

The Small Fur Bearers of Canada

By BONNYCASTLE DALE.

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

IN this immense country, a land clothed with fir and cedar, tamarack and spruce, dotted and intersected by innumerable lakes, each one connected by river, stream or swamp, hundreds of which have never been rippled by the white man's paddle, a land where mighty sketches of muskeg, marsh and drowned land extend for lonely miles beyond our civilised frontiers, is the chosen home of the lithe, shy, active mink and muskrat, stoat, skunk and weasel. On the clean white cover that Mother Nature spreads each successive winter the trails of these small furbearers crisscross the solitary places. The twin foot marks with a space of twenty inches between the jumps shows where the leaping mink has passed. The pattered trail with deep groove behind tells where the muskrat walking over the snow has dragged its flat-sided tail after it. The smaller twin-foot impression, with only a dozen inches between the jumps, speaks plainly to the Red Man of Shingoes, the weasel. In his soft gutturals he calls the mink Shaung-washa, the muskrat Wahzhushk. The lesser jumping walk of the stoat, the steady tramped path of the skunk all speak eloquently to him of the wanderers. Deeply read in woodland lore, his knowledge has been slowly transmitted to us in many a camp, along the weary portage, or as



That famous animal, the Skunk. Note the white-tipped, bushy tail.

fog-rack, and over the rude meal the Mississauga told me more traits of Shaungwasha.

He told how once he had made a "cache" to hold some frozen venison. On his return a week later he found where a hunger-driven mink had broken in through the thickly piled poles. Hungry it must have been, as it invariably catches its food alive—fish and frogs, crayfish and birds. Nesheboono determined to catch the mink and it evidently determined to eat of the red man's venison without disturbing the deadly trap. The Indian set the steel spring with wicked jaws right in the path of the intruder, carefully sprinkled it from gloved hand with dry leaves and powdered it with snow from a bending branch. He drew this fir over every telltale footmark and came back next day to find that Mr. Mink had carefully torn another entrance from behind. Again a trap was set, this time right at the new entrance. Again the clever animal broke in, now from the end. Bound to catch the robber, the Red Man placed a trap at each end and side and next morning the mute witness of the trampled snow told where the mink had many times circled the cache, but never once had come within his body's length of any of the carefully concealed traps.

He told how he had found the nesting place of the mink, in a cave-like rift of the limestone ledge close by the river side, of the three leaping, tossing youngsters playing with the mother much as kittens do with the cat. There was a back door to this house. Off darted



The Mink

Photographs of a live wild Mink are rare. In this one the head shows lighter than it should, because of the reflection from the rock.

the swift canoe darted past the homes of these inhabitants of the wilds.

The sleek brown mink, dodging under overhanging scrub or leaping away on the snow has been a favourite study.

Let me tell you some of the things Nesheboono (He-that-shoots-a-Rapid) knows of these small furbearers, not in his native language but in our more direct English.

THE SLYNESS OF A MINK

"See the little pile of dead frogs? A mink has been along here; he catches them in the creeks and pond-holes, tears the breast open and eats only the heart and lungs as he is a very dainty feeder. His path winds and twists through the shoreline forest. See, there on the snow where he came to our tracks, he turned and went straight back. Of all the dreaded animals, he fears man the most." A heavy south wind was drifting before it a thick wall of marsh fog. The ready axe of the red man flashed back and forth. Soon a crackling, sweet-smelling fire sent it's curling smoke to join the drifting



Muskrat Building a House. A very rare picture.