



VANISHING BREED — *Alaskan trapper prepares snowshoes for winter travel. Decreased demand has reduced harvest in recent years and only a few Alaskans now depend on trapping for a livelihood.*

THE FIRST INFLUX of people into Alaska in the 17th century came from Siberia after Bering's discovery and their sole aim was fur, not gold. An estimated 10 million pelts were taken in less than a century to enrich the royal court of the czars at St. Petersburg and for sale on the fur marts of China.

Russian Raid

The unbridled onslaught on Alaskan fur animals during the Russian regime put the Pribilof fur seal and the sea otter on the skids toward extinction. A four-nation accord between Russia, Japan, Great Britain, and the United States in 1911, put the fur seal and the sea otter under protection and they have been restored almost to their original numbers. Later, the beaver was threatened but a few years of closed seasons soon brought the little dam-builder back into its state of former abundance.

A greatly reduced fur harvest the last few years indicates that Alaskans are now trapping more for

TRAPPING IN ALA

By AMOS BURG

photos by Amos Burg
1929

avocation than as a means of livelihood. For that reason, most trap lines are short as they must be attended on off-work hours.

The 5,700 licensed trappers in the 1971-72 season harvested an estimated 7,200 mink, 16,900 muskrat, 8,100 marten, 2,600 white fox, 1,400 lynx, and 3,911 beaver. This was a very low harvest. Prorated, the catch per trapper is a further indication that trappers were using trapping as a sport and an incentive to get out into the great outdoors and inhale the bracing winter air.

The decline in trapping is not due to any shortage of fur animals. The reason may be that fur prices have not kept pace with the rising cost of traps and snares and the rest of the economy. Trappers were really better off at the turn of the century when the dollar went further and the standard of living was lower with far fewer demands on the earned dollar.

The fur trade has a long history of fluctuating markets. The Fish and Game Department cannot control market conditions, but the department's game division has been successful in developing and applying management techniques that provide for a sustained fur yield. Fur is a perishable crop and must be harvested carefully and regularly or it may be lost.

Modern Methods

Technology has had an impact on trapping. Trap-

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CAMP BREAKFAST — Bannock and black coffee provide this pair of Fort Yukon trappers with breakfast on the trail.

MONUMENT TO TRAPPERS — Stone memorial erected by Hudson's Bay Co. at Fort Yukon honors pioneers who founded the fur trading post in 1848.

pers now are flown to their trap lines in chartered planes. Snowmobiles have almost entirely replaced dog teams for transportation on the winter trap lines in many areas. Many villagers, once serenaded by the howls of hundreds of sled dogs, now hear the staccato sputter of snowmachines warming up for a trip into the bush. With gas prices up to \$2 a gallon in some places, transportation comes high on a long trap line, and expensive snowmachines wear out and break down in the extreme cold temperatures.

Biologist Oliver E. "Bud" Burris, who joined the department at Fairbanks in 1961, has specialized in fur research. Burris revived and updated the methods of collecting statistical fur data on important aspects of the fur harvest. He says that scientific data on fur-bearing animals is often difficult to obtain because the animals are naturally secretive and largely nocturnal.

The number of available animals varies greatly from season to season in various areas. For example, 6,200 lynx were taken in the 1965-66 season. The next season the harvest dropped to 1,900. This year their numbers are reported up again.

In 1966-67, for instance, the highest recorded catches of mink, muskrats, land otter, white fox and other foxes were made in game unit 18 embracing the Yukon and Kuskokwim deltas on the Bering Sea. The most marten that season were caught in the thick

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TRAPPERS CACHE — Trappers near Fort Yukon store bundles of dried salmon for use as dog food.

photo by Amos Burg, 1929

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spruce and hemlock forests at the south end of the Panhandle in Southeastern Alaska.

Out-of-Staters' Dream

The Department receives many letters from persons in the south 49 who fancy that they can locate in the Alaskan wilderness, build a log cabin and make a full living trapping without being bothered by restrictive regulations. Such an idyllic life would be difficult to achieve, Burris notes.

Because of the various land settlements going on, only a few areas are open to entry and these are not necessarily in good trapping areas. Then there are the trapping regulations which put quotas on certain fur animals such as beaver. It would be a precarious and poor subsistence living at best and possibly just one step above starvation.

It requires experience and skill to become an efficient trapper. An expert, hard-working trapper may make \$2,000 in two months, but the average full-time trapper would probably make much less. This is not to say that trapping is no longer of practical importance. Many Alaskans depend upon it for cash and for a few it is practically their only income.

The number of traps used depends upon the type of fur sought. A hustling marten trapper may use hundreds of traps while only a couple of dozen traps and snares may be needed to catch the limit of beaver. Trapping involves more work than catching an

animal. A great deal of fur value can be lost through improper handling in skinning and drying.

Badly shaped drying frames of the wrong size can damage skins. Some trappers have reported that they take up to two hours to properly prepare a mink skin. All damaged, unprime or inferior skins are discounted proportionately and the trappers must respect the fact that fur buyers are selective.

The old-time prospectors who sought gold in the summer and trapped in the winter are gone; their broken-down cabins lie forlorn and deserted in the wilderness. Many village natives who once made a living hunting and trapping as a family unit have either found other occupations or spend the winter in communities so that their children can attend school.

Graded Pelts

When a trapper harvests a pelt he is not assured of a top or even average price. The buyers grade beaver in seven sizes and three or four common types with three grades within each type. With muskrats there are size grades: extra large, large, medium, and smaller size, with a grade for trap or shot damage.

In the 1972 fur market, large and extra large mink pelts brought from \$35 to \$50 down to \$7 to \$9 for medium and small. Dark beaver pelts range from \$42 for sizes 68 inches and over down to \$6 for pale beaver, 43 to 47 inches. A beaver pelt is graded by adding the length plus the width.

Fur prices are affected by warehouses overstocked with imported or domestic fur, continued improvement in man-made synthetic furs and the competition from pen-raised animals such as mink which have uniformly high standards of preparation.

Fashion Reigns

Perhaps the major arbitrator of fur prices is Dame Fashion who may at any time turn her attention elsewhere. The modern housewife may have her eye on appliances for the home or a new car rather than a new fur coat.

Fur coats and other fur products are classified as luxuries. These, like jewels, either appeal to feminine emotions or they don't. There isn't much a trapper can do about that.

Despite low prices and endless labor in subzero temperatures under the flame of the Northern Lights, the aura of romance still clings to the trapper and his adventurous life. Each fall, trappers are still stirred by visions of a snug cabin stocked with the winter's supply of grub and wood and the timelessness of a long winter on the trap line.

Despite exaggerated claims, few if any trappers ever made a fortune, but obviously money-making is not the chief object of the confirmed trapper. As a trapper on the Iditarod once remarked, "Sure, I only average in a year what many Alaskans make in a month. So I guess I'll just have to take the rest of my payment out in the freedom a man finds living in the bush where his time is his own and he is his own boss." ■

Alaska

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NOV.-DEC.1972

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

