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Wildlife on the Island Line: The American Mink

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Early summer presents excellent opportunities to observe wildlife on the Island Line, and no place is better than the Colchester Causeway. This summer's most active residents are a family of mink who can be spotted loping across the bike path or cavorting on the rocks or in the water.

Mink are midsize, semiaquatic members of the weasel family. They sport dark brown water-resistant fur coats and slender, long tails also covered in dark fur. They have spots of white under the chin and sometimes on the throat. Small but efficient predators, they scour the rocks and water for rodents, fish, and frogs. Because of the rarity of a sighting, people often misidentify them as beavers, muskrats, or rats (all guesses we heard over the past week on the Causeway). They have a bounding gait and are usually nocturnal, but they become more active during the day when they're raising young. The kits will stay with the mother until the fall.

Mink are typically elusive, which makes this summer's sightings a rare treat. Here are some tips for increasing your chances of an encounter:

Bike at a slow to moderate pace with your head up

On the Causeway, you're most likely to first see a mink crossing the bike path ahead of you or ambling a short distance along the side vegetation. To give you a reference for speed: when we bike slowly, a faster runner might be passing us.



If you spot a mink, slowly and quietly brake to a stop

It doesn't matter if that takes you beyond where you saw the animal. Don't brake loudly or skid to a stop, and don't throw your bike down so it bangs against the rocks. Instead, gently set your bike down on the side of the path (so other bikers can get by), and quietly walk back to where you saw the mink. Watching from on foot will be quieter and less obtrusive, and it will let you easily move to a better vantage point from which to observe.



Avoid all loud noises (including talking) and sudden, fast movements

Your approach should be slow, quiet, and relatively still. Don't kick the bushes or

throw rocks. You wouldn't like that done to you, and it scares and stresses the animal. Remember, some of these are kits exploring their world for the first time.

Take a long look at the edges of the path and at the rocks on the side of the Causeway

If you're lucky, the mink may be on the rocks or in the water. If you're not lucky (this is typical), you'll need to wait and watch. If you're still and quiet, members of the weasel family (like the mink) will often respond with curiosity. They'll pop their heads up from behind a rock or along the side of the path, checking you out at the same time you're checking them out. Occasionally, they'll even approach you directly while they're looking, listening, and scenting the air.



Periodically glance behind you, turning around slowly

Yesterday, when we'd seen a mink cross the path and had stopped to try to locate it, it first popped its head above the rocks not more than two feet behind where Jon was standing, while he was looking in the other direction. This is not the first time this has

happened...

Also, keep in mind that you may think you're watching one mink when, in fact, you're seeing a few different individuals. Currently, there are at least five mink on the Causeway.

Listen

A family of mink moving together along the rocks or in the water will often call, a harsh CH-CH-CH sound, to keep tabs on one another. This can help you locate them. While we were watching them on Sunday, the mother caught a fish and dragged it under the rocks for the kits to eat. A few squawks and squeals were added to the communications.

When planning your next cycling adventure on the Causeway, be sure to add extra time for life's little pauses, including wildlife watching. Observing a cavorting family of mink is well worth a detour, and it gives you a good reason for a refreshing time-out from the pace of your ride.

