

Fever

These first warm days of spring are among the sweetest of the year. One does not stay indoors willingly. Imagine how you'd feel about such a day if you had spent the winter in a hut of mud and cattails with a bunch of damp muskrats. If I were a muskrat, I'd certainly be ready to stretch my legs, have a little fun, and put as much distance between myself and my housemates as possible. Judging from the muskrat remains that sometimes appear on the roads of Brattleboro this time of year, they feel the same way. It is a pity that our cars so often curtail their plans. Such a fate nearly claimed a muskrat I met in town one fine spring night.

I had just seen the early show at the Latchis Theater and was starting to walk up Main Street when I noticed a group of nervous, excited young people staring into the a darkened entryway. I investigated. In the corner huddled a muskrat that seemed to have had an overdose of excitement. As tires sped by in ominous proximity, I knew this muskrat's chances of a safe return to the river were only fair. Fortunately I was wearing my brown tweed coat, a versatile garment that can serve as a small animal net and tranquilizer (there is something soothing about being wrapped in warm dark wool). The young people stepped back as I removed my coat and explained my intentions. As the coat descended, however, the muskrat revived and took evasive action. Hugging the edge of the building,

she scuttled down the street and turned in at the theater where a long queue had formed for the next show. Those in line were so distracted by the advance of a large brown coat that they didn't notice the muskrat until its paws scabbled over their feet. I was able to track her progress by the shrieks from the crowd. She finally took refuge under a bench in the lobby. When the crowd dispersed and only a small group of curious people remained, I persuaded the muskrat to leave her refuge. I cornered her by the popcorn machine. The wool coat had the desired effect and she relaxed for her transfer to a cardboard box. Among those assembled was someone who lived near a pond and wetland complex and she offered to transport the muskrat to this destination. I trust the muskrat found the habitat suitable and wasn't too disappointed to have missed the late show.

My conversations with the people who gathered to see the muskrat made it clear how poorly understood these creatures are. They are not rats and that they won't eat your chickens. They are semi-aquatic rodents in the same family as mice and voles, but in habit and appearance they more closely resemble beavers.

Like beavers, muskrats have dense lustrous fur, large, partially webbed hind feet, and lips that can close behind their incisors so they can chop vegetation under water. They produce a pleasant-smelling musk that is used to convey information to other muskrats.

Look for muskrats wherever you find a good stand of cattails. An evening or dawn visit will increase your chances of seeing one. Watch for a football-sized rodent browsing on vegetation or swimming along with its laterally flattened tail carving the water behind it (you will know it's not a beaver because when beavers swim you can only see the top of their heads).

You might also see muskrat lodges. Like beavers, some muskrats build dome-shaped houses. They make theirs with cattails, sedges, or other vegetation, and packed mud. Other muskrats, also like beavers, excavate tunnels and dens in the banks of rivers. Whichever home style they prefer, inside will be at least one grass-lined chamber. In the summer the female muskrats raise their families in these nests, and usually will produce two or three litters each year. By early June you might see young muskrats—cute fuzzy brown tennis balls—feeding near the lodge.

Muskrat families seldom stray far from home. Their ter-



ritory might be as small as within a 50-foot radius of the lodge. Mother muskrats will defend this territory vigorously. During a year with a high muskrat population, female muskrats will be quite visible and audible and they protect their family feeding ground.

Muskrats remain active throughout the winter, swimming beneath the ice, harvesting aquatic plants, and feeding in their “push-ups”—holes in the ice beneath mounds of frozen mud and plant debris. All territorial animosity is forgotten when warmth becomes the priority. Ten to fifteen muskrats have been found sharing a lodge in the winter, and the temperature inside has been measured at 36°F warmer than the outside temperature. Compared with the exposure many of our resident birds and mammals endure, the companionable winter quarters of a

muskrat are downright cozy. Still, the arrival of spring must be welcome indeed, and it's little wonder that April is the month of muskrat dispersal. Yes, the young need to establish territories of their own, and finding a mate becomes a priority for all. And since they're out roaming, who can blame them for stopping to see what's happening in town?

These sweetest days speed by each year, and with them the ephemeral highlights of the season. While you're watching for muskrats, don't miss the dusk courtship flight of woodcocks over many larger fields. The woodland spring wildflowers will soon reach their peak. Wild leeks are up, too. The peeper choruses are swelling and gray tree frogs and toads will soon add their songs. Be sure to enjoy them all. I know you'll be outside.