

# Muskrat common but not well known

By ART BRIGGS JUDE

Except for trappers, wildlife biologists, and other wetland researchers such as those involved with Ducks Unlimited, few people really know much about one of Ontario's most common marsh creatures, the muskrat.

Yet this semi-aquatic so-called marsh rabbit is found in almost every lake, river, pond, and swamp not only in this province, but in all of North America.

Little wonder an animal having such a widespread distribution and possessing such a rich coat is customarily referred to as the bread and butter article of the fur trade.

Often averaging less than \$5 a pelt, this "rat," as the fur harvesters traditionally call it, nevertheless contributes the lion's share to an overall Canadian fur industry valued at between \$600 million and \$1 billion annually.

No less valuable in the U.S. where trappers in the State of Michigan alone harvest 500,000 of these animals each year, muskrats are also good to eat.

Many natural food devotees for example are just now finding out what our native people knew all along. That muskrat and other wild meats are high protein low cholesterol food sources.

A little care in skinning, and a soaking overnight in salt brine are all that's required. They are best however during the autumn and winter months when the musk-



Despite their large numbers, muskrats are often overlooked by nature watchers. The small furry creatures are found in marshlands and their pelts are still coveted for the fur.

glands are constricted. But besides having a significant economic and dietary impact on the lives of so many, muskrats are

an interesting part of our wildlife community.

They can often be seen in the warm weather months swimming

about in shallow water or in mild winters, rambling across woodland borders or snow-filled ditches.

By mid-May the first litters are already moving about in their bank burrows and the parents can be observed ferrying clumps of fresh-cut marsh grass to the dens.

Where wetland areas support the necessary luxuriant growth of cattails, rushes, pond lilies and sedges, muskrats have the potential for rapid population explosions.

In such marshes, winter densities of up to 35 individuals an acre are not uncommon. Along creeks and river banks 16 to 18 adults per mile is a heavy concentration.

Due to a rapid breeding cycle which may result in three litters a season, each with 5 or more young, muskrat numbers often increase to the point where they exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat.

Because they are quarrelsome defensive animals, against not only their neighbors but even their recent offspring, vicious fighting breaks out when such high densities occur.

In the ensuing strife, most adults become torn, many juveniles are killed, and some migrate as far as 8 miles to safety.

With razor sharp teeth a muskrat has the potential of inflicting a severe bite on anyone or anything that stands in its way, including humans. To confront or corner one of these big rats is courting disaster.

Apart from human interference, this active amphibian must also face a number of natural pre-

dators that share the same locale. Pike and snapping turtles attack the swimming young, while mink are probably the adult muskrat's greatest enemy. Horned owls and the larger hawks frequently include muskrats in their bill of fare, as do foxes and coyotes when they encounter them away from their water home.

These up-to-three pound adults are also susceptible to plagues of tularemia when crowded conditions occur.

With their robust form, small beady eyes, and long flat tails, muskrats have other built in features that are not so noticeable.

The short hidden ears are one as are the furred lips that close behind the incisors allowing the animal to gnaw underwater.

While all legs are short, the front feet are designed to grasp objects and the back feet are partially webbed giving the animal tremendous thrust when swimming.

All in all muskrats are an important part of our wetlands community, whether they are building reed lodges that later help nesting ducks, opening channels by feeding on waterplants, or providing their flesh as food for other creatures.

The one big knock against the muskrat is its tunneling escapades into earth-filled dams and other protected pond banks. Yet even these renegade marsh rabbits can be controlled with a few traps placed in the right locations.

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