

NUMBER OF TRAPPERS DWINDLE AS

Brunswick County Resident Battles Pesky Beaver Population

BY TERRY POPE

When local fur prices were higher, about 35 trappers roamed Brunswick County's swamps and rural areas in search of game.

But today, Charles Eddins of Leland is starting to feel he is part of a dying breed. Fur prices have fallen dramatically in recent years at a time when the local beaver population is exploding.

The result is a major problem for landowners, farmers and timber companies who have few trappers to turn to for help. Eddins may be the last person in Brunswick County who still traps beavers for a bounty.

Beavers build dams that stop streams from flowing freely. Their mountain of mud, sticks and debris can also clog up drainage ditches, causing land that was once high and dry to flood. Thousands of dollars in timber may even rot away. The rodents are also destroyers, cutting down trees to build their dams and chewing away bark for food.

"A lot of people were trapping for the money," said Eddins. "When the money went, they went. I can understand them not wanting to go out here when the pay isn't good. But now is the time when we need trappers."

Supply and demand is the name of the game. When the demand for furs increases, the price of pelts will increase, too. The slow economy and negative publicity from animal rights activists have pushed the fur market down, said Eddins.

He sells beaver furs for \$8 to \$12 each to an agent that ships them to Canada. Traps cost him \$175 a dozen, and it takes over an hour to skin a single beaver. Add the cost of gasoline for his travel over a three-county area, state license fees and pelt tags, and the trapper is lucky to break even.

The person that is still trapping animals today in Brunswick County isn't doing it for a living, he said.

"I did not start trapping for the money," said Eddins. "It's like duck hunting or playing golf. It's a sport and a hobby. I really love the sport and what it stands for."

Today he is secretary of the North Carolina Trappers Association, an organization that is some 400 members strong, and also serves as host of trapping displays for the annual Dixie Deer Classic held in Raleigh each March.

He has been trapping animals for more than 20 years. Never has he seen the wild animal population in Brunswick County greater than it is today, with an abundance of foxes,

beavers and raccoons living in people's backyards and even on the local beaches.

"When the prices dropped, not only did the trappers quit trapping, but the raccoon hunters quit hunting," he said. "The population is exploding. Mother Nature is going to move in, and she's going to wipe them all out. She'll take the young, the old, the big and the small. You'll have rabies and distemper that will spread to your domestic animals."

A trapper's goal is to help control the animal population and to make pesks like beavers more manageable, not to wipe the species out of existence, he said.

Locally, trappers can use conibear traps, which are specially designed to instantly kill the beaver once it swims inside and triggers the device, from Dec. 1 to Feb. 20. Leghold steel traps cannot be set until the day after the deer hunting season ends, Jan. 2, to avoid injury to hunting dogs.

Hunters and trappers don't always see eye-to-eye.

"When a man comes along and finds one of these traps and takes it," Eddins said, "it hurts me. There's a lot of expense to trapping."

Trappers also fall victim to negative media exposure organized by animal rights organizations, said Eddins, which are opposed to using animals for research and for making clothing.

"They don't even want us to use eggs anymore," he explained, "because we keep chickens in chicken houses."

Fur prices, he predicts, will increase slowly over time. That could mean good news for Brunswick County residents who face local flooding problems due to beaver activity.

Eddins serves on a committee that hopes it can get federal funds to start a pilot program in October to either trap or remove beavers from Brunswick, Columbus and Bladen counties.

"As a trapper, I am not against that at all," he said. "I cannot trap all of the beavers in this three-county area. The people need help, and if I can't get them the help, let's get someone in here that can."

An employee of Federal Paper Co. in Reigelwood, Eddins spends most of his vacation time trapping beavers. He pulls a pop-up camper to Robeson County occasionally to work in areas there. Even with a control project in place locally, Eddins said there will still be a need

for trappers like himself in Brunswick County, to help persons who have local flooding problems on private property.

The control project will work mainly with county governments and the N.C. Department of Transportation to remove beavers from areas where they pose a threat to highways or maintained canals and ditches. Individual requests would be placed low on the totem pole, he said.

Last week, Eddins set traps to help catch beavers from a man-made pond in Grissetown. The animals were cutting down trees and piling debris in front of a spillway, causing the water level to rise too high for the nervous landowner. The dam would be destroyed, only to have it rebuilt by the pesky beavers overnight.

At one time, there were about 1,600 members in the N.C. Trappers Association. Today, that figure has dropped to around 400. In the spring, Eddins lobbied the county and State Rep. David Redwine for a new local fox hunting law.

Eddins said the fox population has also multiplied in Brunswick County. It's not uncommon to see a fox chase a dog or cat away from their food, he said. He hopes local



CHARLES EDDINS of Leland sets a beaver trap on a private pond in Grissetown.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

trappers will return to the sport or hobby that was once popular to them.

"As long as I don't have to go out here and kill the animals and throw them away, I'll continue trapping,"

he said. "The day I have to throw animals away is the day I throw my traps away."

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