



Furbearer Management News

Winter 2002



Beaver Management in New York -- Revisited

By Mike Ermer
Region 9-Allegany

The Department's Furbearer Management Team has recently completed a major update of its plan for managing beaver populations in the State. The original plan, entitled "Beaver Management in New York State: History and Specification of Future Program," was adopted in 1992. The 1992 plan was the culmination of years of research on a variety of beaver management-related topics including beaver population dynamics, the role of beaver in creating and maintaining marsh habitat, the use of trapping regulations to control beaver populations and methods for mitigating beaver damage. The plan divided the state into 26 ecologically-based management units. A beaver population objective was determined for each unit based on balancing the habitat benefits of beaver against the damages that beaver cause. The plan described an annual management cycle for maintaining these objectives. Key elements of the management cycle were estimating beaver population levels from fall aerial surveys, determining trapper harvest through pelt sealing, calculation of harvest targets based on population models, and establishment of trapping seasons to achieve harvest targets. The plan also contained a detailed description of policies and procedures for handling beaver damage complaints

and documenting damage complaints annually. At the time of its implementation this plan was arguably the most comprehensive furbearer management plan in the nation.

In the years since 1992 the plan has become increasingly outdated. Since 1992, our staff has been reduced by more than 30 percent. Consequently, the Furbearer Management Team has revisited the plan and made a number of changes.

Although the key elements of the management cycle described in the 1992 plan remain, the level of effort which can be expended on these tasks has been significantly reduced. For example, the revised plan calls for less than half the aerial survey effort of the original plan. Another major reduction is in the effort expended on beaver damage complaints. The policy outlined in the 1992 plan called for field visits by Bureau staff to a majority of the beaver complaint sites. Under the new plan field visits will be made to only about 10 percent of the sites.

Other revisions stem from things we have learned from implementing the plan over the past nine years. An example of this is how we express beaver population objectives for management units. The 1992 plan set population objectives in terms of "occupancy rates" for all units. An occupancy rate is defined as the proportion of available potential habitat sites that are occupied with active colonies. This concept was not only difficult to explain to the public but was also difficult to implement. The principle problem is that in most management units the number of potential beaver habitat sites is increasing each year due to reversion of farmland to brush and woodland. This means the number of active colonies needed to

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meet the objective would increase slightly each year. In the revised plan, unit objectives are expressed as a stable value--active colonies per square mile. This value can easily be converted to total active colonies for each unit. We also found that population objectives were not appropriate for all units. In areas like the central Adirondacks there is not enough access to allow for control of beaver populations by trapping. In these units, our objective is simply to provide adequate trapping opportunity. In other units such as the Hudson Valley, with a few beaver and a great deal of human development, it does not make sense to try to measure beaver populations through aerial surveys. Instead we have set objectives for those units in terms of maintaining beaver damage complaints at a certain level.

Another factor which necessitated the update to the plan was changes to the old management units. In 1998, the existing deer management units and wildlife management units were completely changed, and a single set of new wildlife management units (WMUs) created. The map below shows the new framework for beaver management based on those new WMUs. This map matches up with the table, also shown here, depicting our new approach to beaver management.

Best Management Practices on Track Research Continues in New York

By Gordon Batcheller
Bureau of Wildlife--Albany

The Department of Environmental Conservation is continuing its involvement in the development of best management practices (BMPs) for trapping in the United States. The Department has not only been actively involved in the field research, we also have had a leadership role in guiding the work at the national level.

In 1996, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) began a program to develop BMPs for trapping wildlife in the United States. A BMP is a method to improve an activity by developing recommendations based on sound scientific information while maintaining practicality.

Once completed, the BMPs for trapping furbearers will be provided to state agencies and trappers for incorporation into trapper education and wildlife management programs. In addition to improving wildlife management in the United States, the research and resulting BMPs may be used by other countries to improve their programs. BMPs will also be used by the United States to address international commitments to identify and promote the use of humane traps and trapping methods for capturing wildlife.

New York has been involved in this initiative from the very start. The fifth year of field work has now been completed. For the first four years, we concentrated on trapping Eastern coyotes and red fox with several types of conventional and non-conventional foothold traps. During the fall of 2001, we focused our research on the raccoon, studying the performance of two types of body-gripping traps set on land, the 160 and 220. The same research was also done in Georgia, but the results from work in both states have not yet been analyzed.

Meanwhile, the first BMP (on Eastern coyotes) has been drafted and extensively reviewed. It is now in the final stages of production and distribution to New York trappers is expected in 2002. BMPs for a number of other species will be drafted in the coming year.

Updates on the BMP project may be found on an Internet website set up especially for this purpose. Be sure to check this out. See <http://www.furbearermgmt.org/index.html>.

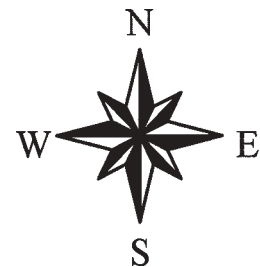
Specifications for Beaver Management

Name of Area	WMU Groupings	Area Sq. Miles	Management Objectives	Aerial Survey Schedule (Fall 2000)	Estimated Population Sites (2000)	Damage Complaint	Trapping Take (2000-01)
West Appalachian Plateau	9J, 9K, 9M, 9N, 9P, 9R, 9S, 9T, 9W, 9X, 9Y	3460	1038 Active Colonies	Annual	900 Active Colonies	116	756
North Appalachian Hills	8M, 8N, 8P, 8R, 8S, 9G, 9H	2783	417 Active Colonies	Every 2nd Year	223 Active Colonies	53	125
Great Lake Plain	8A, 8C, 8F, 8G, 8H, 8J, 8K, 9A, 9C, 9F	4237	100 Complainant Sites Annually	None Planned	No Estimate	64	166
Central Appalachian Plateau	8T, 8W, 8X, 8Y	1556	467 Active Colonies	Annual	264 Active Colonies	52	284
East Appalachian Plateau	7M, 7R, 7S	3106	932 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	963 Active Colonies	84	628
Oneida Lake Plain	6P, 7A, 7F, 7H, 7J	2795	559 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	699 Active Colonies	127	490
Tug Hill Transition	6K	1068	641 Active Colonies	Every 3rd year	705 Active Colonies	63	673
Central Tug Hill	6N	487	Provide Trapping Opportunity	None Planned	No Estimate	24	351
East Ontario Plain	6G	992	347 Active Colonies	2 Years in 3	367 Active Colonies	24	540
St. Lawrence Valley	6A, 6C, 6H	2558	2174 Active Colonies	Annual	2506 Active Colonies	525	4239
North Adirondack	5C, 6F	2138	1283 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	No Estimate	161	717
Central Adirondacks	5F, 5H, 6I	6032	Provide Trapping Opportunity	None Planned	No Estimate	151	1174
Champlain Transition	5A, 5G, 5J	2904	1452 Active Colonies	No Estimate	No Estimate	164	840
Mohawk Valley	4A, 5K, 5R, 6R, 6S	2080	416 Active Colonies	No Estimate	No Estimate	84	294
Ossego-Delaware Hills	4F, 4N, 4O	1899	380 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	456 Active Colonies	68	401
Catskills	3A, 3C, 4G, 4H, 4P, 4R, 4W, 4X,	2759	690 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	883 Active Colonies	75	344
Never sink/ Mongaup	3H, 3K	930	372 Active Colonies	Every 2nd Year	298 Active Colonies	64	96
Hudson Valley	3F, 3J, 3M, 3N, 3P, 4B, 4J, 4K, 4S, 4T, 4Y	2062	106 Complainant Sites Annually	None Planned	No Estimate	116	286
North Taconic Highlands	4C, 4L, 4M, 5N, 5P	967	242 Active Colonies	Every 3rd Year	251 Active Colonies	73	344
South Taconic Highlands	3G, 4U, 4Z	842	295 Active Colonies	Every 2nd Year	261 Active Colonies	42	174
New York City Transition	3R, 3S	707	Minimize Complaints	None Planned	No Estimate	4	11
Coastal Lowlands	1A, 1C, 2A	1509	No Beaver	None Planned	No Beaver	0	0

New York State Beaver and Otter Management Units



* Wildlife Management Unit groupings developed in 1998



MUSKRATS-A DECLINING RESOURCE

By Bill Sharick
Region 4-Stamford

Muskrat trappers from the southern and eastern portions of New York have reported declines in their take and believe the population of these popular furbearers is down. While furtakers in the Lake Plains of western New York, especially the large marsh trappers, seem to be satisfied with their harvest, wildlife biologists can back up the observations of hill country trappers.

A review of New York muskrat harvests over the past 20 years indicates that annual take changes from year to year. The ups and downs of the fur market, combined with short term muskrat population fluctuations from seasonal drought and flooding, have figured into the total numbers of animals available to the trapper.

The long term trend of muskrat take has definitely been downward. The average annual harvest for the five year period 1979 through 1983 was 606,649. From 1995 to 1999, the average annual take was just over 165,000.

However, along with the decline of muskrat take, there has been a great reduction in trapping license buyers and successful muskrat trappers. A total of 31,554 licenses was sold in 1979, but only 9,632 in 1998. Not all license buyers run a line. In the past five years fewer than 50% of licenced buyers set traps for any species of furbearer. There have been fewer than 3,000 successful muskrat trappers statewide. The average take hovers at about 50 per trapper.

It is unlikely that trapping has caused the general large scale decline of muskrats. These animals have a high reproductive rate. They breed several times a year and can produce about six young per litter (not all of these survive until trapping season). Studies have shown that 75% or more of the total population can be harvested. Spring and summer production replaces the losses as long as habitat is suitable. Muskrats live in many water-wetland habitats. However, rivers, streams, beaver ponds and artificial impoundments are the prevalent muskrat sites in the hilly, forested land of southern and eastern New York.

It is very likely that the decline of muskrat populations is the result of long-term reductions of prime habitat from land use changes.

Studies have shown that muskrats living in stream/river situations prefer habitats with banks bordered by open, grassy vegetation and agricultural crops. The animals avoid wooded stream-side cover.

The amount of cropland in New York State has declined by more than 20% since 1970. Less than 15% of southern New York State is farmland and more than 70% is wooded. The streams, rivers and ponds on the abandoned farmland are now bordered by alder and willow: good habitat for mink and beaver, but not the best for muskrats.

There are still many streams, rivers, ponds and small marshes that appear unchanged from years past. Some of these support a fair to good harvest of muskrats. However, the upstream tributaries have changed for the worse for muskrats. The net result is fewer animals throughout the entire watershed.

It is possible that other factors combined to reduce muskrat populations, especially on the local level. Muskrats can, and do, recover from temporary population set-backs (e.g., disease, outbreaks). However, long-term land use changes are essentially impossible to reverse. Muskrat populations will likely never be as abundant in most of New York State as they were in the first half of the 20th century.

Trappers may have to view muskrats in the same way that small game hunters see lower populations of cottontail rabbit, pheasant, and ruffed grouse. Harvest the animals where you can find them. Expect that populations will only be as high as the quality of the habitat will allow. Encourage landowners to practice habitat modification techniques which favor higher populations of muskrats.

The Fur Market in 2000-01

By Robert F. Gotie
Region 7-Cortland

The fur market continued its rebound during the 2000-01 season as stocks of wild fur offered on the world market again reached record lows. Higher gasoline prices and severe winter weather that seemed to persist throughout the 2000-01 fur harvesting season each contributed to lower trapper participation despite higher pelt prices. My own meager experience this past season in central New York bears this out. I can remember only a half dozen times in the last 26 years when I had to wear snowshoes the last week in March to trap beaver in this area. Sure the pelts were prime and the price was up, but it was, as my mentor Roger Miner used to say, "all lugging and hauling." I quit after trapping only one colony. Obviously, other trappers felt the same. The number of beavers taken in 2000-01 fell by more than 6,000 from the number taken in 1999-00. At the same time the average price of a beaver pelt increased by \$4.32 (30% over the 1999-00 value).

During the 2000-01 season, winners outpaced losers by a margin of six to one. Except for mink and marten, the remaining 12 furbearers increased in value over the 1999-00 season. The largest year-to-year increase in relative value for our top five harvested species was recorded for raccoon (\$5.14 to \$7.84 or 53%) and red fox (\$10.80 to \$16.56 or 53%). Beaver increased by 30% and "rats" by 12%.

SPECIES	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	'99-00 to '00-01 Difference
Muskrat	\$5.48	\$3.33	\$1.59	\$2.65	\$2.96	12% increase
Mink	\$18.63	\$11.17	\$9.02	\$10.24	\$9.60	6% decrease
Beaver	\$24.13	\$20.20	\$12.82	\$14.26	\$18.58	30% increase
Otter	\$40.42	\$42.36	\$30.95	\$37.17	\$50.46	36% increase
Raccoon	\$15.39	\$11.33	\$6.58	\$5.14	\$7.84	53% increase
Bobcat	\$25.50	\$41.87	\$31.33	\$29.57	\$46.67	58% increase
Coyote	\$20.59	\$13.08	\$9.12	\$13.45	\$15.10	12% increase
Red Fox	\$18.62	\$13.44	\$9.27	\$10.80	\$16.56	53% increase
Gray Fox	\$12.88	\$10.42	\$5.56	\$6.94	\$9.04	30% increase
Opossum	\$2.01	\$1.17	\$.71	\$.83	\$1.56	88% increase
Skunk	\$3.67	\$2.54	\$2.47	\$2.51	\$3.64	45% increase
Marten	NDA	\$20.50	\$25.33	\$23.23	\$21.38	8% decrease
Weasel	\$2.60	\$1.98	\$2.17	\$2.62	\$3.65	39% increase
Fisher	\$38.70	\$30.42	\$21.90	\$17.40	\$19.05	9% increase

Although these pelt values are still below those recorded in 1996-97, they bear out the predictions of market forecasters for an overall market recovery. The table shown here represents a compilation of averages from 20 local auctions reported directly to me or found in *The Trapper and Predator Caller Magazine* (Association News) during the 2000-01 season.

While we're on the subject of pelt values, I looked into our files for historic records. What I found was extremely interesting. Art Cook, New York's first State Furbearer Biologist summarized pelt values for muskrat, mink, raccoon, red fox and skunk between the years 1919 and 1937. I adjusted these figures by the Consumer Price Index (*The CPI is an index developed and maintained by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*) to put them in context with the value of a dollar today. Below is a table comparing the actual average pelt values paid in 1931 against what these pelts would be worth in 2001.

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The Fur Market . . . from page 6

Species	Pelt Values 1931 (actual)	Pelt Values 1931 (2001 dollars)
Muskrat	\$1.00	\$11.62
Mink	\$5.00	\$58.09
Raccoon	\$4.00	\$46.47
Red fox	\$5.00	\$58.09
Skunk	\$1.50	\$17.43

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to comprehend the genuine difference in pelt worth between then and now. Just look at the two tables in this article. However, because I, like many people, sometimes have a difficult time appreciating economic changes, I searched the Internet further to compare consumer prices of a few goods that would be of interest to trappers. What I found is astonishing.

Pay for an auto worker in 1927 was 10 cents an hour or \$6.00 for a 60-hour week, a very good wage for a blue collar worker at the time. On the other hand, a skunk pelt in 1927 was worth \$2.75 or nearly half a week wages. Is it no wonder that a law (Environmental Conservation Law 11-0901) expressly prohibiting the taking of skunks from dens or holes by digging was passed during this era? How many muskrat pelts do you think you would need to buy a dozen #1 long spring traps in 1931? Try about two! Today the same dozen traps would cost you about 22 muskrat pelts.

The "roaring 20's" and Depression years of the 30's gave rise to the professional fox and mink trappers who ultimately became the first leaders of the New York Trappers Association. Even I am old enough to remember the names of O.L. Butcher and E.J. Dailey. They both sold trapping supplies and wrote some of the earliest manuals for would-be trappers. As I understand it, in their prime they were both "Long Liners" using the auto extensively to get around on their trap lines. An auto trap line remains today the principle method for trapping large numbers of furbearers over a large geographic area. I know a few "long line"

mink trappers who work hard at it today. How many mink pelts do you think it would take to buy a new Model T Ford in 1927 versus today?

According to an article on the Internet a new Model T in 1927 cost \$650. At \$12.00 per mink pelt you would need about 54 pelts to buy this car. Today the cheapest Ford (4 door 2001 Escort) retails for about \$10,500. At current mink pelt prices, it would take about 1,094 pelts to buy this car. Gasoline in 1927 cost about 26 cents per gallon. For the price of one red fox pelt (\$18.00) you could buy about 69 gallons of gas to put in your new Model T. Today you could buy about 12 gallons of gas for every red fox you put on a stretcher. I think by now everyone gets the picture. The value of the raw furs produced today in New York has lost considerable buying power compared to the past.

At one time in our history, it was possible to make a decent living from fur trapping. Today in New York, trapping is a vibrant avocation that helps pay the bills, but has much more significance as an outdoor life style. The declining purchasing power of raw furs produced by trappers and hunters that we have experienced over the years helps explain why fewer and fewer people today continue to trap or hunt furbearers as part of this venerable industry. On the other hand, trapping nuisance or problem animals has dramatically increased. It is in this industry where the opportunity to be a professional trapper lies today. As for me, I will continue to ply the old trade, as long as I am physically able. I'm sure others my age or older will do the same not for the money, but for the sheer labor of love that only a person who has run a trap line can fully realize.

Otter Project Reaches Goal of 279 Otters Released-- Celebration Held in Canandaigua Last June

By *Bruce Penrod*
Region 8-Bath

A great celebration was held for the many players of the New York River Otter Project during the past summer. Over one hundred folks attended, representing the thousands that actually helped the project reach its goal. That goal was the successful release of 279 otters at nine release sites in central and western New York. Numerous individual and organizational awards were presented to recognize many key contributors. The New York State Trappers Association was recognized for its financial contributions as well as the efforts of its members. The individual trappers were recognized for their efforts in capturing otters, as well as helping develop a trapping protocol that would meet the demands of the project.

To help you get a feel for what happened the evening of the celebration, and for the width and breadth of the project, please read the following "toast." Bear in mind that most of the individuals involved in the project are not trappers and know very little of trapping. I firmly believe these people now have a positive and supportive outlook toward trapping because of this project.

I have envisioned the people that have worked on this project similar to those on a large ship. Quite often the individuals at one end of the vessel do not know those at the other, but clearly depend on one another. Those of us on the bridge of the vessel would like to bring everyone's attention to your mates' efforts. For without their efforts, our ship would not be where it is today. First, here's to **the youth**, the young citizens of New York that have embraced the project. Whether bringing us towels or collecting cans to raise funds, they have committed to the restoration of the river otter. Their unselfish dedication bodes well for the future of otters and other natural resources.

Here's to **the volunteers of ROP** (River Otter Project, Inc.). I haven't had the pleasure of

meeting them, but they have been a whirlwind of energy. Whether staffing a booth, selling clothing, making presentations, or creating displays, they have been so very important to educating and informing New Yorkers of the value of our work. They have plugged the leaks when we were short of resources. We are floating high today because they stepped forward and hauled on the lines.

Here's to the **fish gatherers and fish cutters**. To the DEC fisheries staff that bagged endless number of fish collected in biological surveys. To the few of us that had the pleasure of cutting the fish into otter steaks, and learned the benefits of fish oils first hand. (There aren't many!) You served with distinction. **Note the accent is on "stinc"...**

To the **animal care takers** who served with even **greater distinction**. Cleaning otter bed pans is not something highlighted on a resume, but your efforts assured that we put the best quality animals afield to pioneer their new homes.

Here's to the **care givers** who wrote new chapters in the otter history book and guided us in the production of a high quality "releasable" product. We are most thankful for their skills and knowledge and the grace and dedication with which they served.

Here's to the **trappers**, the folks that walked the line--many, many miles, day-after-day through rain, sleet or snow to find nothing in a trap. To those that brought us an otter for the releases and to the trappers that took extra time to help design a better trapping protocol.

Here's to **our trucking company, the Otter Overland Express**, the transporters that hauled captured otters to Cornell University and the Seneca Park Zoo, and those that took them to release sites, day-after-day-after-day. To the "pick-up people" that waited for a call to pick up an otter over the six years, but never got a call.

Here's to **Perry Sumner**, from the Department of Natural Resources in North Carolina, and **Frank Webb** for getting us started on how to catch an otter. To **Manuel Spinola, Frank Felbaum, and Tom Serfass** for their help from Pennsylvania. To the **DEC staff** who held trap-

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Otter Project. . . from page 8

ping workshops, inspected the equipment, and wrote a plan. If you weren't there, we wouldn't be here today.

Here's to those **unmentioned folks** that helped us through a critical time. It goes without saying there were many tasks and efforts that largely went unnoticed. We apologize for what might appear to be a disregard for your efforts, but that is simply not the case. We are extremely grateful for **all** that was done to advance the project. The immensity of our journey has left us in arrears in accolades payable: Please accept this toast as an expression of our gratitude.

Here's to the **corporations and organizations** that had the vision to provide their staff with the opportunity to do good things for otters.

Here's to **ROP's Master Record Keeper and Rapid Bill Payer**, Cindy DiRienzo, for keeping us on track.. Many a trapper owes a timely check to her efforts.

Here's to the **significant other**, wife, friend, daughter, son, that accepted a family member's involvement with the otter project. Especially to Shiela Money, Alan Grethal, Drew Summers, Heidi Kollias, Michael DiRienzo, and Julie Penrod for your support and tolerance. We most certainly would not be where we are today without you.

Here's to the **folks that contributed** to the release of an otter in my Father-in-Law's name, Erron Woodard-a conservationist that we lost during our journey. Special thanks to **Lou and Angie Berchielli**.

Here's to the **friends** we have made and seeds we have sown for partnerships yet to be.

And finally here's to **lobito de rio**, little wolf of the river. *Your ship has come in.* Please join me in raising a glass to all . . . and to wish this furry critter success and prosperity in their new homes in central and western New York. Thank you.

Editor's Note: And thanks to **Bruce Penrod**, for being the leader and professional he is. His commitment and dedication were the backbone of this effort, and we all owe him a hearty "Thank you."

Department of Environmental Conservation Automated Licensing System DECALS

By *Gordon Batcheller*
Bureau of Wildlife-Albany

A major change is in stores for hunters, trappers, and anglers this year. From now on, sporting licenses will be sold via a new computerized licensing system, called "DECALS."

This state-of-the-art automated licensing system will provide sportsmen and sportswomen with all of their tags and permits, including deer management permits, at the time of purchase. That needs to be said again: When you buy your license, and you apply for a deer management permit, a computerized system will either issue you a deer management permit or tell you that you were not selected . . . at the *time of purchase* . . . right then, and there. Deer hunters will no longer fill out an application for a deer management permit and send it to us.

There also will be major changes in how you report your game take to the Department.

For black bear, deer, and turkey you will call a toll-free telephone number and report your harvest by phone. All paper report postcards are being eliminated.

For beaver and coyote harvest, you will still be able to get your pelt-tags the same way you do now: by visiting a regional office, by mailing or faxing your report to Albany, or by making an appointment with a DEC official (e.g., at a fur auction). However, you also will be able to report beaver and coyote by telephone, just the way you would do a deer, turkey, or bear. Once we get your report by telephone, we will mail you the pelt-seals.

Why are we making the switch over to DECALS, the **DEC Automated Licensing System**? In short, it will save you time and money. It will provide better customer service, more efficient license issuance, and make it easier for DEC to collect important data for managing fish and wildlife.

