



Wild Illinois History

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Furbearers of Illinois

Concept:

Furbearer is the name given to mammals that traditionally have been hunted and trapped for fur. There are 14 species of furbearers in Illinois, although only 12 species may be legally hunted and/or trapped. Furbearers that are legally harvested for human use are always common and abundant. Through this activity, students will gain a vocabulary and knowledge about furbearers ecology and conservation.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Gain a vocabulary and knowledge about furbearers
- Research a specific furbearer
- Help others become aware of information and conservation of furbearers

Standards Addressed:

- 12B Know and apply concepts that describe how living things interact with each other and with their environment
- 12.B.2b Identify physical features of plants and animals that help them live in different environments

Materials:

- Access to computer and Internet
- Poster board and art materials
- DVD on Furbearers of Illinois (optional). To order contact:
Illinois Department of Natural Resources Clearinghouse
One Natural Resources Way
Springfield, IL 62702-1271
217-782-7498
clearing@dnrmail.state.il.us

Space: Classroom

Key Points:

- Illinois is rich in resources and important habitats for animals and plants. Different parts of the state with their different habitats – support different types of furbearers.
- Habitat destruction poses the greatest threat to our native plants and animals.
- Trapping once helped deplete many furbearer populations, but modern conservation efforts have helped furbearer species return to healthy populations.

Educator's Background:

Furbearer is the name given to mammals that traditionally have been hunted and trapped primarily for fur. There are 14 species of furbearers in Illinois, although only 12 species may be legally hunted and/or trapped.

Furbearers that are legally harvested for human use are *always* common and abundant.

Not all kinds of furbearers are hunted and trapped in every state. Furbearers plentiful in one state might be scarce in another, due to habitat losses or other reasons.

In Illinois, furbearer species that may be hunted and or trapped include: badgers, beaver, coyote, gray fox, least weasel, long-tailed weasel, mink, muskrat, raccoon, opossum, red fox, skunk.

Furbearer species that may not be hunted or trapped include: River otter, bobcat.

Furbearers are a diverse group, including both carnivores (meat eating predators) and rodents (gnawing mammals). Most are adaptable species ranging over large geographic areas. A few animals that are normally hunted or trapped primarily for their meat or to reduce agricultural or property damage may also be considered furbearers if their skins are marketed.

Most furbearers possess two layers of fur: a dense, soft *underfur* that provides insulation and water-repellent qualities; and an outer layer of longer, glossy *guardhairs* that grow through the underfur, protecting it from matting and abrasion. A fur is said to be prime when the guardhairs are at their maximum length and the underfur is at its maximum thickness. Fur generally becomes prime in midwinter when the coat is fresh and fully grown; the timing for primeness may vary somewhat depending on species, location (latitude) and elevation.

Furs are generally tanned, trimmed and sewn into garments, rugs, blankets and ornaments, and sometimes dyed in a variety of colors and patterns. Furs are also used in fishing lures, fine brushes and other products. Some furs are shaved, and the hair processed into felt for hats and other garments.

Fur is a renewable resource (naturally replenished), a product of long traditional use, valued by many for its beauty, durability, insulative and natural qualities. Fur is only one of many values that people ascribe to furbearers. People have continuously used furbearers in North America for clothing, food and religious ceremonies for the past 11,000 years.

Fur resources had a greater influence on European settlement and exploration of the continent than any other factor. Many cities and towns were founded as fur trading centers where Europeans bartered with Native Americans for furs.

For information on individual furbearer species in Illinois, go to:
http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/what_is.htm

Procedure:

The class should divide into 14 groups. Each group will select or be assigned an Illinois furbearer to research. They will give a presentation on that furbearer to the rest of the class. They can prepare posters or develop other multi-media presentations.

Background questions for student groups when researching their furbearer:

1. What is the animal like physically? How is it adapted to the environment in which it lives?
2. Where does the animal live in Illinois? What is its habitat like? You might draw a map of where it lives in Illinois or sketch a picture showing its likely habitat. Can the animal live in areas that are urban, suburban and/or rural? What challenges does the animals and people face living close to each other?
3. What are the animal's habits? How are fascinating components of how it lives, hunts, reproduces or makes a home or shelter?
4. What does it eat? How does it gather food? Is it an omnivore, herbivore or carnivore?
5. What is the history of the animal in Illinois? What challenges has the animal faced in Illinois' history? What is the status of the animal now? How have people helped or caused problems for the animal's population? What factors have led to numbers rising or falling over time? What is the biggest challenge that the animal faces now? How can people in Illinois help this animal? (Think education, conservation, funding.)
6. Can the animal be hunted or trapped? What regulations are in place regarding those activities?
7. What conservation organizations or activities exist to help these animals?
8. How could you help in the conservation of this animal? What would you recommend that people do to help this animal?

Sources of information:

- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois website:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/index.htm>
- For description of Illinois furbearers:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/>
- Fur Hunting and Trapping Regulations:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/regulations.htm>
- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois/ Related Links:
<http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/links.htm>
- Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois/ Publications:
http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/virtual_news/publications.htm
- For information on how hunters and trappers contribute to wildlife and conservation, go to Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois / Virtual Newsroom
http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/virtual_news/index.htm
- For another historical perspective on trappers and the fur trade, as well as a description of trappers in today's world, go to:
http://www.anr.state.vt.us/furbearer/way_of_life.html