

Fur trapping brings hunter out in

By Karen Krien

*The Saint Francis Herald
karen.k@nwkansas.com*

To St. Francis trapper Cliff Semler, being outside in the brisk early morning air checking traps is one of the joys of trapping fur-bearing animals.

"I can't hardly wait for the first day of trapping season," he said.

Many mornings during trapping season, mid-November to mid-March, Semler and sometimes his grandson Shannon are up by 5, checking traps with a flashlight. Very seldom, he said, do they come home without at least one animal.

A carpenter by trade, Semler's hobby allows him to trap in the mornings and build cabinets and houses and do remodeling during the day. However, when he comes home in the evenings, he heads back to his shop to take care of that morning's catch, which, if there are many animals in the trap, could make for a long evening.

He said he began trapping fur-bearing animals seriously in the 1970s. His father had traps on the farm and, as a kid, he was always trying to trap something. What he caught, lots of times, were skunks which had to be dealt with. However, his father, who was also a taxidermist, encouraged his interests.

He said he watched the animals, how they

lived, what they ate and the way they traveled. He soon learned how to set his traps. While animal activists may say trapping is inhumane, he says Mother Nature is more cruel. Many animals starve or die of disease, he said, and some have parasites, rabies or distemper.

He said traps are humane if the right size of trap is used for the right animal. He has a 7-inch-square trap which is used for smaller animals. An 8-inch or larger trap is used for beaver, he said, placed under the water. He has a variety of other traps, many of them older. Each trap has a copper plate with his name and address stamped into it.

Most of the animals he traps, he says, are predators and kill pheasant, quail and turkey. By trapping some of these animals, there are more birds for the hunters.

A state regulation says a trapper must check his traps every 24 hours. If the traps cannot be checked, they are pulled, he said.

Beaver, he said, are an interesting animal, altering their lifestyle to fit their needs. If the river dries up, they dig down in the sand, but they are safer in the water, living in ponds behind their dams. Other animals such as muskrat, mink and ducks, as well as fish, also benefit from the beaver dam.

A beaver, he said, can cut down a large tree in a couple of days. Some people, he said, don't like that because the beaver are getting rid of

these big trees, but when these trees are down, it allows sunlight to shine and small trees began to come up. These small trees, along with the tender tops of the big trees, are what beaver like to eat.

Beaver are powerful animals with long teeth but a dangerous tail. One day, he said, he was checking traps and he saw a beaver swimming down toward his trap. Already in the water wearing waders, he thought the beaver was headed right into the trap, but it turned short of the trap. The animal swam right toward him and, instinctively, he grabbed the beaver by the tail and threw him out of the water. He said it was not the smartest thing he ever did, because the teeth are like knives, and the beaver could have really cut him up. He said he would never do that again.

Semler said he probably likes trapping beaver the most, but bobcat comes in at a close second. He said he takes great pride in doing a good job of curing the pelts.

Early on, he said, he devised several methods for skinning animals. He even went so far as to design a knife with the right curve and had Tony Howard, a knife crafter, make one. He later had Howard make a second knife for his son Cody.

Preparing the pelt includes skinning, or casing, cleaning the hair on the pelts, then scraping the meat and fat from the inside. The whole

process takes between 20 and 30 minutes per animal, he said, then the pelt is mounted to dry.

The beaver are mounted on a round board. The rest of the animals are mounted on two longer pieces of wood with the head at the top. After the pelt is tacked to the boards, a board at the bottom stretches the pelt.

Raccoons, opossums, skunks and muskrats are mounted fur-side in. Semler said there is little difference in the skin color of these animals.

However, the animals with more color are stretched skin-side out. These include coyote, fox, bobcat and badgers. He said a light, almost white coyote pelt is more valuable than those with more colors. Some bobcats have more spots than others, he said.

A number of years ago, he said, he had set up 10 traps along the river from St. Francis to the Colorado line. Early the next day, he started checking the traps. The first had a beaver, the second had a beaver, as did the third. He said he ended up having nine beaver and knew it was going to be a long evening.

When the season opens, he said, he generally starts with only a few traps, then, as he checks them each day, adds a few more until he has around 15 set.

Semler said he finds the bobcat the most exciting animal to trap.

Hunter's Breakfast Buffet

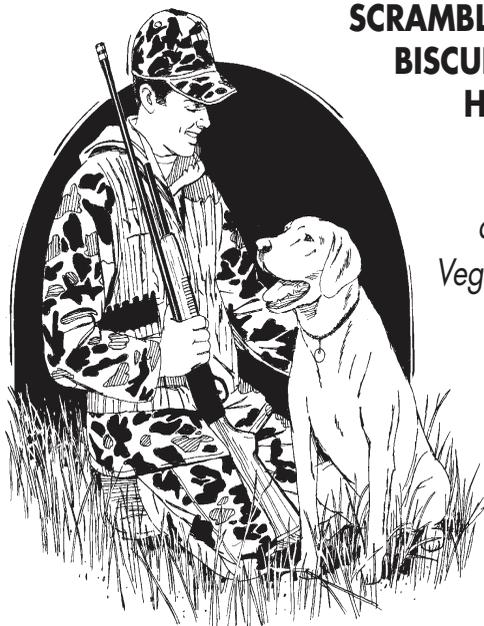
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