

# Taking Care of

by A. David Woodward



American Marten  
(Leonard Lee Rue III Photo)

**A**laska produces some of the finest fur in the world, and the value of that fur is estimated to be \$5 to \$10 million annually. If all the furs sold in Alaska were prepared for market properly, they would be worth even more.

Properly prepared pelts look good to the buyer; they are uniformly shaped, clean, and undamaged. The final destination of that fur is a beautiful garment, and the goal of the trapper should be to make the appearance of his raw, unprocessed fur approach that of final product as closely as possible. The fur buyer should be able to "see" the potential for each piece of fur.

Proper fur handling begins out on the trapline, at the set. The trapper should use traps and sets that will minimize the possibility of damage to his prey. Common pelt damage associated with set location such as "pitch pockets" (spruce gum in the fur), "freezing down" (fur, usually guard hairs, freeze into the ice or snow and may be pulled out), or furs being "clipped" (fur being eaten by mice before it is removed from the trap) may be avoided by choosing the proper set and set location. Using the correct size trap will also help to avoid pelt damage.

When dispatching animals, the trapper should make every effort to do it as quickly, cleanly, and humanely as possible. In most cases, a swift, firm blow directly behind the head for small furbearers, or a "22 short" between the eyes for the larger furbearers, will do fine. Every effort should be made to prevent blood or body fluids from soiling the fur.

Trappers should be prepared to transport their catch safely. A padded box or burlap bag will protect the day's harvest until it is safely home. Frozen tails should be wrapped in rags or newspaper to prevent damage during travel. Unfrozen animals should

not be packed so that two or more are in direct contact with one another, because unfrozen bodies retain warmth that may result in fur slippage. Once the fur is safely in the trapper's home or fur shed, the animal should be thawed slowly, away from direct heat or sunlight, and skinned as soon as possible.

As the animal thaws, excess water can be towed off the fur, and it should be cleaned of any soiling that may have occurred. Blood is best rinsed out with cold water or brushed out with a stiff-bristle brush. Pitch, if still moist and not imbedded in the underfur, may be removed with a solvent such as lighter fluid, acetone, or starting fluid. Most other types of soiling (mud, urine, grease, etc.) can be washed out with lukewarm water and a mild soap. The fur should be completely dry before the skinning begins. If electricity is available, a hand-held hair dryer on a cool setting will speed the drying process.

Furbearers in Alaska are skinned either "cased" or "open." Cased skinning involves cutting the pelt across from the inside of one rear leg to the inside of the other. The pelt is then pulled off the animal much like a pullover sweater. All furbearers in Alaska are skinned cased except beaver. Beaver are skinned "open," which involves splitting the pelt from chin to vent and removing it as one would an overcoat.

The trapper should have his tools ready and close at hand before he begins skinning. Skin carefully. Time is money, but in skinning, less time is less money. Keep the fur clean throughout the process by using paper towels or clean rags to wipe off excess fluids or soak them up with cornmeal or sawdust. Keep your knives sharp and make straight, even cuts. Although it is not necessary to skin out the feet on most furbearers, the pelts will look better if you do. Always skin

## Your Pelts



Fabian Carey Collection

out the feet of wolf and wolverine as these animals are often made into rug mounts. When skinning out feet, remove the pads and separate the toes at the last joint.

Tails should be pulled and split to the end. An old umbrella rib makes an excellent splitting guide and will help maintain the long, single cut needed for high-quality work.

Fleshing the pelt is perhaps the most difficult task. All excess fat and flesh must be removed from the skin. Otherwise the pelt will not dry and tan properly. The pelt is placed on a fleshing board and the fat is scraped off with the trapper's fleshing tool. Some trappers use commercially sold tools. Others use spoons, old files, or hacksaw blades. Begin fleshing the pelt at the head and work down to the tip of the tail. Don't scrape too close or you will cut the hair roots and the fur will pull out in the tanning process. Beaver are particularly greasy, and many trappers, after fleshing them, wash the skin side of the pelt with detergent and lukewarm water. This breaks down and helps to further remove the fat from the pelt.

After fleshing, repair any cuts, tears, or bite wounds in the pelt. Using an overhand stitch and waxed dental floss, sew up all holes from the skin side. Make small, tight stitches and try to keep all the fur on the fur side of the pelt. These repairs should be invisible

to all but the most practiced eye from the fur side of the pelt.

Pelts must be stretched and dried on correct size stretcher boards. The pelt should be put on the board symmetrically. Do not overstretch your pelt. This may make your pelt look larger but will make the fur look less dense. What you gain in size, you will lose in quality.

Place the pelt on the stretcher fur-side in and allow it to glaze over, then turn it fur side out and pull it snugly over the board. Tack the pelt down with pushpins around the base. Spread and flatten the tail before tacking it down. On cased fur, spread and tack down both front and rear legs. An additional board will be needed for the front legs and feet.

Beaver, being skinned open, is stretched flat on a sheet of plywood using nails or laced onto a hoop. In Canada, beaver are stretched oval, but in Alaska, beaver are traditionally stretched in an almost perfect circle. Beaver rear leg holes are sewn shut, and the front legs are tied off, then trimmed.

Don't place your furs near direct heat or sunlight, because this will cause them to dry too fast and become brittle. They should be hung up safe from vermin in a dark, cool, well-ventilated area where the temperature stays around 50° to 60° Fahrenheit. Once dry, they should be removed

carefully from the stretchers and hung up. In most of Alaska in winter, a dark, unheated shed or garage provides excellent storage where the pelts will freeze and not dry out completely. Don't remove pelts from their stretchers too soon or they will wrinkle and their appearance will be poor. When properly cured, the pelt should be dry to the touch, yet fairly flexible. If a pelt sticks to the stretcher, it may be softened by wrapping it in warm towels and removed.

When shipping dry pelts, pack them fur to fur and skin to skin. It is best not to ship furs in airtight containers, and folding should be avoided if at all possible.

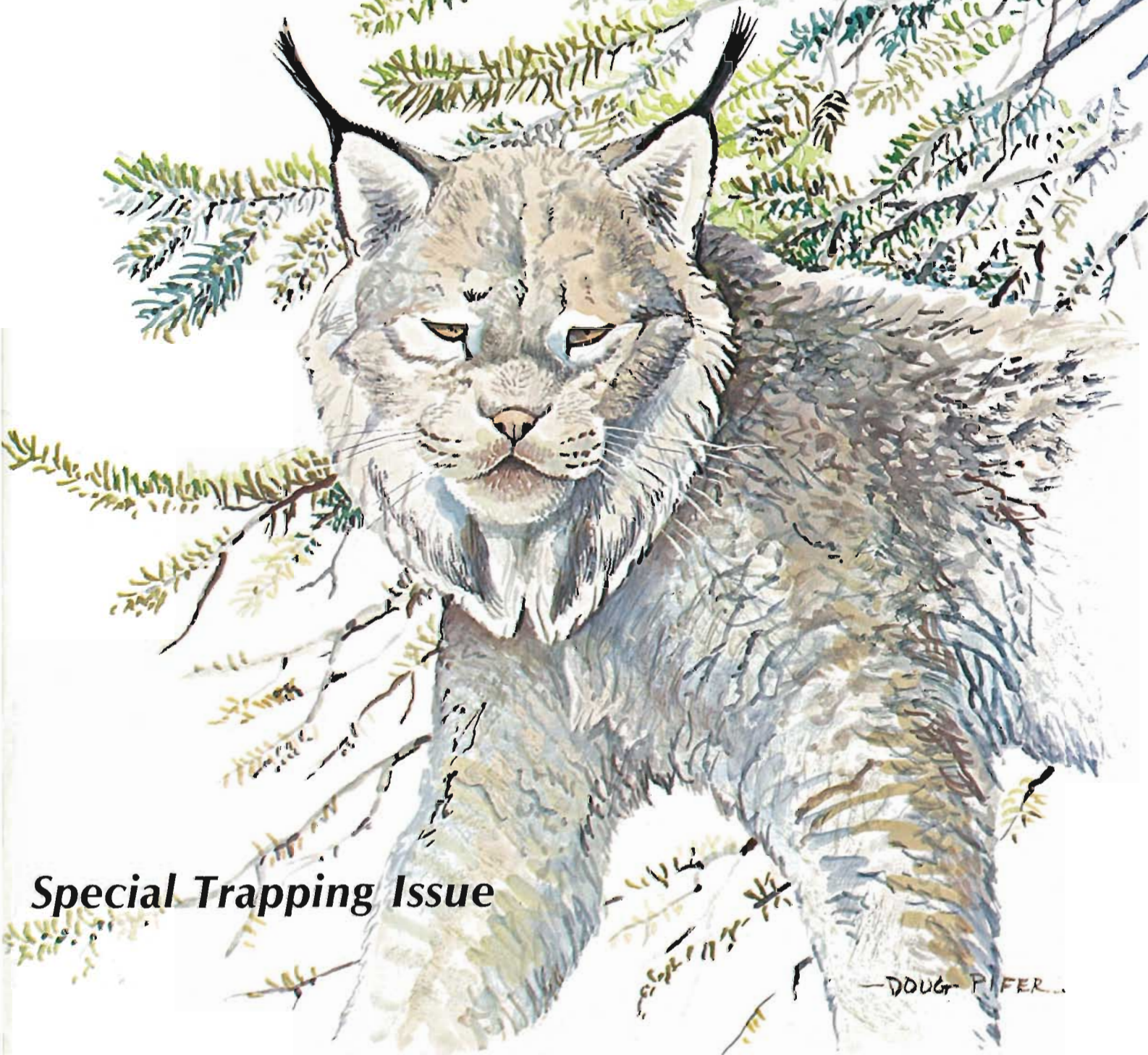
The demand for fur is still good throughout the world, but due to high interest rates and the general economic situation, fur buyers are very selective in what they buy. This selectivity on the part of the fur buyers means that proper pelt handling is becoming even more important. If you want to get top money for your fur—make it look good!

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—DOUG PIFER—