

Pesky Muskrat Critter Useful Dead or Alive



GENE BRANSON of the Tule Lake Wildlife Refuge looks over some of the government's share of muskrat pelts in the drying shed, located at the old CCC Camp. More than 12,000 muskies were trapped in Tule Lake and Lower Klamath Lake wildlife areas.

By MALCOLM EPLEY JR.
There are lots of folks who like what the muskrat has to offer after he's already dead—for coats, mink for perfume, mink food and "marsh rabbit" dinners.

But the Tulelake Fish and Wildlife Refuge like a certain number of the pesky little varmints alive and well on their properties. Despite the fact they are the bone of the irrigation district manager and the farmer, they serve a useful purpose on the refuge.

Amazingly enough, the Klamath Basin's vast marshlands don't come by muskrats naturally. Man introduced them here some years ago from the Great Lakes region. Practically every other marsh in North America could boast (or worry about) them.

The quality of the original planting stock of Klamath muskrat was high, and consequently, locally trapped furs have always sold at a premium in the Pacific Coast states.

Because the muskrat is constantly in search of food, he does a job for the Wildlife Service at Tulelake that otherwise would cost lots of money. He feeds on the root stalks of marsh plants, keeping the growth opened up instead of allowing it to become a vast, impenetrable stand of tubes which would trap away waterfowl. Other food and aquatic plants grow on the openings made by the rat, and during bad weather wild ducks and geese find shelter there.

Still another thing—from the wildlife standpoint—in favor of muskrat is that his house makes a fine nesting place for the wild birds. Mr. Tom Horn of the Tule Lake Refuge says there's hardly a rat house without a nest of some sort on it.

Muskrats, Horn says, have cyclic peaks of population which rise and fall without regularity and whether or not their populations are trapped. They produce two or three litters per year and average four little ones per litter. If some sort of control were not exercised over them, Horn notes, either natural or man made, the populations would build rapidly.

He describes them as lazy little animals, evidently always hungry. "Evidently," he says, "all of the muskrat's activity revolves around getting something to eat. When cold weather approaches they shiver unprotected until forced to build houses. They do this by clipping off cattails and bulrush stalks and dragging them into big piles. Inside they burrow out rooms and passageways."

BUBBLES
They store no winter food, but live "by hand to mouth" by diving under the ice through a hole maintained throughout the winter in their house. They pull up and clip

off the roots of bulrushes and cattails. They can swim long distances under water, and Horn notes that some people think they can catch their breath by finding air pockets between the ice and the surface of the water.

Sometimes muskrats will build into steep banks for rooms—and that's the main objection of farmers to the versatile animals. Many times they'll drill right through the bank and washouts occur when water levels are raised the next spring.

In the deep South, Horn says, muskrats are commonly served in cafes under the delicate-sounding title—"Marsh Rabbits." Apparently, though, our tastes haven't developed yet in the West to that point.

The past season, Horn reports, 12 trappers took 8,372 muskrats off the Tule Lake wildlife area, and

four more took 4,036 off the Lower Klamath area. This, the first season's trapping in three years there, brought trappers the present market level of \$1 per pelt.

TO BUREAU
Trapping permits are issued on a 50-50 basis, with the government getting half of the pelts taken for the trapping rights. Revenue from the government's share of the trappings this year will be credited to the Bureau of Reclamation, Horn said.

"The wildlife manager reported 'clean trap' operations were made along agricultural areas of the refuge—the League of Nations and Frog Pond areas—to keep dike-boring muskrats from doing damage. The same was done in the lower Klamath area, he said.

Muskrat skinning has become quite a skill, with good skinners developing phenomenal speeds of

stripping the furs from the tiny bodies. After skinning, the pelts are placed on stretchers for drying and are then shipped; the government ships its share in bales of 1000 pelts each.

Horn tells a story off-told in the Louisiana country where the "marsh rabbit" is such a delicacy: "Every year," he says, "a contest is held there to determine the state champion muskrat skinner. The idea was that the signal to start skinning is given when the starter throws a muskrat into the air. The man who won the cham-

ponship began skinning at that signal—and skinned six muskrats before the starting rat had hit the ground."

Horn suggests we take this with a grain of salt.

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ON THE DRYING RACKS, trapped muskrats await the skinning operations. Skinners become phenomenally quick in stripping the fur from the carcasses of the muskrat.

SCOUTS AID BLOOD DRIVE

NEW YORK (AP)—Boy Scouts, some 90,000 strong will start knocking on doors soon to help the American Red Cross get pledges for blood donations.

RADIO COURTESY OF U. S.

SAIGON, Indo-China (AP)—Thousands of Vietnamese villagers in remote, un electrified areas will be listening to international and local radio sets. The American Mutual Security Administration is distributing 400 community listening radio sets.

MORE MEAT THIS YEAR
COLUMBUS, O. (AP)—The average U. S. citizen probably will eat 2 or 3 pounds more meat this year than last, says C. F. Christian, consumer specialist at Ohio State University. Total meat production this year is expected to be larger than last year. Average meat consumption last year was 138 pounds.

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