

Fur Farms
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by Jack Hatfield

Believe it or not, fur farms are important to trappers. Why? Their production often controls what wild furs bring on the marketplace. Mink do so almost religiously. They often control muskrat and wild mink prices.

I retired from buying fur ten or fifteen years ago. Since that time, I have not kept up with the fur industry like I once did. Consequently, the figures I'm about to quote may or may not still be pertinent to today's fur business. The world marketplace could consume 35-40 million ranched mink annually without harming ordinary price structures for them. It costs a mink farmer (rancher) \$20-\$22 to produce a mink pelt. When mink were overproduced in any given year, that often took down the per pelt price below its production cost. Supply and demand controls the ranch mink market unlike anything else. You will see many, many mink ranchers put out of business during any year when production exceeds demand. Selling a \$20-\$22 mink for \$15 or less kills them.

Scandinavian mink ranchers have played all sorts of games in the past. All were meant to make competitors go broke so they could enjoy a higher market. In many cases, it worked. Their governments subsidized them by encouraging them to produce massive amounts of mink during a season. That resulted in 50 million or more pelts hitting the market during that year. Prices fell far below twenty bucks and our American ranchers, not being subsidized by our government, went belly up. The following year, the Scandinavians had a field day because much of their competition had been eliminated. Mink ranching can truly be a cutthroat business.

I had one friend who was one of the country's biggest mink ranchers. The games the Scandinavians played had no impact on him. Here's why: He was wealthy enough that he did not have to sell his mink during the down-market year. He had his tanned, put into cold storage, and he sold them when the market bounced back. Of course, that can also result in driving down market prices if enough mink ranchers do it at the same time. They can release all those mink on the market at the same time and increase the supply beyond the annual consumption rate. Most are aware of that so they filter them into the market slowly. Once they're tanned, there's no need to unload them all at once and hurt market prices. It has happened.

Today's mink prices were some of the highest ever recorded. I'm told they were responsible for the increase in demand for muskrats last year. The muskrat shortage, and that increased demand, resulted in the highest prices I've seen paid for muskrats. Mink users often turn to the cheaper muskrats to produce fur garments when mink pelts go out of sight. Never believe they don't have a connection because they do. Watch for 'rat prices to drop if ranch mink are overproduced next year and their prices return to normal. It happens all the time and has throughout the fur business' history. Mink ranchers, just like trappers, tend to get greedy and overproduce the market when big bucks are flashed in front of them. That's one thing that makes the fur business so volatile.

When I bought furs, we'd lost over 90% of the business to fox and mink ranchers. That meant that 90% off all garments were made from ranched furs. It's no mystery why. You can't even think about comparing wild furs with ranched ones. Fur farming has become an exact science. Breeding of mink and fox has become almost as genetically perfect as animal husbandry gets. Colors and sizes are so perfect that a blind man can match the pelts and produce fantastic fur garments. Their sizes don't require as many pelts as they once did. The fur quality beats the bejeebers out of wild fur. Ranch furs are killed during their ten-day peak primeness period, which all furs have. Wild furs rarely are taken during this time, so there's no comparison with their primeness quality. There are little or no differences in the fur quality of ranched furs; there are plenty in wild ones. If you are a garment maker, which would you rather have to work with?

The major reason wild furs are used to produce garments anymore is their price. If they weren't cheaper than

ranching fur, we trappers would have no market – period. Certain wild critters cannot be pen raised or ranching while still producing good quality fur. Raccoon are one of them. There are breeds of raccoon that are pen raised and their fur quality is horrible. One, the Finn Raccoon, is huge with horrible-looking fur. I've seen them on world auctions in Canada. I would not want to own a garment made from those big, ugly, wooly-looking rascals. All breeds of ranching foxes originated from the original red fox. Reds threw those mutants, and two mutants were bred to produce the new breed. That's how silvers, crosses, blacks, arctic, and all breeds of foxes got started. They are glorified reds.

I've never seen or known anyone who raised, or even attempted to raise, grey foxes. Greys aren't related to reds and belong to their own species. They are more cat-like than canine. Can they be pen raised? It's doubtful. Someone would have farmed them if they could. There are some critters in nature man simply cannot duplicate; greys might be one of them.

There is a demi-buff ranch mink that is an imitation wild mink. They are brown with their white spots where wild mink have them. I've never seen one with the same fur quality of a wild mink. Most of them have shorter fur. Most are also twice as big as wild mink. Again, man cannot duplicate what nature can; he can only imitate it. That's why there will always be a market for wild mink.

Wild mink have a peak primeness period of ten days. In our section of Ohio, that's usually somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Not every wild mink reaches its peak primeness period at the same time; it varies with each individual mink. It may be genes, weather, or diet that determine it, or a combination of all three. Regardless, our mink trapping season spans several months. What are our chances of catching one during its peak ten days? Ranchers check their mink for peak primeness daily and when it's there, they kill them, freeze them on the carcass, and process so many per day. Their fur quality is one for one for one. There's no question about primeness. Foxes are the same way. That's why ranching fur has taken control of the fur industry. It's why wild fur is one of the most undervalued commodities in the world. We should consider ourselves lucky to even have a market for our wild furs. Yes, ranching furs are that good.

Will wild fur prices ever come back as strong as they once were fifty to a hundred years ago? As long as there are ranches producing better quality furs, don't expect it to happen. We should be grateful that muskrats, grey fox, otters, and beavers cannot be ranching. Our market would be non-existent if they could.

Make no mistake about it, there will always be a market for fur garments as long as men have wives and mistresses and winters produce cold weather. Synthetics have been made in many different forms, but no manmade fabric can ever repel the cold like a natural fur skin. Many have tried to produce such fabrics; furs always win. Man cannot out-produce Mother Nature when it comes to repelling the cold. As trappers, that's good to know because it means we'll always have a fur market for our skins.

Ranching foxes and mink is not an easy business. It's always a crapshoot because you never know during any given year how many pelts of any species or color will be raised and put on the market. Whenever it's more than the market will bear, losses come and all the work and money you put into feeding your critters will result in you losing money. That's frustrating and it always looms as a possibility during any given year. You have to be a gambler to be a fur rancher. Regardless of the business, you'll have good years and bad ones. They are guaranteed so you have to put enough aside from your good ones to carry you through the bad. If you cannot afford to do that, stay away from ranching furs. You'll go broke. I've seen many do so.

Because the nature of fur ranching is how I just described it, there are few small ranchers left. Like all farming, the small farmers have virtually disappeared. Large corporations have taken control of fur farming almost worldwide. Sometimes they end up cutting their own throats and each other's. Fashion is a fickle thing in the fur business. It comes and goes like the wind. One year the latest rage may be sapphire colored mink coats. Nobody foresaw it, so enough of that color strain wasn't produced. They sell for ten bucks more than

any other color, because there's not enough to supply the demand. The ranchers hear this so they increase their numbers of sapphire mink, and the next season they don't sell. Another color has replaced them as the hottest seller because of the fickle fashion trends. That happens frequently so trying to guess what color will be hot one year and cold the next is pure speculation. When you speculate, it's always a gamble that usually produces more losers than winners. I've seen ranchers driven out of business because they overproduced a particular color strain and couldn't unload them. Mink ranchers can be their own worst enemies. That's because they're always a year behind fashion trends and must decide almost a year in advance which color strains they want to breed heavily. The whimsical fashion trend has put many of them under when they guessed wrong. Again, if you're large and wealthy enough to have your pelts tanned and held over until their particular color comes back into demand, you'll be assured of a profit. Big fur ranchers can; small ones cannot.

As a trapper, I'd like to see ranched foxes and mink go to a hundred bucks per pelt. It probably won't happen because ranchers won't allow it. They'll produce too many pelts to prevent it. The more ranched furs cost, the more appealing wild furs become as an alternative fur. Sure, they're harder to match and work with. But if you can buy them for half or less of ranched goods, that'll bring down the cost of the garment that is produced and you'll sell it quicker. Besides that, some wild furs produce more beautiful garments than any ranched fur can. It all comes down to the taste of the individual buying the garment and what they're willing to pay. The bulk of the price of any garment made comes from the price of the raw skins it took to make it. If a furrier has to charge eight thousand dollars for a ranched coat because he has six thousand tied up in it, he'll opt to make a wild red fox coat for five thousand dollars because he'll only have three thousand tied up in it and still make his two thousand. Besides that, the cheaper coat will sell faster too. Fur coat buyers do shop prices. ### Jack Hatfield, 14681 Lisbon Road, Salem, OH 44460.