

Canadian Natural History.

The Skunk.

(*Mephitis Americana*.)

Among the Carnivora there is a well-defined family that are distinguished by their quick and active movements and by the special adaptation of their long and flexible bodies for insinuating themselves into narrow and tortuous passages in search of their prey. This is the weasel family, of which the principal specimens in this country are the mink, the skunk, the weasel, and marten. The first of these has already been described in the CANADA FARMER; the second is the subject of the present notice, and the accompanying illustration, the latter copied from a specimen in the University Museum. Almost every one in Canada who lives in the country has either seen the animal, or knows something about it by means of another sense than that of vision, and if he has ever smelt the creature, we venture to say, will never forget it. Nearly every member of the weasel family is distinguished by a strong odour, but the skunk is in this respect pre-eminent. The offensive, pungent, and sickening effluvia of this animal is not, however, at all times emitted, though we doubt very much if the creature is ever sweet. The source of this peculiar odour is an oily fluid secreted by small glands near the root of the tail, and capable of being ejected by the animal at pleasure in a small stream and to a considerable distance. A few of its near relations possess, though not in an equal degree, the same peculiar means of defence; and a similar instance is furnished by a marine animal very unlike the skunk in every other respect, namely, the cuttle-fish, which when attacked or in danger, baffles its pursuers by emitting in very considerable quantity an inky fluid, serving not only to deter pursuit by its offensive nature, but to envelope the animal in darkness, and thus afford the means of concealment.

In general form and appearance the skunk possesses the usual characteristic conformation of its tribe. It is about eighteen inches long, tail included. Its head is small, the snout short, the ears small and rounded. The fur is coarse, and of little or no commercial value. The tail is long and bushy. The color is subject to considerable variation; but the general shade is black or dark brown, relieved by one or more distinctly marked stripes of white. The fore feet are strong, furnished with five stout claws, well adapted for burrowing. The legs, like those of all its family, are very short.

Its habits are nocturnal, and it feeds principally on mice and other "small deer," being specially fond of the poultry yard, where its depredations among the eggs and young chickens are much dreaded. During summer the windows of cellars are sometimes left open for the sake of coolness, and if not protected by wire gauze or some similar covering, the creature is apt to make a prying and predatory visit into the house. Woe betide the inmates if they attack it while under their roof. The house would retain the horrid stench for weeks afterwards. The safest plan is to let the animal alone, and it will quietly take its departure. Dogs, unless they are the veriest puppies or trained veterans, will seldom attack it, and if they do, are almost certain to receive such a discharge of the fluid artillery over their

bodies as to render them for a long time afterwards intolerable to all about them. Some dogs, however, acquire the art of killing it instantly, by a sudden spring and grip before it has had time to emit its offensive liquid. It is said also that if the tail be held down, or the animal be suspended by that member, it is deprived of the power of ejecting the pungent secretion.

It is usually of a peaceful and quiet disposition, and only when attacked or irritated does it bring into requisition its peculiar means of defence. It is, moreover, notwithstanding its ill odour, of some use to the agriculturist, destroying a great number of noxious insects, grubs and small animals, whose depredations would otherwise seriously affect the farmer's crops. It is rather a graceful-looking animal, and, confident in its power of self-protection, will allow and almost invite a near approach; so that strangers to its habits are not unfrequently allured by its apparent docility into an attempt to capture it. The consequences baffle description. A friend received a visit from a travelling pedler in Illinois, who had just met with such an adventure on the prairie, having encountered and tried to catch, he said, "such a pretty little black and white creature, with a bushy tail." He wanted accommodation, and our friend's hospitality was sorely put to the test. The pungent secretion which the animal employs for its defence is said to possess



valuable medicinal virtues as an anti-spasmodic. Its sickening and offensive odour must, however, prevent its use to any extent. Mr. Wood, in his Natural History, relates the case of a minister who was in the habit of using it, not internally, but through the medium of his olfactories, as a remedy for spasmodic asthma, to which he was subject. For this purpose he carried about with him a small quantity in a smelling-bottle. On one occasion, feeling his breathing oppressed whilst preaching, he had recourse to his usual remedy. Whether he obtained the desired relief is not stated, but the effluvia which pervaded the church as soon as he removed the stopper of his smelling-bottle speedily dispersed the congregation, and saved him the trouble of finishing his sermon. Strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless a fact, that the flesh of this animal is used as food, and is said by those who have not been deterred by the natural prejudice entertained against a beast so odoriferous, to be sweet and palatable, resembling somewhat the flavor of roast pig. On the whole, however, while we would give the creature all credit for any service he may render, we think he can be well dispensed with either from the larder or the pharmacopœia.

How to Skin a Bird.

To the Editor of THE CANADA FARMER:

SIR,—Seeing in your journal occasional enquiries concerning the best methods of removing and preserving the skins of various animals, I venture, hav-

ing some experience in the art, to send the following directions for skinning any bird of moderate size, such as a wild pigeon.

When you have shot such a bird, which you intend for stuffing, first examine the wound, not by pulling off the feathers, but by gently putting aside the feathers right and left with your fingers, and by blowing into them. Then stuff the wound, throat and nostrils, with tow, cotton, or rags, and wind a small quantity round the bill. Have a moist sponge with you to remove any spots of blood that may be on the feathers. Take the bird by the legs to the place where you intend skinning. Lay it on a table, on its back, with the feet from you, and the head towards your left elbow. Separate the feathers on the breast bone to the right and left; pull off the down; then cut through the outer skin and no further, with a sharp knife. Cut from the beginning of the breast-bone to the vent. Have a little powdered chalk by you, so that when you have skinned a part of it you can dust the skin with chalk, and it will not adhere to the flesh when you leave off. By using a blunt stick or the handle of your knife you can skin to the back. The thighs should now be pressed inwards, and the skin turned back so far as to enable you to separate the legs from the body at the knee joint. The skin is then pulled downwards as low as the rump, which is cut close by the insertion of the tail,

but in such a manner as not to injure the feathers. The skin is now drawn upwards the length of the wings, the bones of which must also be cut at the shoulder joints. It is then pulled up until all the back part of the skull is laid bare, when the vertebrae of the neck should be separated from the head, and the rest of the body from the skin. You next must grind an iron teaspoon sharp, and remove the brains from the skull bone; and by breaking a few tender bones inside of the eyes, you can take them out by pressing them inward with your fingers. The whole

of the flesh is now to be removed from the under mandible, also from the head, wings, legs, rump, and the cavity of the skull filled with cotton or tow. The whole inside of the skin, head, &c., must now be well rubbed with arsenical soap, spirits of turpentine, or the solution of corrosive sublimate, then the skin inverted and hung up to dry. Pack in white paper, with a little powdered camphor, to prevent the insects from destroying the skin.

A. B. B.

CORRIGS FEARS OF BIRDS.—At Cornwall station, and within a few feet of the platform at which the trains arrive, a robin has built a nest on a tree on which the leaves are only budding. It is now sitting on its eggs, undisturbed by the traffic, the whistle of the engine, or the noise of the cars. But this conduct is not singular in the case of the Cornwall birds. A few years ago one built its nest on one of the ties of the railway bridge over which trains pass constantly, and there it reared its family respectably, until they were of an age to get on the fly.

MAMMOTH PIGEON ROOST.—The Commercial says. A gentleman who has just returned from Pennsylvania, informs us that there is a pigeon roost near Port Allegheny, in that State, some ninety miles from Buffalo, covering an area of fifteen miles in length, by five to six miles in width. Over six hundred Indians and a thousand white men, we are told, were on the ground recently, and cut down much valuable timber to get the "squabs"—doing much damage. Over two hundred barrels of squabs were sent to New York in one day.