SETTING THE TRAP: Ryan Gorman dabs a scent designed to lure mink to a trap at Point Pelee National Park so he can study them.

Star photo: Sharon Hill

Researcher collars mink

By Sharon Hill
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LEAMINGTON

A trail of tracks in the snow beside a hidden metal cage looks promising for researcher Ryan Gorman as he pursues the elusive mink of Point Pelee National Park.

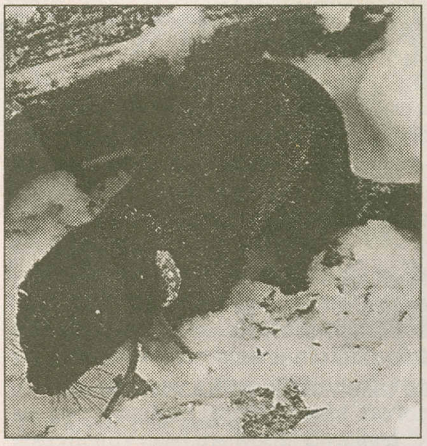
He kneels in the snow, peeks in a hole and finds nothing. He's on his way to another 0-for-35 day.

"I haven't caught one for two weeks at least," he says as he heads back to his truck.

Gorman, a graduate ecology student at Trent University in Peterborough, wants to catch live minks in the 35 traps he checks daily so he can attach radio collars and release them.

It's the first study of mink in the park, in Ontario and probably in Canada, says Trent University professor Jeff Bowman, who also works in the wildlife research section of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

"They're extremely difficult to trap," Bowman says.



TRANSMITTER: This mink was fitted with a radio collar so researcher Ryan Gorman can track it at Point Pelee National Park.

Special to The Star: Ryan Gorman

Mink, a member of the weasel family, are not easily attracted to bait. In addition to fish left in the trap, the pair of researchers rub a mink scent around the trap.

The scientists also had to find special radio collars from England that would stay on the mink, which have thick necks and skinny heads. So far, five have been collared.

Tracking them will help the researchers learn more about mink, such as the size and health of the local population.

Using historical information from trappers and other field work, the scientists should be able to tell if the Ontario population is faring well or declining.

The mink, which live beside marshes and eat fish along with mice and rabbits, are also good indicators of an ecosystem's health. Bowman received $60,000 for the study from the Canada-Ontario Agreement, a federal and provincial agreement focused on Great Lakes water quality.

By taking blood samples, the researchers can discover PCB levels in the animals. PCBs have been banned for more than two decades, but are still in the sediment. The chemical accumulates in minks because they are at the top of the aquatic food chain.