

ROD AND GUN IN CANADA



DEVOTED
TO
THE
FISHING
GAME AND
FOREST
INTERESTS
OF
CANADA.

One Dollar Per Annum.

MONTREAL, OCTOBER, 1901.

Single Copies Ten Cents.

THE HABITS OF THE OTTER.

By the late Frank H. Risteen.

A prime otter skin is worth from \$10 to \$15, and as it is so much lighter and easier to handle than the bear skin, it is really the best prize that rewards the eastern trapper's toil. The silver grey fox doesn't count, for it is many years since a genuine specimen was taken in New Brunswick. A veteran Miramichi trapper who has stretched more otter pelts than any of our local woodsmen lately, thus describes some of the habits of the otter and the most approved methods of capturing him:

"Unlike most fur animals the otter is a poor house-keeper and seldom builds a house of his own. Being unable to lay up any large amount of food for himself he becomes a sort of tramp, rambling about through the woods wherever lakes and streams abound and levying toll on the way. When he needs a shelter he usually appropriates some old muskrat or beaver house, especially the burrow of a bank beaver. He will not hesitate to turn a muskrat family out of doors, in fact they will be lucky if they do not figure on the otter's bill of fare. The animal has usually a number of wayside resorts in the shape of holes and burrows at which he carries in his travels. If the menu isn't up to the standard the otter moves on. He knows how to build himself a snug, warm bed and that is about as far as his domestic instincts go. When the snow is deep in winter he sometimes makes a temporary den by burrowing. In the dead of winter I have known an otter to remain at a lake for a month, but that is unusual; he is most always on the move, gliding over the ice-bound streams and lakes, or worming across the intervening ridges. The fact that he is so constantly in motion makes him a very difficult animal to trap. I have never caught over twenty of them in a single season. They are found more commonly on small lakes than large ones.

"At all seasons of the year the otter's main item of grub is fish, with muskrats, frogs and mice on the side. He has a decided hankering for rabbits, but bunny has too much speed for him. On stormy or windy days I have known an otter to still-hunt a fox and pounce upon him like a flash. The only show reynard has then is to exercise the functions of his feet. As soon as the woodland lakes are well snowed under, the heat from the water opens one or more air holes in the ice, either out in the middle or along the shore. These are a great help to the otter in his winter fishing. Lightning swimmer though he is the otter often misses his mark. The capricious trout and the reminiscent chub keep both eyes peeled for him and dart under rocks and roots beyond his reach. Still the otter is a

very successful fisherman and very destructive to all members of the finny tribe found in inland waters, up to salmon five pounds in weight. One of the few virtues possessed by the otter is that he wages unceasing war upon the eel. When an otter meets a big eel the policy of the otter is one of benevolent assimilation. The sucker, too, often supplies a dinner for the otter. About the only chance he has to fool the otter is to make a previous deal with some friendly kingfisher. The ultimate result, in either case, is about the same so far as the sucker is concerned.

"The biggest otters I have ever taken have weighed about fifteen pounds. As a fighter the otter is more than a match for a dog of twice his weight, as he is as lively as a cat and can bite ten times to the dog's once. His jaws work as slick as a sewing machine and this makes the dog howl. I have on several occasions seen an otter on coming out of the water start after a dog just as if the dog was his meat. There seems to be no limit to his pluck. I was once going over my line of traps on Bathurst waters in the month of February when I heard something that sounded like one of these portable mills squalling and squawking on a little pine knoll a few rods ahead. I hustled up the hill and arrived just in time to see two otters running off that had actually tackled a lynx in a trap. There was almost enough fur scattered round on the snow to pack a pillow case, most of which belonged to the lynx, who was still fanning the air with all the loose paws he had. I gave chase to the otters and managed to nail one with my axe under a blowdown; the other got away. When I got back to the lynx he was dead. His skin was worthless, being torn and bitten through in more than twenty places, while the otter skin hardly showed a scratch. So I lost \$1.50 on the fight and made \$10.

"I never knew but one case of a fight between an otter and a beaver. A family of beavers had plugged up the gateway of an old driving dam on the Dungarvon, making the dam water tight and flooding the pond to a depth of four or five feet. This was about the latter part of October, I had seen an otter fishing in the pond, so thought I would try the effect of letting down the dam. The water ran out rapidly and in about half an hour there was not more than six inches of muddy water left in the pond. The otter started to run through the gate, but when he saw me standing there he whirled about and darted upstream and into the beaver house that stood about twenty rods away on the bank of the pond. The house had been unoccupied during the summer and I guess the otter didn't know the beavers had returned. Anyway the otter came out of that in less than ten seconds with his head almost