

Mink Handling

Mink aren't a hard fur bearer to skin, flesh and stretch; they're just a little different than others. The small size and the scent glands call for a little more finesse and a lot less force!

Open the mink on the table. With the mink on its back, head left, tail right, hold the mink's right hind paw in your left hand and insert the tip of your knife right in the bottom of the paw with the knife edge to the right, or away from your left hand. This makes it so there is pressure under the skin as you're cutting, and the knife edge is also away from your left hand, just in case you do happen to make a slip with the knife.



Apply enough pressure to slide the knife under the skin, going straight across in front of the vent in a line toward the opposite hind paw.

Continue the cut clear across and onto the bottom of the opposite paw. After the cut is clear across, take the skin on the knee side of the opposite leg with your thumb and index finger on your left hand and lift up and toward the knee. Now use your knife and swipe under the skin while pulling up on it and you can work your way down over the belly and back up the leg you started on.



With the skin now free on the insides of both back legs, set your knife down and push your thumb between the skin and outer side of the leg while twisting the foot to make the knee pop out.

Work your thumb around until the skin is loose all the way around the lower part of leg, then pull apart with the skin in one hand and leg in the other and it will strip right down to the paw. Mink are one of the few fur bearers that have good fur right down to the toes, and by stripping this out before you loosen the skin over the hips you don't put pressure on the glands, causing an "accidental discharge". Do this to both legs, then you can strip the skin down to the hips. Holding the paw in the left hand, use your thumb of your right hand and carefully strip the skin down over the hip. By keeping the pressure on the outside of the leg and stopping as soon as you're starting to put pressure the vent area you won't squeeze the glands out.



Time for the knife again. I start on the mink's right side, take the skin between your left thumb and index finger, and push away on the thigh with your other fingers creating just enough pressure to hold the skin tight. Take your knife and start skinning over the hip and right up by the vent. This is where you need to be careful, and you can skin right up over the gland.



To do the other side I reach across and use my left hand to hold the skin and put pressure on the leg just like the first side, but skin down the leg with a backhand motion, right over the gland joining the first cut on the tail side of the glands.

Now that you have the glands exposed, let's get them cut off before squeeze something that shouldn't be squeezed! Much like skinning over the glands, get a pinch of the skin on the edge of the glands between the thumb and index finger and push away on the leg to make a slight tension. While you pull up and away on the glands, carefully cut under the glands and right through the vent. The glands will now be separated from the carcass and set to the side. These glands do have some value to lure makers if you want to drop them in a jar and freeze them.



Put your knife tip in the tail a couple inches down from the base, edge up, and slide the point toward the base where you just removed the glands to start your tail split. Work the skin off around the base of the tail and carefully strip the skin down to the start of your cut. Now you're ready to pull the tail bone out, literally. Don't pull out on the tail skin or you run the risk of tearing the skin off, instead, hold the skin and pull the bone out of the skin. You can use a tail stripper, but mink tails usually come out easy enough that you can just pinch with your thumb and finger and pull the bone out. In the picture my hand is on the legs and not the bone just so you can see how the tail is stripped and how to hold you fingers. Now that the bone is out, go ahead and split the tail clear to the tip, it's a good idea to get into the habit of splitting the tail on everything as soon as you pull the bone out.



If you want to hang the mink now, just cinch it around the waist. You might find you can just hold the hips in one hand and skin in the other and pull apart and strip right down to the shoulders.

Once you have the skin down over the shoulders, you can hold the skin in one hand and take the exposed part of the leg in the other and pull apart, working your thumb between the front of the leg and the skin. Hook the thumb of one hand under the leg, and put the fingers of the other hand on the skin and strip down to the front paw. You'll



see that you will begin stripping down the neck at the same time. Keep pulling and most times the leg skin will strip right off the toes and you can trim the legs once it's on the stretcher. If they don't strip off, just pull it to the wrist and cut through the skin just past the end of the claws that are inside the inverted leg skin.



Another good pull and the skin should pull down right over the head to the ears. Mink ears are located way at the back of the skull and down low on the sides. Cut through the cartilage to free the ears and pull down to the eyes.

When you get to the eyes you'll also be at the corner of the mouth. Mink are a predator so they have a forward facing eye and it's also down low in relation to the top of the head. Just stay close to the skull and the eye will open right up. Cut on the corner of the mouth at the same time and it will open, you'll need to bring them both down together to keep tension on each one.





Once the eyes are skinned loose you'll find the jaw skin will quickly hang up on the canine teeth, don't try and skin around these teeth, just cut the jaw skin off and continue skinning down to the nose and cut through the cartilage.



Time to put it on the stretcher. If you use a wire stretcher you'll really need to squeeze the nose down for a female mink. If you use boards you will definitely need two different sizes for male and female. Look for boards that are made of fairly thin material, about $\frac{1}{4}$ " , with a nice taper on each side so the edge is almost sharp, just a little blunt, the skin will come off easier with a tapered edge. You can scrape mink on a beam, just lay it on the beam and flip the nose skin over the end of the beam skin side down. You can flesh the whole mink by just rolling it to one side or the other. Mink are also easily fleshed right on the board if you want. Any dull edged object will work, the putty knife you see in the picture worked just fine. When you flesh mink don't try and scrape them clean, just take off any red meat on the head and neck area and the yellow fat off the whole skin. The first fat you'll see will be in the arm pit area. This will go under the red meat on the body of the mink that we call the saddle. Just take off enough saddle under the arm pits to get the fat out, the saddle will eventually be tight on the skin

with no fat left, and that's where you want to stop. The bulk of the rest of the yellow fat will be on top the saddle and on the hips and lower belly area, scrape this off and you're ready to stretch.



Start pinning with one pin on each side of the tail. Center your skin and move each pin in so the tail is about half the width it was.



Two more pins on each side will be enough for female mink, three for males. With the skin laying loose on the board poke the next pin in the skin out almost to the edge of the board, then bring the skin in and push the pin into the board almost touching the previous pin. This will bunch the skin where the window will be giving the impression of a denser fur.



You'll actually have much of the leg fur on the back of the board now, remember that mink are one fur bearer that has almost the same fur down the legs as on the body, so it will blend right in. You can put a whole bunch of pins on each side of the tail if you want, pulling it wide, this makes the tail real short and stubby and is referred to as pleating, I just put one pin in the end to hold enough tension that the tail skin doesn't fold on itself and spoil. You'll notice in the picture that the skin over the hips looks bunched up because you pulled the skin in as you pinned it, this will flatten out as it dries.

Turn the board over to the belly side. You won't have a whole lot of skin left, a couple pins in each leg to hold tension is all you need. Keep the legs pinned out toward the edge of the board and if there's a little bit of loose skin on the belly area trim it off, this will give a good inspection window.



The only thing that should be left to do is trim the front legs, possibly the jaw skin if you left it on, and insert a belly wedge. The belly wedge is simply a tapered stick slid in from the window up to the jaw opening. With a tapered board I don't even use a wedge; I give the mink a couple days to get mostly dry, pull the pins, pull the skin loose and slide it most of the way back on the board to finish drying. If the skin does get too dry, a bounce or two on the nose will break it loose then a steady pull will free it from the board. The last picture shows the saddle left on the skin with the mink ready to dry.

