

POTOMAC MUSKRATS.

QUEER HABITS OF THESE WILY AND TROUBLESOME LITTLE RODENTS.

Their Depredations In Cornfields and Vegetable Patches—They Are Easily Caught In Spite of Much Canning—Undetermined by Canal Building.

Of all the queer creatures, including crawfish, turtles, bullfrogs, etc., which infest the shores of the Potomac near Washington, affording sport to small boys gifted with an appetite for the chase, not least interesting is the muskrat.

Muskrafs, though timid animals, seek the neighborhood of human habitations. They were learned that the presence of man assures them an abundance of food, while at the same time their natural enemies are fewer. Hereabout they flourish, being to a great extent undisturbed. They are not destroyed by farmers, though in certain regions they are dreaded enemies of agriculture. Of corn they are extravagantly fond. They will eat it at any stage of its growth—the seed from the ground, the young plant from the furrow or the "roasting ear" from the stalk.

They visit the cornfield at night, cutting down the stalks and carrying away the juicy ears. At times streams flowing through "bottom lands" where this cereal is cultivated are fairly covered with floating stalks—the result of the nocturnal forays of these vermin. In order to make the flinty grains tender they will sometimes deposit the ears in water for two or three days. These animals are fond of many kinds of vegetables, robbing apple orchards and patches of turnips and parsnips. In winter and early spring they subsist in great part on the flesh of river mussels. Probably they are driven by hunger to this diet of shellfish.

Records of this habit are preserved in the banks of many canals, where alternate deposits of shells cleaned by muskrats and of sediment may be seen in places reaching to a depth of some feet. The means by which the animal obtains the mussel from its shell has been much discussed. Probably it is often done by inserting the paws or teeth between the valves and tearing them apart. If the mollusk cannot be caught unawares, the edges of the shell are broken by means of the teeth. The heavier species of mussels, it is believed, are carried out upon the bank and left until they become weak or die, when the valves can be easily separated.

Muskrafs, you see, are very clever creatures. Farmers attribute to them an appetite for young ducks, but it is probable that they are wrongly credited with a destruction actually committed by turtles.

These rodents are very unsuspicious and are easily captured. Many of them are killed by means of poisoned apples or turnips placed near their burrows. One of the most effective traps for them is a barrel without end placed upright near the bank of a stream, so as to be about half filled with water. Inside of it upon the water are put grass and weeds with some pieces of parsnips. Every night the barrel is likely to capture from one to half a dozen muskrats.

When a rat gets inside, it is impossible, owing to the depth of the water, for it to stand upon its hind legs and cut a hole in the staves above water line. At the same time it cannot get out at the top. When several are taken the same night, a fight usually ensues, resulting in the death of all of the captives either by the sharp teeth of their companions or by drowning. The muskrat is a very voracious when cornered. Its worst enemy, next to man, is the dog. Hawks, owls, foxes and mink all prey upon it. These rodents have been found in the canals of large cities, but the fishes were so tainted with the flavor of the food as to be unfit to eat.

With the building of canals in various parts of the country has come a change in the life of the muskrats in many localities. They have actually abandoned to a great extent the streams to take up their habitations along the banks of these artificial waterways. No doubt they realize the greater security afforded them from floods and other dangers. These animals will rarely occupy banks of gravel or sand, preferring loam or light clay. Advantage has been taken of this fact by railways, which so long as they construct banks of gravel and keep them free from vegetable growth are rarely bothered by the rodents. Otherwise great damage is done, the burrows caving in, undermining the tracks and doing other injury.

In early spring the greatest damage is done. With the alternate freezing and thawing at that time of the year the coverings of the underground passages fall in, exposing cavities of surprising extent to one who does not know the amount of subterranean work these animals are capable of doing. Much vigilance with eyes and ears is often required to prevent such caving from causing disastrous injury to property. The burrows commonly extend into the bank for a distance of from 10 to 30 feet. There are usually two openings from which passages lead backward and upward from the stream very crookedly. They end in a large gallery, which is the home of the muskrat.—Washington Star.

Tidal Waves.
The question whether there be such a thing as a tidal wave I once asked the captain of an Atlantic liner. "Oh, yes," he answered; "we keep a tidal wave for the passengers and the newspapers. If you want to know what it really is, I will tell you. It is when a powerful ship is driven through a head sea at such speed that before she can clear herself of one big wave she is into a second. The second and first together are too much for the ship, and she carries away a deckhouse or bridge or a boat or two. That is a tidal wave."—Cor. New York Tribune.

How He Felt.
It is told of one of the most austere bishops of the American Episcopal church that once when catechizing a class of boys he called attention to the disobedience of Jonah and the consequent punishment. To enforce the lesson he said in a stern way, "And now, boys, how did Jonah feel when the whale swallowed him?" One bright lad answered, "I think he felt down in the mouth."—Philadelphia Press.

THE MILLIONTH OF A SECOND.

This Astonishingly Small Amount of Time Measured by Electricity.

Instantaneous photography has made us familiar with the fact that very minute subdivisions of time are possible. Successful negatives are now frequently taken where exposure lasts only the one-thousandth part of a second.

But at the first blush the statement that a single tick of the clock—the three thousand six-hundredth part of an hour—can be divided into millions seems almost incredible, so infinitesimal is the fraction of time to be determined. This is a scientific age, and science is nothing if it is not exact. Man has measured and weighed the abysses of the great oceans that cover three-fourths of the surface of our migratory planet and can give approximately the number of drops of water and grains of sodium chloride of which it is made up.

He has also computed the size, measured the distances and analyzed the composition of stars so distant as to be not even visible to the naked eye. After this it requires a very bold or a very ignorant individual to set any limit to human ingenuity.

That extremely minute fractions of time could be accurately determined was incidentally discovered by a celebrated electrician while making some famous experiments with regard to the velocity of electricity.

For the purpose of his experiment he caused an electric discharge from a Leyden jar to be sent through half a mile of copper wire with a break in the center. This gave rise to three sparks, which were reflected in a rapidly rotating mirror revolving at the enormous rate of 800 times a second.

The position of the sparks in the mirror showed that the central spark was slightly out of line, or was slightly retarded as compared with the other two, which were strictly simultaneous. The mirror, therefore, had moved forward somewhat while the electric charge was traveling through the quarter of a mile of wire to the central break.

The difference between the position of the sparks was found to be one-fourth of a degree, and as the mirror revolved through 360 degrees in the one-eightieth of a second the actual retardation of the central spark amounted to the one one million one hundred and fifty-second thousandth part of a second only.

This is the smallest fraction of time ever determined. It is obvious that by simply lengthening the wire through which the electric discharge is sent less minute fractions of time can be accurately determined in a similar manner. If it takes an electric discharge the one-millionth part of a second to travel over one-quarter mile of wire, it takes four times as long to journey a mile, or, to be exact, the two hundred and eighty-eight thousandth part of a second. In other words, electricity travels 288,000 miles per second.

It is by the above method scientists have been able to ascertain the velocity of electricity and duration of electric flash, the speed and duration of lighting, the velocity of light and much other valuable information respecting the properties of these forces of nature.—Boston Globe.

The Trade in Maine Ashes.
"Maine burns more firewood to keep warm winters than any other eastern state," says a Maine man who has been in the business. "The wood is of better quality and makes better ashes than can be collected in Massachusetts or New Hampshire, and there's a sharp demand for Maine ashes in the middle and southern states for agricultural purposes. Great quantities are used in Massachusetts also. There are a number of dealers in Boston who make a business of collecting ashes through Maine for shipment. Carloads and carloads of them go out of the state by rail yearly, and shiploads are sent to Florida and Georgia, where they want the best hard wood article. They send north phosphate rock, and we send them ashes, and the trade is a benefit to both sections."

"There are some parts of Maine denominated 'prime' by the dealers, because they are in hard wood, maple and birch regions and do not burn much soft wood. In some of these localities there is a sharp competition in the business. Leached ashes from the potash and soap factories used to be shipped mostly, but they've gone out, and dry ashes are wanted. So much is this the case that one potash man I knew, a dishonest fellow, dried his leached ashes and shipped them as unleached. The potashes and local soap factories of Maine are run under by the demand for dry ashes and are going out of business. Probably the day is not far distant when dealers in Portland, Bangor and other Maine towns will look after this trade and do the shipping direct from Maine ports to the southern states. There is a large profit in it, if I am not mistaken."—Lewiston Journal.

John Ruskin's Home.
Of Brantwood, the chosen lakeside home of John Ruskin during the last quarter century of his life, occupies one of the most favored spots in all England. Situated on the border line of Lancashire and Cumberland in the lake district, it overlooks the smallest of the waters in that "lake country" with which the names of Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, Lamb, Lloyd and Wilson are indelibly connected.

Set in the background of a half encircling wood of exquisite grace and mystic beauty, as seen in the green half light of its tranquil shade, Brantwood is protected from the east winds by the open, rising moorland that stretches far to the rear and faces a long slope of lawn that sweeps down to Conistown water's edge. Behind the green and purple moor the water of its overflowing walls runs swiftly down the rocks with all the fuss of a real cascade, and the exalted rock of "Naboth" rises just beyond the borders of his estate—a sort of natural pulpit which is rented by Ruskin, so that from its greater height, which he loves to climb, he may gaze upon the wider view. In front the narrow lake, sparkling in the sun and blue as the waters of the Rhone or of Thun. Then the rising banks beyond of broken green, with white faced houses blinking behind the trees, and the gray village of Conistown nestling away to the right, close down by the head of the lake, and beyond the "Old Man" himself towers above the smaller hills that rise close about his knees.—McClure's Magazine.

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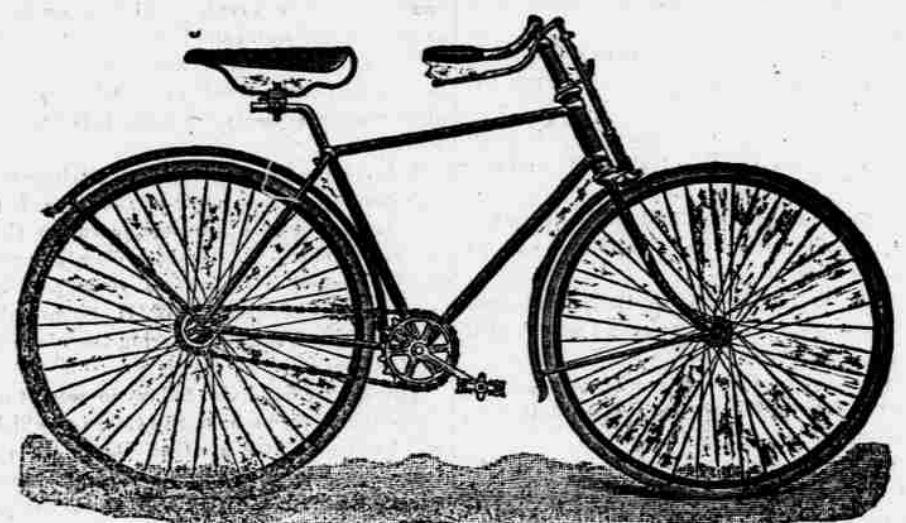
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