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House-Makers of the Water-Ways

Written for The Western Home Monthly, by H. Mortimer Batten

EVEN more remarkable than the home of the beaver is that of the muskrat or musquash of the Canadian waterways. As summer advances—say towards the end of July—these industrious rodents begin to make preparations for the coming winter. Near to the margin of some pond or sluggish creek they get to work collecting together the mud and reeds from one particular patch of water and piling it into a heap. The foundations of the heap are, of course, below the surface, and as the building process goes on the surrounding water is deepened, while the dome grows in height. At length a pile from three to seven feet in diameter and standing high out of the water is constructed.

Long before this stage is reached, however, one of the rats has got busy on the interior, while the other added to the exterior. In the centre of the heap quite a considerable chamber has been hollowed out, and as the weight of the dome increases and the heap of rushes settles, this chamber requires alteration to prevent the roof from sinking in. It is provided with but one entrance, and though the chamber is, of

have become extinct in many parts years ago. One day a friend and I silently approached a musquash "dome" we knew to be occupied, and pushed it over, expecting to take the animals by surprise. But sound travels well through water, and the rats escaped from the "dome" before we reached it. We waited some time for them to come to the top for air, but nothing happened, and just as we were about to go away we observed one of the rats seated serenely on his raft at the other end of the pond and eyeing us coolly. He dived directly we saw him, doubtless to rise elsewhere and take another look at us.

It was not till that day I realized the full value of these floating platforms I had seen so often. The rat in question had full time to fill his lungs and take stock of the situation before we saw him and renewed the hunt, and there is little doubt he had played the same trick many times on other unwelcome visitors to the pond.

In clear water the rats can be seen swimming below the ice, and can easily be followed from place to place till eventually they drown. A hole is then



View in Kildonan Park, Winnipeg

course, above waterline and high and dry, the entrance is below the surface, so that however wild the blizzard may blow or however keen the frost there is no likelihood of the inhabitants of the dome being snowed or frozen in.

Just above the waterline the rats gnaw several short passages into the heap. These passages answer the purpose of verandahs. The animals procure most of their food below the surface, but they do not eat it there. They rise to the top, like the common water voles, and prefer to sit in some sheltered spot and eat at their leisure.

This leads up to another feature in the home-making of the muskrats. In addition to the main "dome" or "house" at the water's edge, the animals usually construct rafts near by, on which they can squat and eat or sun themselves. Usually a floating chunk of wood is secured to the weeds or rushes in some convenient position, but should the pond not be thus conveniently provided, the rodents construct rafts of reeds which float for a time on the surface, like the nests of some waterfowl.

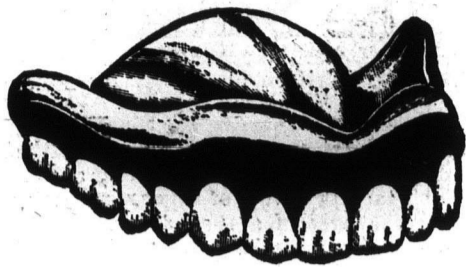
These rafts or floating platforms answer a double purpose; not only are they used as feeding places and lookout stations, but owing to their constant motion they keep the water in their immediate vicinity free from ice during the cold weather. Thus, should their home be raided by their deadly enemy the mink, the rats are able to rise to the surface from some secret corner and escape unseen.

The muskrats have many enemies, and were it not for the clever arrangement of their homes they would doubtless

made in the ice, and the body of the much persecuted animal hoisted out. The Indians approach the domes with caution, and with a steel spear poised for use. They pat the dome gently, and as the animal swims out from below, the spear is driven home, penetrating four or five inches of ice, perhaps, and pinning the rodent to the bed of the pond.

Even more cleverly designed than the winter "domes" of the muskrats are the bank burrows which they occupy during the spring and summer. The exits and entrances to the burrows are below the surface; so far as I know the musquash never allows its passages to communicate direct with the open air. The living chambers of the burrows, like that of the dome, are well above high-water line, and are ventilated by a shaft which extends vertically to the bank above. These shafts are very small, and are never used for passage, their sole purpose being to admit air, for without them this important element would obviously be absent.

It often happens that the pond which the muskrats inhabit shelves to a very few inches in depth towards its bank, in which case the rats have to swim through shallow water to gain the burrows. This, apparently, does not meet with their approval, and they overcome the difficulty by digging deep trenches from the mouths of the passes across the stretch of shallow water to the deep which lies beyond. By passing to and fro along these cuttings they are able to keep a sufficient depth of water over their backs. Should the water sink below normal level, and the mouths of



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