

HUNTING AND TRAPPING FURBEARERS IN TEXAS: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Through many years of participation, I have found that hunting and trapping furbearers offers some of the finest sport in the field of outdoor recreation. It can be enjoyed by almost any interested person. The resulting rewards are an invigorated spirit, mind and body and, at times, a handsome economic supplement. Consequently, all efforts should be directed to refine the taking of furbearers in the most ethical manner in order to enhance and perpetuate the fascinating sport.

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In 1958, I was employed as a Wildlife Biologist by the Texas Game and Fish Commission (now Texas Parks and Wildlife Department). Even though my work has been with upland game, my interest in furbearers has never waned. In the early 1960's, permission was received from the Director of Wildlife for me to draft a preliminary furbearer management plan for the State. However, after this was completed it was decided that fur prices were so low that time should not be allotted for its execution. Yet, in the light of the modern fur market and the subsequent need for a reservoir of data on the resource from which to base plans for sound management, I sincerely believe it would have been a most valuable investment of time, talent and experience.

DISCUSSION

Rapidly rising fur prices have commanded that more attention be given to the resource in recent years. During the 1973-74 season, 7000 licensed trappers harvested an estimated 600,000 furbearers in Texas valued at approximately \$3,800,000. Their number increased during the 1974-75 season to 10,000 and they took 700,000 raccoons, ringtails, opossums, skunks, red and gray fox, badger, civet cat and muskrats valued at about \$4,200,000.

If the above figures do not excite you, consider the bicentennial furbearer harvest in the Lone Star State. An army of at least 12,000 hunters with dogs, animal callers, lights combined with guns and thousands of steel traps went afield in the "Spirit of 76" and caught literally thousands of the highest priced furs in the history of the State. Top raccoon pelts brought \$24.00 and seldom did one bring less than \$10.00. Red fox were \$35.00 and gray fox, \$20.00 to \$25.00. Ringtails topped at \$4.00 to \$6.00, skunks, \$2.00, while opossums, muskrats, badgers and civet cats were of less value. However, two predators not classified as furbearers reached an all-time high. Bobcat pelts ranged from \$50.00 to \$80.00 and coyotes from \$10.00 to \$25.00.

These luxurious prices produced a "stir" throughout most of the State not witnessed in my lifetime and possibly never before. Furbuyers, like lizards in the springtime, emerged from almost everywhere. Suddenly old warehouses, garages, country stores, homes and even truckbeds became market places for raw furs. Sporting a bank roll that would "choke a cow" most furbuyers had that lean and hungry look that could only be satisfied by the "feel" of grading a batch of prime furs. The aromatic smell of raw furs could be sniffed in more places than you can imagine, and a large number of Texans were having the time of their lives. They listened to the music of the hounds at night and spun yards of hunting and trapping experiences on the street corners in the daytime. The vigorous exercise was good for the body, and the fresh joy of hunting and trapping in the crisp winter environment was a tonic to the soul. Furthermore, tapping this new vein of extra income at a critical time of the year made just about everything complete.

Now that the dust has settled, what are the consequences of this luxurious sport? Is there sufficient broodstock to sustain the anticipated harvest if prices continue to soar? What effect has this accelerated fur market had upon the sport of those who pursue the coyote, bobcat, fox and raccoon for sport alone? A pair of red fox, for instance, is worth about \$70.00 to a trapper on the fur market while the same pair of fox pursued by 3 hunters with 10 hounds each add about \$6,000.00 each year to the local economy from dog food, gasoline and hunting equipment. Who is going to put this into the proper perspective and help preserve the sport? How will the removal of such a large segment of

predators annually affect the ecology of the State? To my knowledge wildlife science has insufficient documentation of facts on furbearers and other predators in Texas to answer accurately these and many other questions in this area of animal biology. Therefore, accelerated research holds the key.

One final word — let us combine our efforts to lift the methods and means of taking furbearers to the highest level in order that the sport “at its best” may continue from *generation to generation*.