Orphan Mink Care, Key Points

Feeding:
Mink are strict carnivores with a very high metabolism rate. **Formula must be high in protein, high in fat, low in carbohydrates, and contain taurine.** They require frequent feedings (neonates every 60-90 minutes, infants every 2 hrs.) very gradually reducing frequency as they begin eating on their own. Be alert for hypoglycemia (cold, lethargic). Feed as much as they want (often 3-5% BW/feeding but varies widely). They will begin eating solid foods as soon as their teeth start coming in (~18 days) and well before their eyes open (28-35 days). Offer chopped whole mouse supplemented with moist kitten kibble or feline raw, fish, and daily salmon oil but weaning does not begin for another few weeks. Continue to formula feed 8 -12 times per day, 24/7, until the eyes are open, with chopped supplemental food (chopped whole mouse, fish, and high-quality kitten) always available. Gradually increase the hand feeding interval as dictated by the young mink. Note - they will need to be fed at least every three hours until they consistently refuse the syringe. **Formula (and water) can be offered in a dish once the eyes are open and they become difficult to hand feed. Underfeeding is a much greater concern than over feeding. They will not overeat when self-feeding and require consistent access to food. Water bottles may work for mink, in addition to shallow, heavy dishes or containers secured to the cage.**

**My formula:** I am currently using 4-parts FV 32/45 (skunk) powder: 1-part KMR powder: 1/4-part MultiMilk powder: 8-parts water. I have also used Zoologic KMR: Multi Milk: water, 3:1:6, successfully. I prefer KMR and FV Kitten over the non-cat equivalent because it is more likely to have adequate taurine. Zoologic has slightly more protein and fat than Fox Valley equivalents. The diet should be supplemented with daily salmon oil, up to a mL or more as they get bigger, especially if showing signs of dry skin. Spitting up formula was not uncommon, especially when taking formula from a dish, caused by a combination of eating too fast and an immature swallowing mechanism.

The best weaning diet is natural prey, since they appear to imprint on their diet at an early age: whole mice (puréed, chopped, or slit open as necessary), fish (minnows, fresh, canned with no salt or seasoning, and/or frozen), and small rats. A high quality moist kitten food is a practical supplement. I found the raw cat food (e.g., Primal Nuggets feline beef and salmon) to be a good option. Also offer insects (mealworms and crickets, captured free range worms & bugs, etc.) and the occasional raw egg, whole chicks, and other prey foods for exposure to natural food options. Their jaws and teeth are considerably more powerful than either weasels or ferrets. I found they relished fish skeletons (including the head and tail) and a variety of fish scraps left over from filleting the fish, obtained from a seafood deli section. They did not eat tuna and were not impressed with salmon (although salmon oil is, of course, delicious). If possible vary the source of food and offer wild caught (snap trap) mice and rats on occasion.

Housing:
Provide supplemental heat for as long as they are interested, nest areas (piles of fleece work well), and cover. As they become more mobile space needs increase rapidly(!). Bedding such as hammocks, tunnels, multi-levels, and cubes on a base layer that is absorbent and easy to spot clean (such as paper towels or small pads spread over cage pads) work well. Sturdy ferret supplies (beds, hammocks, hide-aways) are generally the right size, and large igloos make a nice den. Provide multiple options. It is important for a successful release that the instinct to hide and stay under cover is not conditioned out, as well as being less stressful for the animal if they can feel hidden and thus safe. Mink are receptive to using a litter box; I have used sand or wood pellets for the fill.

Mustelids are scent markers. Avoid an entire cage cleaning in favor of no more than 25% at a time, including furnishings and enrichment items. Often bedding can be shaken out and returned to the cage. **Expose to a natural light cycle. Do not house different mustelid species together as they are all in a predator/prey relationship.**

They are high energy and very smart, so frequent changes and additions of cage enrichment is critical. New soft toys are always fun, and small dog and ferret items, teenie beanies, and dangling toys, along with tents, tunnels, containers, and other hide-aways are often suitable. Toys will be cached. Intestinal obstruction from eating toys, does not seem to be a problem like it is with ferrets but of course supervise toys and playtime. Fleece straps last longer than cords; swivel clips, shower hooks, and key rings are useful for attachment to the cage.

At 6-8 weeks they should be introduced to water for swimming. Shallow pools they can easily get in and out of and walk around in, such as large plant trays weighted with river rock or shallow litter box/storage bins initially, progressing to low-sided kiddie-pools, aquariums, stock tanks. Live minnows, ice cubes, and toys may encourage them to put their head under water and start swimming. They must be able to get themselves in and out easily, and will probably spend a lot of time going in then out to shake off, with intervals of swimming.
Pre-release Conditioning:
It is critical that the instinct to hide is not conditioned out of the young mink. While adult mink are not often predated, they are preyed upon by larger predators such as great horned owls, fox, coyote, and bobcat. They are also prized by fur trappers. **Offer an extensive network of tunnels and hiding spaces at all times.** They are active at all hours of the day and night, alternating rest intervals with bursts of activity, but primarily nocturnal.

They must be able to swim against a strong current, climb, and hunt, catch, and kill both aquatic and land prey such as mice, fish, crayfish, rats, and perhaps birds (including water fowl) prior to release.

One way to introduce them to the concept of swimming with currents in their water is to turn the hose on full blast into the pool. They should also have the opportunity to practice diving and deep-water swimming. A stock tank or larger swimming pool is a good option, always with a way for the mink to get in and out on their own. They swim in short intervals, rather than spending long periods in the water. They are a semi-aquatic animal, and their coats are not fully waterproof like the fur of beavers and otters.

Begin live prey training with minnows and young mice, rats, or birds. They will quickly master the technique. They are not ready for release at this point! **They must know how to hunt and kill wild prey prior to release,** unless it is a very well supported soft release. Hunting is a learned skill, and they have a narrow window of opportunity to learn before starving to death without extensive support. In the wild the young stay with their mother until early fall, and they must bulk up before winter. Exposure to wild mice and small rats, crayfish and frogs, birds, and live crickets and earthworms, in addition to a variety of fish and minnows will help prepare them for release.

“Cage Rage” and desperate attempts to escape indicate a need for more space and/or more enrichment, not necessarily that they are ready for release.

Release in the area where they found, if possible, otherwise along a quiet waterway in late August or early September. Mink are solitary and very territorial, except for mating and raising the young, so try not to release in the immediate vicinity of other mink, although the adults seem tolerant of the dispersing young in late summer.

Notes: