West Virginia Division of Natural Resources

Furbearer Management Newsletter

Fall/Winter 2008/2009 Wildlife Resources Section

Welcome to the second issue of the Furbearer Management Newsletter. We appreciate the positive response and support that the first issue received. It is our goal to provide information and news pertaining to furbearer management to interested parties in West Virginia through timely articles and data. We hope you enjoy this issue and, as always, would appreciate hearing from you. Please direct correspondence to: Rich Rogers, WVDNR, 1 Depot St., Romney, WV 26757, richrogers@wvdnr.gov.

River Otter Management Issues

River otter bridge surveys will again be conducted this winter in an effort to continue to document otter range expansion and simple presence/absence of the species in individual counties. Ninety-seven surveys will be conducted by Wildlife Resources Section personnel between January and March of this year.

A Strategy for Monitoring River Otter Status in West Virginia was completed this past summer. This strategy is designed to guide state wildlife biologists in collecting data and help in making appropriate decisions regarding the possibility of a future trapping season on river otters.

Additionally, teeth and female reproductive tracts were removed from twenty otters last January. Approximately forty more will be sampled this winter. As funds become available, teeth will be sent to a qualified lab for aging. Female reproductive tracts will be examined for embryos by Wildlife Resources Section staff sometime this coming spring. These data will be used to help construct a model to assess reproductive potential of West Virginia's otter populations. Otters were primarily collected from incidental catches.

Trappers and others are encouraged to continue to send sighting and incidental catch reports to the address at the beginning of this newsletter. Trappers accidentally catching otters should turn carcasses in to their nearest District wildlife office.

Raccoon Field Trial Survey

The WV Raccoon Field Trial Survey is now in its seventeenth year. Number of raccoons treed per hour of hunting time is collected from competitive hunts to yield a handy index to raccoon abundance in different areas of the state.

The 2007-08 survey indicated that coon hunting success remained stable from the previous year. The overall trend in raccoon abundance seems to have begun to level off statewide with slight variations in different regions of the state. The north-central and western counties continue to show a decline in numbers of raccoons treed over the past few years. This region, which typically has had the best hunting in the state, is now reflecting some of the worst hunting when compared to other regions.

Write to the address at the beginning of the newsletter for a copy of the last survey or if you would like your club to participate. Participation is sorely needed. This is one of the only surveys in which houndsmen may contribute meaningful and worthwhile data to assure the continuation of their sport.

Spotted Skunk Reporting

The Wildlife Resources Section is interested in obtaining information on spotted skunks from trappers. In past years, spotted skunk range seems to have diminished in West Virginia as well as other states. In West Virginia, they seem to be confined to the Allegheny front and high mountain areas. Years ago, reports commonly came from farm country as well. There are several pelts brought in to fur dealers each year, but reports indicate that some trappers are not selling many pelts of these animals. Large-scale habitat changes and changes in

predator/prey dynamics are the most likely culprits. It is recognized that trapping has a minimal, if any, affect on spotted skunks.

There is no desire to curtail trapping of this species. Currently, trapping and pelt sales are the main sources of data for spotted skunks. Please report any catches of this small skunk to the address at the beginning of this newsletter.

Beaver Tagging

Be reminded that the method for filling out checking tags for beaver changed over a year ago. This change was enacted to simplify the procedure for filling out multiple tags until a better system is devised. When filling tags out for beaver on a given day, only the first tag needs to be filled out in its entirety. Subsequent tags only need to have check station, species, trapper name, license number, date, and county of kill filled out. This is the same for checking two or two hundred on a given day.

Annual West Virginia Fur Harvest

The annual fur harvest is calculated from numbers of legally tagged animals that were harvested (beaver, bobcat, and fisher) and numbers of pelts that were bought and sold by licensed fur dealers in West Virginia. Fur dealers must fill out and submit reports detailing all purchases and sales of pelts during the year. Results tabulated from checking tags and fur dealer transactions are as follows for the 1997-08 seasons:

WEST VIRGINIA FUR HARVEST

Season	Beaver	Bobcat	Fisher	Gray Fox	Mink	Muskrat	Opossum	Raccoon	Red Fox	Skunk	Coyote
1997-98	2322	577	53	1180	393	7474	1553	17846	1019	79	29
1998-99	1616	554	45	1111	211	2833	1201	9939	671	40	29
1999-00	988	644	27	933	97	1734	504	4283	359	33	43
2000-01	1140	705	26	1213	183	2857	463	4350	334	31	49
2001-02	1829	943	45	2147	448	5785	922	7733	747	130	169
2002-03	849	891	26	1533	267	4160	1048	6148	610	51	149
2003-04	917	1090	50	1480	374	3210	1277	11160	957	160	539
2004-05	1247	1447	72	1238	382	2523	2506	15794	969	159	467
2005-06	1589	1682	105	1316	325	2978	1358	8641	1117	124	613
2006-07	1839	1902	98	2115	335	3293	1925	11726	1683	235	360
2007-08	1487	1976	108	2164	331	3477	2704	19189	1746	225	826

Bobcats and CITES

There has been a concerted and ongoing effort by our representatives to the CITES Convention to have the bobcat removed from CITES treaty agreement. The bobcat is listed as a "look-alike" species to some that are endangered in other countries. This is the reason that all bobcats must have a plastic CITES seal placed on it before it leaves the U.S. It has been noted by our representatives that the bobcat is the most intensively studied and managed wild feline in the world and is in absolutely no danger of overharvest. Pelts are also fairly easily distinguishable from similar cats to a trained individual. CITES stands for Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The convention was formed to limit the sale and movement of pelts and other body parts of endangered species from entering the market.

Adaptive Management for Furbearers

Adaptive management (AM) is a strategy that most states use to manage their furbearer resources. It is loosely defined as embracing uncertainties that have management consequences. The strategy is very well suited to managing furbearers and is scientifically defensible to the public. It is especially useful where there is disagreement among constituents on basic ecology of a species, but agreement on actual management objectives.

Simply, this all means that we may have to make decisions on how we manage a species without having all the data we would like to have before making that decision. By carefully and regularly assessing our actions, we can make changes to fine tune management without irreversible damage to the resource we are trying to manage. Such conditions usually present themselves when time and money are not available to do long-term studies, or where a species or aspect of a species' ecology is near impossible to study adequately. Difficulty in obtaining sufficient sample sizes and the

secretive nature of most furbearers makes many of them very difficult to study. An easy to follow outline, prepared by Nathan Roberts of Cornell University, is presented below.

Four Factors (Truths) of AM:

1. Environmental variation (weather, food supply, water level, snow depth, etc.) cannot be controlled.
2. There is an inability to observe subtle population changes and to evaluate the response to changes in management.
3. There is an inability to adequately control harvest due to changes in trapper/hunter pressure as influenced by market, weather, etc.
4. Ecology of the species is not understood well.

How it Works:

1. ID management objectives.
2. ID key uncertainties.
3. Construct competing models to describe key uncertainties.
4. Design policies to provide info on uncertainties.
5. Monitor response.
6. Use all to update management program.

Advantages of AM:

1. Info available quickly.
2. Joint effort between research and management since this usually involves a harvest season of some kind.
3. **Provides info not otherwise available.** This is the key to understanding and accepting this strategy.**

Disadvantages of AM:

1. Often requires drastic changes in laws, management, and philosophies.
    a. There is increased risk of doing the wrong thing.

b. There is usually wildlife agency resistance.

2. There are bureaucratic and political realities that must be dealt with.
3. This method can be computationally intense in terms of keeping track of, and analyzing data.

Muskrat Decline

There is agreement among furbearer biologists that there seems to be a decline in muskrat numbers throughout muskrat range east of the Mississippi. The Northeast Furbearer Technical Committee has been collecting historic data from states and Canadian provinces in the northeast for examination. So far, recently collected sex and age data is similar to historic data with only a couple of exceptions. Pennsylvania and and Prince Edward Island data show declines in the number of juveniles in recent years. It was noted by senior furbearer biologist, Randy Diblee of PEI, that there is a density dependent reproductive response in muskrats as in many other furbearers. That is, litters are larger and juvenile survival is higher with higher mortality from predation and trapping. It is possible that trapping pressure plays a larger role than once thought in muskrat population dynamics.

Opening Dates and Pelt Primeness

In the past, many trappers have questioned opening dates of trapping seasons in West Virginia as being too early. The concern has been that pelts are not prime at these times. Trappers are reminded that these dates have given trappers opportunities to take care of nuisance problems without the need for obtaining a permit. Historically, it also gave trappers time to trap before snow and cold weather set in.

Those concerned with pelt primeness should wait until later in the season to begin trapping. For the same reason, farmers do not harvest unripe crops if they want to maximize their income. We need to continue to train trappers on proper pelt handling and all issues regarding pelt quality.

As a rule, pelts of mammals that spend most of their time in the water prime up later in the season. The reason is that average water temperature remains higher longer than average air temperature. In West Virginia, wait until at least mid to late December before trapping semi-aquatic furbearers such as muskrat and beaver. Wait until mid to late November before trapping terrestrial furbearers. This will vary slightly from region to region in the state.

Links

West Virginia Division of Natural Resources	www.wvdnr.gov
West Virginia Trappers Association	www.wvtrappers.com
Guide to State Game Depts.	www.identicards.com/links/statednr.html
Assoc. of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Furbearer Resources	www.fishwildlife.org/furbearer.html
National Trappers Association	www.nationaltrappers.com
Fur Takers of America	www.furtakersofamerica.com
Conserve Wildlife	www.conservewildlife.org
Furbearers Unlimited	www.furbearers.org
CITES	www.cites.org