

THE STEEL TRAP

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During the past four years we have heard a great deal about our dwindling wild life and the importance of conserving and protecting it. Wild life in the vocabulary of hunters and sportsmen means game birds principally and animals such as deer, bears and rabbits which can be used for food—and, of course, these groups are also terribly concerned about our decreasing flocks of migratory birds. These lovely winged creatures, too, offer choice tid-bits for the Epicurean.

The newly organized General Wild Life federation convened in St. Louis last month. I doubt very much whether anything was said regarding the protection of those beautiful animals in our forests commonly known by sportsmen as predators and vermin. The women of Wisconsin feel, however, that it is high time that these animals be given at least some sort of chance so as to curtail, in a measure, the terrific inroads into the ranks of these fur bearers, which, if unchecked, will result in the extermination of valuable species, all of which are necessary according to the wise provisions of nature.

The department of agriculture estimates that 80,000,000 mammals are killed each year in the United States, not counting those additional millions which need to be destroyed and discarded by the trappers because the pelts of certain animals are not prime or because the fur has been injured during the struggle of the tortured animal to free itself from the vicious steel trap. This is a direct loss to the country and indirectly to every taxpayer.

Demands More Restraint

Our fur bearers are disappearing at too rapid a rate not to require a strict curb on the activities of trappers and these men in the forest should have a bag limit, like any other exploiter of wild life and like hunters be made to observe more effective regulations than have ever been required before.

The following excerpt from the latest bulletin of the University of Wisconsin pertaining to wild life research paints an accurate picture of the present status of Wisconsin's fur bearers:

"The commercial exploitation of the Wisconsin fur resources has pushed three species across the north boundary of the state; marten, fisher and wolverine. A fourth, the otter, persists here in greater numbers than in any other state, but its position is nevertheless precarious.

"Like the moose and the woodland caribou, all four of these valuable fur-bearers occupy a steadily narrowing zone bounded on the north by the tundra, shrinking on the south by the extermination of outlying remnants, and shrinking internally by the gradual thinning of population density.

"On the other hand, the beaver, once in like case, has achieved a dramatic comeback, due no doubt to the indefinite multiplication of its main food—popples—in the wake of forest fires. The beaver has not extended its north boundary like the deer and the prairie grouse, but it has benefited by the same accidental improvement of its habitable range through fire and logging.

"Raccoon and mink have suffered a severe shrinkage in density but not in area. Their decimation may be ascribed mainly to over-trapping, drainage of marshes, and the elimination of hollow trees suitable for dens. Drainage ditches and flowages have created some new range. Drainage tiles and rock outcrops have offset in some degree the lack of den trees. The net trend, however, has been steadily downward. As with fish and pheasants, artificial restocking can delay and mask but not check the shrinkage in habitable area.

"The muskrat, like the raccoon and mink, has shrunk in density, and for similar reasons, but in a less degree. No range has been lost. The shrinkage is masked by cyclic fluctuations. Badgers have shrunk both in range and in density.

"Skunks and weasels persist in generous numbers throughout the state. Like the cottontail, their high breeding capacity, underground dens, and the increase in agricultural foods make them almost immune to serious decimation.

"The opossum, formerly absent from the state, has lately invaded the southern and central counties in increasing numbers, and may be destined to become the starling of the fur-bearers.

Fox Comeback

"Foxes and coyotes have achieved a comeback not unlike that of the beaver, and probably for a parallel reason—that is, an increase in their rodent food supply as a result of settlement and forest fires. The status of foxes is masked by local fluctuations in density, and by the alternating dominance of red and grays. Neither of these shifts is as yet understood, but they are probably associated with epidemic disease.

"Timber wolves, on the other hand, have shrunk northward like the moose, caribou, marten, fisher and wolverine. They persist only in the border counties.

"The lynx has shrunk northward like the wolf, but the bobcat persists over about the same range as the coyote.

"The cougar or puma disappeared with the first settlements.

"The general fur picture is again one of mixed gains and losses, but with an overwhelming predominance of loss."

Wisconsin is one of the largest fur bearing markets in the country. Each licensed trapper may operate 75 traps. There is no bag limit. In addition, 20 beaver and 12 raccoons may be taken by each trapper during the approved trapping season. Multiply this by the eight or nine or ten thousand trapping licenses issued each year and you can deduct for yourself why our animals are becoming scarce.