A Fur Chat

J. E. Guthrie
Iowa State College

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester

Part of the Forest Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol17/iss1/9
A Fur Chat

J. E. Guthrie, Professor of Zoology
Iowa State College

The first manufacturer, so they tell us, was that ancient man in far-off antiquity who pulled the skin off a furry beast and wrapped it about him. From a pelt, torn off in order to get at the meat of his prey, he had made him a garment. It warmed him, comforted him, protected him from bramble scratches and insect bites. What was it to him that his descendants, a thousand generations down the years, would fashion delicate furs into elaborate, soft robes of exquisite beauty and frailty—the garb of luxury? To him they served primal needs, rough and undressed tho they were. We may wonder, but we can never know, how long man wore skins before he learned to scrape them with the chipped edges of flint scrapers, to have his women chew their edges to make them soft, to dry them and smoke them and oil them and work them into something like flexibility.

And since the remote times of those ancient cave folk, man has used furs. A by-product of the chase at first, they soon became the object of it, except in the warm climates. Winter, that had stricken man with terror, became kindlier, for clothing meant adaptability, freedom to go comfortably to places from whence the snow and ice had formerly driven him back, but had given sanctuary to the game his flint points sought.

The question of man's right to destroy life to satisfy his needs and desires has been often debated. Either man has a moral right to take life or he has not. Probably few this side of the Orient would maintain that all life is inviolable. Trees live: we kill them and use the wood. The sentimental vegetarian ruthlessly slays radishes, onions, potatoes, green corn, and devours them; cuts living tobacco and dries it for a smoke; butchers flax plants and mangles them for their fiber that he may wear linen. Then he points an accusing finger at the man of sin who kills a chicken or an ox for food, a fox for its beautiful coat, a guinea pig in the control of human disease. And do we sterilize a dish and slaughter a few million microbes? They were alive,
poor things. Life is life for ox or oyster, for wolf or weed, for bug or bacillus.

Really, then, it is not the mere taking of the life of a wild animal that the saner ones among us deplore. It is the wanton destruction of the wild creature or the flower. More commonly objection is made to the unnecessary cruelty often involved in the taking of the bur-bearers whose coats are demanded by our markets and ultimately by ourselves. The trapping trend now is toward more merciful methods, a speedier and less painful end. The prediction has frequently been made that furs would go out of fashion, but they haven’t. So long as man will live where he must dress warmly in winter, furs will probably continue to be in demand. As to the vogue of furs as dress trimmings, and for other ornamental purposes, that is another matter. Fashions are mercurial, they may change and do change in such non-essentials without reason and without warning. It’s lynx today and coon tomorrow or fitch, ermine, opossum, squirrel, chinchilla, mole; but the cunning furrier can get most all of them, seal, leopard, ermine, mink from rabbit, by dint of plucking, shearing, waving and dyeing. Man’s desire for Nature’s own device for pro-

Raccoons appreciate friends.
tection against cold can hardly be expected to abate unless some better substitute appears. With increased demand for furs, the matter of supply becomes important.

The commercial raising of fur-bearers, a matter mainly for our northern states and the British provinces except in the matter of opossum and muskrat, is increasing. Not long ago the domestic production of fox furs was considered a doubtful experiment, now it is almost a recognized branch of animal husbandry. The farming of mink, muskrat, raccoon, skunk and some others, today in the experimental stage, may be staple industries tomorrow. And what of mole, opossum, cats and dogs raised solely for furs? Who knows what may yet be done?

But a fresh skin or a dried skin is not yet a fur. The procedure of manufacture has become highly technical and today dressing, tanning, shearing and dyeing processes are carried on largely by the aid of machinery to produce the best results and the most perfect furs.

Altho this is true, yet there are many excellent home-tanned furs in use. The methods of preparation differ with different kinds of furs. Some furs are extremely delicate, others more sturdy and substantial. The elaborate process of preparation of the factory involves a long series of operations. Take for in-

Fur on hand. An Iowa Civet.
stance the procedure to which Canadian fur dressers subject a mink skin: The dried skin is pounded with the "kicking machine," soaked to soften the head, fleshecl, flesh side pickled with salt, dried, revolved in a large drum with sawdust, greased and pounded, stretched, drummed with sawdust, stretched, drummed with sawdust, stretched, beaten with rattans and finally dyed. This according to Laut in "The Fur Trade of America." If one is satisfied to sacrifice a little of flexibility, of finish, of gloss for the satisfaction of having furs which he has himself taken in the raw, there are far simpler processes. They involve work, but one best appreciates that on which he has used effort.

The demand for good furs has caused the states to make protective laws to protect fur-bearers when their hair is thin, as in summer, or shedding. A few months will make the difference between a ten cent skin that nobody wants and a five dollar one with thick, soft under-fur and long, strong over-hairs. Worthless in summer, valuable in winter. Another project of protective game laws is to insure reproduction, to give the mother and immature young every possible chance, and the results have justified wise protective laws.

For home tanning, any one of several methods may be used. If the skin has been dried it will need to be soaked over night in water not more than lukewarm to soften it. Fresh or "green" skins do not need this. Then with a dull knife scrape off any fat or bits of flesh that adhere to the flesh side. With some skins this means considerable work, but should be thoroly done. Next dissolve a quart of salt in a gallon of hot water, cool and add one-half ounce of sulphuric acid. Keep in glass or crockery, not in metal. In this tanning solution thin skins like rabbit or squirrel will tan thru in a day. Heavier skins require longer and may remain in it indefinitely. Remove, wash several times in soapy water, wring as dry as possible, rub on flesh side with a cake of hard soap to kill the grease. Now fold lengthwise and throw over line to dry, hair side out. When surfaces are barely dry and inside moist lay on smooth, round-edged board, scrape with a worn flat file or other blunt-edged tool to remove an inner layer.

Skins become pearly white. Next, stretch, rub and twist until quite dry. For parts still hard, moisten and repeat the
working. A little fresh butter or other animal fat may be worked into the warmed skins and then the excess absorbed by working in dry hardwood sawdust or extracted by a quick gasoline dip. This increases the softness. The skins thus prepared come out as soft as chamois and velvety smooth if well worked.

Dyeing is not desirable and not to be attempted by the amateur. Heavy skins of large animals are best sent to a custom tanner, who will plane the hide down thin during the tanning process to make it flexible. Even the amateur, after a little practice, will be able to save many valuable furs and substitute them for many costly furs which he might not feel able to purchase. This is worth while, for on a cold winter day Boreas and not Paris sets the styles—and Boreas says, "Furs."