

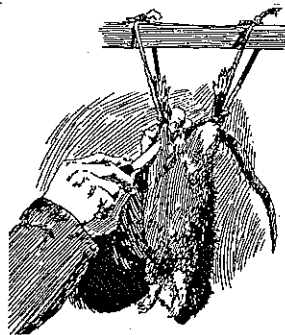
HOW TO HUNT MUSKRATS



BY
J. OLIVIER CORWOOD

PERHAPS there is no animal better known to the boy inhabitants of North America than that clever little aquatic denizen of every lake, creek and pond from the great northern woods of Canada far down into the south, commonly known as the muskrat; and with the beginning of the breaking up of the ice this spring thousands of boys will prepare to take as many as they can of the glossy brown pelts which are now in such great demand by furriers all over the country.

To those boys who love outdoor sport, and who delight in the excitement of hunting and trapping, there is offered no better opportunity of earning spending money, or running up a small bank account, than by hunting these animals. Especially is this true of those who live in the country or in small cities, for the waters in such neighborhoods are always fairly alive with muskrats. Even in larger cities, where the populations run up into hundreds of thousands, muskrat hunting can be carried on with success by those boys who live in the suburbs, or near a stream running through the city. It may interest young rat hunters to know that the author himself, who lived in a city of fifteen thousand inhabitants, caught nearly one thousand



SETTING A MUSKRAT

muskrats in the spring of his last year in high school, and that the three hundred dollars revenue which came for them helped to pay through his first year at college; and muskrats are as numerous today as they were then, which was not a long time ago.

Those who contemplate trapping should begin their preparations before the first spring thaw comes. And to trap successfully, unless a boy is somewhat of a naturalist, he should learn a few things before he makes his first attempt, for, just as spring pelts are worth two or three times as much as those taken in the fall, so is rat catching as much more difficult in the spring as in the autumn. Then the water in rivers, creeks and ponds is higher, and in many instances the broken ice conceals the rat holes. The water is freezing to the touch, and wet feet occasion discomfort that would not be noticed in a warmer season.

By the time the first fairly warm days come, when the snow and ice begin to thaw, the trapper should be prepared. In the middle west these days usually come with the "January thaw," which ordinarily puts in an appearance sometime in February, and good trapping continues until May. From half a dozen to a dozen traps are sufficient for a schoolboy to attend to unless he is in partnership with a chum, in which case the sport is more agreeable and more traps can be attended to. These traps need not be expensive ones, and they must not be too strong. Ordinarily a steel rat trap that costs more than fifteen cents has too powerful a spring, closing with such force that the jaws break the rat's leg, in which event the animal usually tears himself free, leaving the severed leg behind.

A few days before trapping begins the hunter should carefully examine the creek or pond along which he intends to work in order to discover the feeding grounds or other places which the muskrats frequent. To one who has had experience in trapping these are easily distinguishable, but by amateurs they are often passed unnoticed. Following closely along the edge of the water one

must examine every little spot of snow or soft ground for tracks of the animals. These tracks are much like those of a cat, only smaller; and where they are found it is a pretty good rule to set a baited trap, especially if the hole cannot be located. But efforts should first be made to find the hole. In the early spring rats are always prepared for floods, and after they have left their houses they burrow their new homes high up under the bank. A hole that is used by rats can be easily recognized by the worn path leading from it, and where one such hole is found others are pretty certain to be in the neighborhood, for, though it may not be easily located, a feeding ground is near. This feeding ground may still be under the water and ice, or it may be in plain sight, and usually it is nothing more nor less than a good growth of bulrushes, on the roots of which the muskrats feed.

Once the hunter has thus familiarized himself with his trapping ground he is ready to begin work. Traps should first be set at the holes, and it is a great mistake not only of young trappers but of older ones as well to just place the trap in the muskrat's path, fasten the chain, and leave it there. Nine times out of ten the following morning will find the trap un sprung, for muskrats are among the shrewdest little animals in existence. They never plunge blindly out of their holes. First they come up very cautiously, and stick their heads out; and you must remember that they are night animals and can see well. If there is anything suspicious in the path of one of these animals he is sure to notice it, and he either jumps over the obstacle or goes around it.

So it is necessary to use some skill in setting the trap. The end of the chain should be fastened to a log, or a stick driven in the ground out of sight of the hole. Then a shallow hole a little larger than the open trap must be scooped out at the mouth of the muskrat's home, and the trap set in it, after which the chain, trap, and even the chain stick should be concealed under a thin covering of mud, snow, or old vegetation. That night the boy who has set the trap may go to bed with a pretty sure conviction that he will have a rat the next morning. The same method of setting the traps should be followed near feeding grounds and in the runways of the animals, with the exception that here it is necessary to use bait. In my experience I have found bits of parsnip and apple very good, but have little confidence in potato and cabbage, which some use. This bait should be stuck on the end of a long stick which is set into the ground at such an angle that the base of it is two feet away from the trap, and the bait end directly above it. If the stick is set too straight the muskrat will not be compelled to perch himself on his hind feet to reach for the bait, and thus get into the trap, but will be able to support himself against it and without danger to his legs.

Of course the next step of the successful trapper is to properly kill and skin his game. A rat in a trap should never be shot or killed with a sharp instrument as these methods will damage the pelt. A good rap or two over the head with a blunt stick will settle his ratship. It must not be supposed that when a rat is caught the location of the trap should be changed. Muskrats live in large families, and ordinarily where one is taken other successes will follow if all evidences of the struggle are obliterated under a covering of mud, leaves and sticks. From under one willow the author took seventeen muskrats in a single season.

Until one has become experienced the easiest way to skin a muskrat is to first hang the animal by its hind legs from

a limb, or a board nailed to the side of a building, and then with a sharp knife to cut around each of these legs just above the knee. Then the knife should be carefully drawn through the pelt down the inside of the leg across to the opposite leg, and up to the other circular cut. After this the hide can be gradually worked down over the head, where the knife must again be skillfully employed to detach the skin from the skull. When the pelt is off it should immediately be stretched over a board or a shingle brought to a rounded point at the end, and then hung up in a cool, dry place to mature. In about a week it is ready for sale.

If a trapper is fortunate enough to possess a gun as well as traps his success should easily be doubled. Nights when the moon is high and clear are the times to shoot muskrats. If the hunter walks up and down a creek or pond, no matter how quietly, he will get nothing; his only chance lies in concealing himself in the neighborhood of a feeding ground, and there quietly await developments. From early evening until midnight the rats play and feed. They may be heard jumping and splashing in the water a few rods away, but unless the moon is very bright they cannot be seen at any great distance. Then, suddenly, a silvery white streak is seen shooting across the stream. It moves very swiftly, and at the very head of it is the rat. There must be no quick movement in raising the gun, no sudden shifting of a foot or an arm, or a heavy splash will tell the hunter that his quarry has gone under water and is surrying homeward in safety. The boy should be in a position to fire without shifting his position. In fact his eyes should be constantly glued to a certain stretch of water, and whenever a streak appears there he should blaze away at the head of it. If the shot is a true one the body of the rat, which, with the heavy fur of spring will be almost as large as a small cat, may be seen floating slowly with the current.

Now a word about marketing muskrat pelts, and especially those taken from rats which have been shot. In shooting, trapping, and disposing of about five thousand rats I have found that the majority of those merchants who buy pelts have no scruples against taking the long end of a bargain. This comes pretty near to saying that many of them are dishonest, but not quite. The pelt of a fair sized rat captured in the early spring should be worth at least twenty five cents, and some of them are worth thirty five. But the man who buys them of you near your home will offer you about twelve or fifteen cents, and will probably say that he is giving you more than they are worth at that. As a matter of fact he will make a big profit, a profit which the trapper himself is entitled to. So the best plan is to write to a well-known furrier in some large city, tell him what you have, and send him a number of pelts as samples. He will then offer you a price, providing all of your pelts are as good as those submitted. Especially do home dealers take advantage of those who have shot rats. They point out the tiny shot holes and declare that the pelt is almost worthless ("so many holes in it, you see"), but that they will take chances, and give you



MUSKRAT SHOOTING BY MOONLIGHT

half price. In reality the pelt is worth practically as much as if the holes were not in it. Tiny pieces of fat stripped from the animal are sometimes placed over the holes, and this, after the pelt is "matured," becomes a part of the hardened skin, completely concealing the alleged defects.

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