

Originally published in the July, 2007, issue of the **Active Page**:

Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Louise Decario

In late April, I was visiting friends, admiring their yard, when a terrible screeching and fighting came from the compost pile. What was happening?

It turned out that it was two adult American mink (*Mustela vison*) engaged in violent courtship, ending in the male savagely biting the female's neck. Copulation, which induces ovulation, is repeated several times daily for a few days during late February to April. After one or two months gestation, two to ten kits are born: pink and wrinkled, covered with fine white hairs, blind and deaf. During the early summer the young mink follow their mother on hunting excursions and after two months are able to fend for themselves. In the fall, around six months old, they leave their mother and their home. The males provide no parental care.

The American mink has short stubby legs, partially webbed feet, a sturdy pointed face, small ears, a slim lithe body and a long

serpentine neck. The fine lustrous fur is thick, oily and water repellent. Its colour varies from rich brown to almost black with a white patch under the chin. The long bushy tail is about half its body length. Large males may reach 60 cm (two feet) in length.

American mink are semi aquatic. They live near tidal flats, marshes, lakes and streams or as far as one half to two miles from the water. They can be found throughout most of northern North America. Territory is marked with strong-smelling excretions from scent glands. In coastal areas, low tide levels determine activity time whether day or night. Inland mink are generally nocturnal.

Crayfish, minnows, shiners, trout, frogs and salamanders are all part of their varied diet. Also eaten are insects, birds, earthworms, small mammals and snakes. Large males will even kill muskrat and rabbits.

Mink have always been an important fur-bearer and have come to dominate the fur market. Today, most fur for clothing comes from mink ranches, not trapping.

Pollution has become a major problem for wild mink as they feed heavily on fish that have absorbed pesticides, mercury and PCB's. Reproduction may be hampered in such cases, but death may occur.

* * *

Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: Why – and how – do birds fly in tightly choreographed formations? This behaviour is most highly



developed in shorebirds, and like the schooling of small fish, is a predator-avoidance tactic. Feeding as they do on the open shoreline, often with their heads down, small shorebirds such as sandpipers, plovers, and dunlin are very vulnerable, and they are hunted by the fastest predatory birds -- the falcons. In response there has been strong selective pressure for shorebirds to develop flock feeding behaviour, so that as soon as one bird detects a predator, the signal is quickly passed to the whole flock. For the same reason these kinds of birds have developed tight formation flight in response to disturbance. Just how shorebirds are able to move so synchronously in the air is not entirely understood, but their small bodies and narrow pointed wings are adaptations for making quick maneuvers. Each individual bird responds almost instantly to the slightest change in direction of the birds next to it by turning in the same direction. The impression is of a ripple rapidly propagating through the flock. Because shorebird colouration tends to be dark above and light below, in addition to its quick changes in direction the flock appears to "flash" dark and light, which is thought to be another predator avoidance tactic.

<http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.

This month's Natural Mystery (contributed at the Spring Wingding): Why do lilies hide their beauty – their invitation to pollinating insects – by turning toward the ground?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. Visit our website at