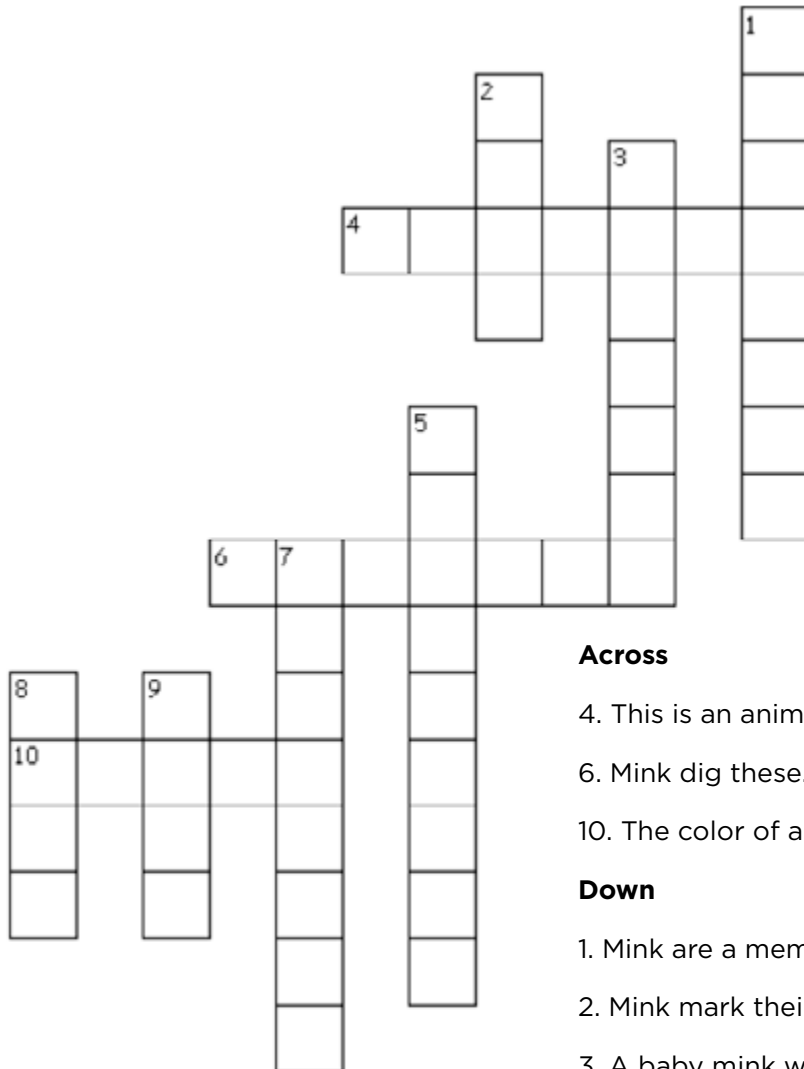
Meteor Showers: Meteor showers are created when the Earth passes through the orbit of a comet. Comets are just like large dirty snowballs. When they melt and turn to a gas, they leave behind a path of space dust. The Earth’s gravity pulls the meteoroids, or dust, into our atmosphere, causing many more “shooting stars” or meteors. December 13th is the peak of the Geminids meteor shower. To find the meteor shower, look to the constellation Gemini. The meteors will look like they are flying right out of the constellation. You may see as many as 50 meteors per hour.



IAU and Sky & Telescope magazine (Roger Sinnott & Rick Fienberg)

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Mink Puzzle



Words

- Burrows
- Crayons
- Furbearer
- Kits
- Musk
- Muskrat
- Mustelid
- Underfur
- Swim
- White

Across

- 4. This is an animal a mink may eat.
- 6. Mink dig these.
- 10. The color of a baby mink when born.

Down

- 1. Mink are a member of this animal group.
- 2. Mink mark their territories with this.
- 3. A baby mink weighs as much as two _____ when born.
- 5. An animal that is hunted or trapped for its fur.
- 7. This layer of soft, fluffy fur keeps a mink warm.
- 8. With sleek bodies, mink are built to _____.
- 9. This is what baby mink are called.

WILDLIFE EXPRESS

Volume 28 • Issue 4 • American Mink • December 2014

Wildlife Express is published nine times a year (September-May) by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:
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