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RAISING MUSKRATS<sup>1</sup>

Prepared in the Section of Fur Resources, Division of Wildlife Research

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Many persons unfamiliar with the industry of raising muskrats have been deceived by statements that these valuable fur animals can be produced profitably in small pens. This, however, is not the case. The chief requirement in muskrat farming is a suitable marsh or a water area of at least a few hundred acres in extent in which the animals are now found naturally or in which they once lived.

Areas adapted to muskrat production are of three main classes, grouped in the order of their importance: (1) Marsh areas, (2) swamps, and (3) ponds, lakes, streams, canals, and other bodies of water without marshy borders. More muskrats are found on areas of the first type than on areas of equal size of either of the other two. The marsh itself produces the food necessary to maintain the animals and to induce them to live and breed there. The problem on marshes is largely that of guarding against poaching and of employing trapping methods that are not incompatible with maintaining an adequate breeding stock.

RAISING IN PENS

Although it is possible to raise muskrats in pens, it is not a profitable undertaking as a fur-production measure. Reproduction under such restraint is not regular; and losses result from polluted drinking water and from fighting among the animals. More money has to be invested in equipment, feed, and labor than can be realized from the sale of pelts. For these reasons a number of companies have discontinued attempts to raise muskrats in small pens.

FENCING MARSH AREAS

As a rule, large muskrat marshes need not be fenced, but in some instances fencing may be desirable. Steel posts are satisfactory on high and dry land, but in muck or in wet ground, wooden posts are more

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serviceable, and wire of 1-inch mesh, 15-1/2 gage, is suitable for the fence. The posts may be 16 to 20 feet apart, the depth to which they are placed depending on the nature of the soil, and the fence may be sunk 10 to 12 inches below the surface of dry ground, but in marsh and bog lands much deeper sinking will be necessary.

#### BREEDING

Studies of the breeding habits of muskrats are far from complete. The breeding season generally begins late in February or early in March in the northern part of North America and earlier farther south. One frequently hears the statement that in marsh areas of Louisiana and Texas muskrats breed all the year round. This, however, is still open to question. The Fish and Wildlife Service has found that the period of gestation in carefully controlled matings of pen-raised animals is 29 to 31 days. The average number of young in a litter of a young female is 4, and in that of an older female 6.

#### PRIME PELTS

Muskrat pelts taken in fall and early in winter are worth much less than those from animals trapped late in winter or early in spring. The fur is still prime in the latter part of March, but the breeding season in most sections has then begun, so that trapping continued into April would greatly limit the number of animals for the next season. Muskrat farmers would do well to restrict their trapping season to two months--February and March.

#### PUBLICATIONS

The following publications dealing with the raising of muskrats, their life histories, houses, and uses of their fur will be found useful:

The fur-bearers of New York in their relation to agriculture, by W. J. Hamilton, Jr. Cornell Extension Bull. 319, March 1935. New York State College of Agriculture, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y. Free.

Successful muskrat farming, by Robert G. Hodgson. Black Fox Magazine, 425 Fourth Avenue, New York, N. Y. \$4.

Practical muskrat raising, by A. E. Harding. Black Fox Magazine, 425 Fourth Avenue, New York, N. Y. \$1.25.