

To Trap and Protect

Predator removal assists Horicon waterfowl

By Dick Ellis

With a subtle twist of the paddle, Arnold Groehler manipulates the small skiff to move from a straight track on the Horicon marsh channel to another muskrat trap tucked in near the entrance of a cattail hut. A sea of cattails stretches in every direction on the national wildlife refuge, pocketed in the distance by hardwood islands and veins of oak savannah. Looking far down the narrow channel from the back seat of the skiff, purple flags flutter in the wind every 50 yards or so; more traps and more responsibility for the Wisconsin trapper helping to protect some species of wildlife by knocking down others.

"A wildlife biologist once told me that every raccoon I remove from the marsh will result in the increase of 50 ground nesting ducks like mallards and teal next fall," said Groehler. "Raccoons, skunks and possums are the big three, the primary predators of duck and goose eggs and the most harmful to waterfowl production. The secondary predators are weasels, mink, fox and coyote. We are encouraged by refuge managers to catch all fur-bearing animals as part of the predator control project on the national refuge."

A Predator Control Program on the national refuge, recognized as a major waterfowl production area, helps check the havoc that fur-bearing animals reap on nesting ducks and geese. Any Wisconsin trapper can participate in the predator control program on the marsh, according to Assistant Refuge Manager Diane Kitchen.

"We trap upland species for predator control," she said. "We don't charge the trappers participating in trapping of upland species. We'll issue permits to whoever wants one. We don't see that many trappers coming here."

Kitchen said that the primary purpose of trapping the marsh is to protect and preserve migratory birds and geese, which also includes shorebirds, marsh birds, songbirds and a long list of



Wisconsin trapper Arnold Groehler walks with two raccoons taken on Horicon Marsh as part of a predator removal program that assists nesting waterfowl and egg production. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

other wildlife species that make at least temporary home on the refuge.

Under an auction system that allows trappers to bid for the right to exclusively trap on specific vast "units" of Horicon acreage, muskrats are also targeted on the refuge. By removing muskrats, Kitchen said, trappers preserve the earthen dikes on the marsh that muskrats devastate by tunneling to the point of collapse, and help keep a balance so

that the animal doesn't eradicate too many cattails.

The 2009 trapper auction was held October 7, when six combinations of dike and marsh units and one marsh-only unit were put up for bid. After scouting the refuge to evaluate the value of each unit, trappers earned sole trapping rights for each tract by bidding, with a low bid of \$250 to a high of \$1450. Kitchen said that the 1979 auction realized an all-time high by bringing in \$109,000 in trappers bids with 50,000 muskrats trapped.

"We decide what areas we want to offer for trapping each year," Kitchen said. "The seven trappers each are allowed one helper and the program involves the federal (21,000 acres) and state (11,000 acres) property.

Habitat that is best for waterfowl production is also good for producing lots of muskrats; she said a 50-50 mix of water to cattails is excellent. Muskrats



Arnold Groehler checks his traps set near a muskrat house on Horicon Marsh as part of a predator removal program that assists nesting waterfowl and egg production. (Photo by Dick Ellis)



With his traps marked by purple flags on the vast Horicon Marsh, Wisconsin trapper Arnold Groehler claims another muskrat from his small skiff. (Photo by Dick Ellis)

eat the cattails and make their huts from cattails which open up the small pounds used by ducks and geese for landing areas and nesting.

"Muskrats help achieve a proper balance of water and cattails beneficial to waterfowl, and other wildlife," she said. "Sometimes we won't offer trapping permits in a certain area because we want the muskrats to eat the cattails there."

Groehler's trapline run included both a circuit of upland traps set in the hardwoods and muskrat traps on the water. Leg traps hold the upland predators without harming the animal until they are dispatched with a .22 caliber handgun by the trapper. Several raccoons were part of the take on this blue-bird fall day. A small opossum was also released and scurried off.

As we launched the skiff to check muskrat traps, Groehler said that the sea of cattails as viewed from the dirt roads quickly turn into a "whole new world" when the trapper slips down into the actual jungle. "It's very easy to get lost in the middle of the marsh," Groehler said. "More than once I walked out late at night after walking in circles for several hours after a thick fog appeared. Lesson learned. Now I always carry a compass."

Groehler shared some of the "real joys" of being on the marsh. They include conversing often with a bald eagle on the north end of the marsh as the bird looks down from a dead tree over the trapper at his tasks; viewing the rare sight of eight snowy owls huddled together on cold and miserable day on the lower portion of the main dike road, and

listening to the clockwork response to howling coyotes as the noon Waupun whistle announces the time.

Although the number of muskrats caught on Groehler's unit are naturally declining because of his great success earlier in the season, about one of every three traps checked on this day hold a muskrat. Horicon Marsh, he said, produces muskrats which international fur buyers consider to be the finest in the world. Many Horicon trappers will pool together their catch to form large blocks of several thousand matched muskrat pelts which are more desirable to the largest manufacturers in China. The Chinese view muskrats as a cheaper alternative to mink for use in fur coats.

"The ideal habitat of the Horicon Marsh produces a muskrat that is much larger than muskrats from other areas," Groehler said. "The Horicon muskrat also has a lush, silky dark brown fur with a light blue under-fur. Trapping muskrats is special to most trappers because muskrats are normally the first animal that we learn to trap before developing our skills to catch more difficult species like coyotes. When I attend trappers conventions and rendezvous in other parts of the country, I always tell the other trappers that they are not worthy of the title until they have caught a Horicon muskrat."

Even for an observer, a day on the refuge is an exhilarating experience. Not only is the size of the marsh overwhelming but the number and diversity of waterfowl flushing from nests and potholes as we approach each trap is stunning.

"I give Diane Kitchen and her staff at the Horicon Fish & Wildlife Service much credit for managing the marsh in such a way that produces a lot of wildlife," Groehler said. "Not only ducks, deer, pheasants, muskrats and other fur bearing animals, but such diverse creatures as bats, snakes and endangered butterflies. It's a difficult task to manage all of these species so that they prosper in the marsh, and their advocacy groups are pleased with the results. It's a hard job to please everyone. But the real joy of being out on the marsh is seeing all of the diverse wildlife." *OW*

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Wisconsin Trapper Arnie Groehler makes his way toward shore after checking traps set near a muskrat huts on the Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. Groehler participates in a program designed to reduce the negative impact of predators on waterfowl production. Raccoons, muskrats, weasels, mink, fox and other predators routinely raid the nests of ducks and geese (Photo by Dick Ellis)