

PRACTICAL
SKUNK RAISING.

A BOOK OF INFORMATION
CONCERNING THE RAIS-
ING OF SKUNKS
FOR PROFIT.

By
WILLIAM EDWIN PRATT.



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Practical Skunk Raising.

By William E. Pratt.

The supply of wild fur has already fallen behind the demand and the time is in sight when wild fur will form but a small per cent of that in use.

All furs trapped in steel traps are less beautiful because the animal suffers. It is a well-known fact that the less the animal suffers, the better the fur.

The time is not far away when nearly all fur will be grown on fur-ranches. Fur-farming unquestionably has a great future as an industry.

Without detailing countless failures; it is well to begin by disposing of the wrong idea that most people begin with, that all they need to do is secure an island or a big fenced area, and throw in much feed to a bunch of selected fur-bearers, and reap a harvest of so many pelts each year.

The absurdity of this is seen if we compare it to a horse-breeder who would put a high fence around a large pasture and turn in a couple stallions and a dozen mares; throw in much feed daily, and expect a harvest of so many colts, each year.

No,—success depends on general supervision and control of each individual.

Skunks raise a better coat in captivity than when wild, because their food is gotten without hunting for it, and are beyond danger of man, dogs, and other intruders. Striped skunks ten years ago sold for one dollar per pair, while only two dollars per pair was paid for “star blacks”. Three years ago or more these prices had doubled, and a skunk with his scent glands out was even more valuable.

One male and two females is a good lot to begin with, 6 which would increase to twenty young the first year, and one hundred and fifty the second, providing one could wait that long, and one certainly could not expect any dividend until the fifth year.

2.—The Ground.

An acre of ground is sufficient to begin with, but one must have it situated so one could increase to perhaps ten acres. It should be high, dry and sandy, with some grass in the plot, and not too remote from a railway station.

3.—The Fence.

An inexpensive fence to begin with may be made by setting posts in the ground close together, but strongly. I recommend a fence made of wire netting or steel set or inbedded in the ground from one to two feet. First, dig a trench about one foot wide and two feet deep, and put heavy rock in the bottom and thus, with the rock below the wire there will be no way that the skunks can escape by digging.

The posts should be set ten feet apart. If set farther the wire will have a tendency to sag. The wire should be of one and a half inch mesh for the main fence, and one inch mesh for the breeding yards, as young skunks sometimes escape through a one and a half inch mesh. No. 16, or 18, gauge wire from four to eight feet in height should be used. Any smaller gauge than the above mentioned is not durable enough.

A wire or board inhang of twelve inches, should be placed at the top rejecting in so the animals can't climb out. This is attached by slats nailed along the tops of the posts and the wire nailed to them. Steel sheeting needs no inhang, because it 7 is so that the skunks cannot get a foothold.

If the skunks dig at night to get out fill up the holes as soon as possible and thus discourage the workers.

The big pen or large enclosure, serves as a range for the barren females, males, and young skunks during autumn.

4.—Pens.

Many breeders consider pens better and cheaper than dens. These are little runs about ten feet square, separated only by a three foot netting which has an inhang or overhang as it is some times called, of a foot on each side, so the skunks cannot climb in or out. If boards are used for pens inside the big fence no overhang is needed. All pens should be completely floored with mesh wire three or four inches under surface.

5.—Dens.

Every cage or pen needs a movable den that is dry, sanitary, portable, easy for observation, and warm. This last feature is important, for skunks are sensitive to cold which causes pneumonia. The dens should be well supplied with straw and rags, (avoid hay) because the seeds are injurious to the nostrils.

6.—Cage Litter.

After trying smooth floored dens, and floors strewn with straw, chips, ashes and sawdust; I feel safe in recommending sawdust, as its great absorbent power helps to keep clean dens. It should cover the floor to a depth of two inches.

8

7.—Food Troughs.

Do not use wooden troughs; they are unsanitary. Pie dishes either tin or ware, will do if the sides do not flare. If they do the skunk usually spills the milk or any liquid in the dish, by standing on the sides with its paws.

8.—Food House.

The food and tool-house should be in the pen for convenience. There should be mice and rat-proof vessels to keep the oatmeal and dry biscuit, cheese, and meat in. It should be equipped with a large boiler for boiling oatmeal and meat in. The meat may also be smoked as this will preserve it, and is greatly preferred by the animals. The meat may be hung out of reach of the rats in sacks.

9.—Feeding.

Skunks like most animals are omnivorous. A continuous unbroken diet of meat would eventually wipe out the stock; as would a diet solely vegetable. Moderate varied feeding is essential. Adult skunks are fed once a day, they themselves prefer it after dark. Staple articles of food are beef, rabbit, cow liver, chicken giblets, oatmeal, and other porridge, cooked potatoes and milk; anything a dog will eat with fruit and insects added. Be sure the meat is clear of infection.

Another staple article of food is a bread made of bran and shorts. Mix with three quarts of sour milk, enough flour to make a stiff dough. Roll dough out until it is an inch thick and bake for an hour like bread in a hot oven.

This is much relished by all fur-bearing animals, and is still more acceptable if flavored with a few spoonfuls of black 9 molasses.

Milk must be given sparingly unless it agrees with the stock. Once a week is enough, more than that is liable to induce scouring and other disorders. Half a dog biscuit, and a few scraps of meat are enough for a skunk's daily allowance. Of course some should have more than others according to their needs.

A brood-mother growing or suckling her young should have as much as she can eat twice a day, morning and evening.

When winter comes, skunks retire to their dens and eat nothing for weeks. In March the feeding is resumed and in April the brood mothers are extra fed with a preponderance of meat, much of it raw. It costs from twenty-five cents to a dollar to feed a skunk from June first to December first. Meat and fresh water are necessary at all times for brood-mothers, for if this is neglected they will devour the young as soon as born.

10.—Water Troughs.

Skunks drink much, and often. They must have plenty of fresh water at all times; especially when the young are expected. The vessel that the water at all times is kept in should be washed every day. In winter the skunks lap up snow instead of water.

11.—Examining Box.

No cautious man would undertake to examine a wild skunk as he would a dog or rabbit. Yet it is important to know sex and condition of each new skunk as it arrives. This may be easily and quickly done by means of an examining box. This is a small box 10" by 8" by 6" covered with a chicken wire of 10 about one inch mesh on the top. There should be a six inch entrance at one end of the box.

On the solid wood bottom is a handle which is of course the top, when the box is turned wire side down.

Chase the skunk in the entrance slowly and then lift the box up by the handle and look under without fear. As soon as the operation is over the skunk will seek his proper den.

12.—Diseases.

The keeper should watch the animal's dung, if too fluid or too soft, too copious or too little, there is something wrong. Their appetite, and the dung are the great tests. If these are right there is little chance of anything being wrong.

Greed—Some cases often abound among skunks such as over-eating; by getting all they can from the other skunks, after eating their own food. Such freaks should be isolated and marketed as soon as possible.

Cannibalism—Sometimes when enclosures are small the mothers devour the young as soon as born. This is sometimes the result of quarreling. Always build the enclosures large enough so the skunks have plenty of room.

Murder—Murder must be considered a disease. Some individuals are incapable of it while others are very prone to it. The last mentioned soon make themselves known. They should be marketed as soon as possible.

Distemper—This may be detected by the animal's eyes and nose running. The animal should be sent at once to the hospital, and treated by washing the nose and eyes with a solution of boric acid and water.

Mange—Mange is considered a serious disease, and is caused by fleas which induce the animal to scratch. The fur gets thin and the body is covered with scabs. This may be cured by applying a good flea powder and a dip. 11

Worms—Worms may be eliminated by feeding the skunks in a dish of clear, sharp, sand.

Other Foes—While the armed skunk travels about without fear of man or beast, it must be remembered that the disarmed

young skunks may be killed by dogs, or taken by horned owls or any other large bird.

13.—Rats.

Rats are a great nuisance about a fur ranch. They often dig holes and teach the young skunks the way to escape. They also kill the young, and are quick enough to keep out of the way of the mother.

14.—Disinfectants.

Those I use are—Chloride of lime, peroxide of hydrogen, and lysol, 2%.

To disinfect a den, put it in a large tub and soak it in “sheep dip”.

To disinfect a corner, sprinkle with chloride of lime.

15.—Hospital.

The hospital is a series of cages, quite removed from the other, with the earth and grass for a floor, and good opportunities for a “sun bath”. Sick animals should be put in the hospital as soon as noted.

16.—Breeding and Winter Management.

The stock should be mated about November or December. Put one male to four or five females. It is well to watch them for a few days to make sure the group is harmonious. 12 Often it happens that one female will quarrel with the others.

She should be removed and tried somewhere else. If one is seen outside the den constantly, this is the cause.

Put plenty of straw in the den and they will make themselves comfortable enough.

During the winter they eat nothing. Some breeders deem it wise to feed a light meal a week.

Mating time is from the middle of March, starting with February. Males must not meet at this time for they will fight, until one or the other is killed.

17.—Barren Females.

Three or four days after mating season has set in, remove the male and try some other male in, or for a few days. As the males are decided in their likes and dislikes. Neglect of this precaution will result in a large proportion of barren females.

18.—Breeding Mothers.

By April first every female should be given a separate den, and well fed and cared for.

This is the most important time of all, success or failure depends on the management of the mother at this time. Toward the end of the month she should be given raw meat and plenty of water. This diet should be given until mid-May, as this allays the meat craving which causes the mother to devour the new-born young.

I will repeat again the watchwords of success—

Proper sanitation, seclusion, and quiet, an abundance of raw meat and fresh water.

The period of gestation is nine weeks; the young are born in mid-May. 13

The young females have from four to six young the first litter and the older females have from eight to sixteen to one litter.

Never put two females with young, in the same house for they will fight and steal one and another's young.

One family in one house is a good old rule to observe.

When one month old they are able to walk around and drink milk. I would advise disarming and weaning at this time.

19.—Young.

The young grow very fast and soon become as tame as kittens, some show their amazing temper at this age, from the beginning.

At thirty days they walk alone and drink milk. At sixty days they will weigh on the average of six lbs. each, and appear to be half grown. At six months they are full-grown, and weigh from four to six lbs.

At this age they are ready to be marketed.

20.—Escapes.

It is well to be prepared for escapes. A properly constructed fence will prevent this.

Two contrivances should be in stock—net and traps.

Net—This is an ordinary dip net to put over them.

Traps—These are box traps, or “catch-alives”. They are easily constructed, and one half dozen will be found convenient for many purposes.

21.—Disarming.

To prevent a shot from this deadly battery of the skunk they are disarmed while very young. When animals are young the operation is a simple one; but when performed when they 14 are grown not more than one out of three survives the operation.

When ready for disarming, spread a burlap or gunnysack across your lap and order the assistant to bring the skunk. He must be careful to hold it by the tail, with it near the ground. The sack is then rolled around the animal; rear exposed.

The assistant holds the animal firmly and double muffles the eyes, so it cannot possibly see. A skunk seldom shoots unless it sees an enemy.

The proper instruments consist of a scalpel, clamping forceps, extracting forceps, hook and goggles.

The scent sacks are located one on each side of the vent off one fourth inch from the vent.

To disarm—First make an incision three eighths of an inch long and one half an inch from the vent.

As soon as the incision is made, cut deeper until the scent sac appears, which is about the size of a bean in young skunks and about the size of a marble in mature ones.

With the blunt forceps, force the adhering muscles down off the sac, and cut the sac off one fourth inch from the vent.

If the operation is done according to instructions, there will be no loss whatever.

Animals do not require disarming unless they are going to be shipped. If skunks are raised solely for fur, it is just as well to leave them armed.

Express companies refuse to ship them unless scent sacks are removed.

22.—How to Ship Skunk.

Secure them when ready for market, by using a box-trap. Never try to handle them.

To ship them, put each in a small soap-box lined with tin. 15

Cut a hole three inches square in the side and cover it with wire of one inch mesh.

Fasten a tin in one corner of the box three inches from the bottom for water. Above this make a hole to pour water through.

Mark it “water here”. Make a lid in the box for convenience in feeding.

One pound of dog biscuits, or bread, and a few scraps of meat will amply supply a skunk on the road. Label the bag “Seven days food”.

Do not fear to lift the lid and look in, for a skunk must be greatly alarmed and provoked before discharging musk.

Conclusion.

If the material in this book is thoroughly understood and mastered, and the reader is the proud possessor of two “star-black” skunks in a plot, fenced secure against escape, in five years he can reap large dividends.



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