

Nature Study Class.—VIII.

By WM. H. MOORE.

You say it is chilly and we will have to get out our furs to wear when we go out at evening now. Have you ever thought much about the original wearers of our furs? Have you ever given any attention to such questions as: How many fur bearing animals have we in the Maritime provinces? Is the supply limited? Are the animals beneficial or injurious to the husbandman? It's surprising how little we know of the life histories of our fur-bearers.

Our fur-bearers may be divided into two classes, as the squirrels were classed in the September REVIEW, viz., hardy and half hardy, or those which are active throughout the whole year, and those which den up or hibernate during the cold season. They may also be properly classed as carnivorous, and rodents. These two ways of classification overlap each other, and we have hibernating carnivores, and active rodents. Another classification would put them in two groups, plantigrade, and digitigrade.

The plantigrades, or those which when walking place the whole foot upon the ground, are with us only half hardy and include the bear, raccoon, and skunk. These are carnivorous, and the porcupine which also places the whole foot upon the ground when walking is a rodent. But the fur of the porcupine is not suitable for the trousseau of other animals. The hind feet of the muskrat and beaver are fully walked upon, but are more especially adapted for swimming. Perhaps the fur bearing animal with which most of you are best acquainted in one way or another is the skunk. The fur of this animal is made into boas, muffs, collars, etc., and is known to the trade as alaskan sable when of prime quality. That however will not concern us greatly at present for there are other things of interest in connection with this animal. They are nocturnal and when disturbed hastily put up their white flag (the tail which has more or less white hair on it) and is a signal of distress; distress to the offending party through the olfactory nerves.

This animal seems to have no fear of any enemy, and apparently thinks it has equal rights either in the city or country. Its home may be in some hollow log, a burrow in the earth, or under buildings or hay stacks.

The young produced at one time may number from four to fourteen, and are born in the months

of May and June. Very heavy is the drain upon young bird life in the vicinity of one of these large families, for the old female is a keen hunter of wild and domestic birds, that nest near by. Later in the season creeping things comprise the bill of fare. In the autumn months, crickets and locusts are secured in goodly numbers the crickets being caught in their nightly place of rest under stones and sticks or brush, which are deftly overturned. In late fall fully a half inch of fat forms underneath the skin of these animals. Such is their condition when they go into winter quarters. Two may occupy the same den, sometimes coming out on foraging expeditions during thaws in winter time. We have known one of the pair to get caught in a trap and be eaten by its mate.

The raccoon's habits are similar to those of the skunk, but to the bill of fare of the latter is added grains of various kinds while in the milk stage, or while the kernels are forming, and fresh water clams are a favorite article of diet. The 'coons are rather more sociable among themselves and frequently hibernate together, as many as a half dozen in one den. This number seems to be made up of a female and her cubs that have been spared to live that long. The old males evidently keep "bachelor's hall" through the winter. The raccoon does not breed so profusely as does the skunk, and six is the greatest number we know of in one litter. It is when the 'coons get into a field of grain that they do much damage, not by the amount of grain eaten but by rolling down the stalks so flat that it is a most difficult if not impossible job to cut it. They do great damage in some corn fields by climbing the stalks and destroying the corn. The supply of skunks and raccoons is more than sufficient for any demands required of them through the warm months.

The bear was formerly a much dreaded animal. At present it usually haunts the dense forests and seldom does any damage to farm crops or animals. In districts where big game is plentiful, they get a goodly allowance of food from carcasses left by sportsmen, and by catching the young of the moose, caribou and deer. They feed largely upon berries and nuts in their season.

The bear is not even so prolific a breeder as the raccoon, as only from one to three young are born at one time, and trappers say that the young are only produced each alternate year.

The winter den of the bear may be under fallen