

**Grading Furs – Part 2**  
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## Muskrats

Muskrats are one of the easiest furs to grade. You'd never know that to see how many grades some buyers throw at you. Basically, muskrat pelts are either good or bad. Despite that, there are all sorts of in-between grades created so they can be bought cheaper. There are all kinds of damages that occur to muskrats that are unique only to them. The worst is that which they inflict on each other. Muskrats are territorial minded fighting machines. Their teeth are sharp, their pelts thin, so they cut each other easily. All old scars are capable of reopening when they dress the pelt.

They are graded as per size, quality, and damage. Large, medium, and smalls are furred differently and have different leather thicknesses. Kitts and mice are late and later-born muskrats. They are virtually worthless because of limited usage so nobody want to spend money getting them tanned. Usually they're used for coat liners. Their pelt leather is so thin they're hard to sew. M, P, T's are three common off grades that are virtually worthless. M is mice of those late, late-born muskrats with blue, fuzzy fur. P is for pieces, which usually should have been thrown away and not even dried. They are what's left of pelts that were eaten by raptors or mink or badly damaged road kills. Taints are the T's. They were left on the carcass too long and allowed to spoil or start to decay. Pelt leather color tells it all. It's either blue, black, green, or a combination of those colors. It's usually on the belly or sides and a waste of time and money to tan them. A piece of bare leather may result.

Flat muskrats are a fur buyer's base. Sellers often don't recognize them and see only a big muskrat. They are pelts with little or no fur. That includes both underfur and guard hair. But flats may also have thick, heavy leather with little or no fur because they are so big and old. What causes flats? Lack of food and old age are the main two. Some claim climate and genes also do. Strip mine pit muskrats are notorious for producing flat muskrats. That's because nobody usually bothers them and there's seldom enough food for the needed protein that make good fur. Muskrats rarely live over two years and most that are caught are young-of-the-year juveniles. When they have an ample food supply, they grow rapidly and make the large size grade by fall or winter.

A muskrat's growth rate is connected to its food supply more so than any other furbearer. Pond 'rats with limited feed, such as grass roots, seldom exceed the medium size and may take two years to make longer. As a fur grader who looks at plenty of muskrat pelts, you should be able to look at a pelt and tell where it came from. Pond sized muskrats show up at our fur sale where I grade and they stick out like a sore thumb because so many of them in large ponds are mediums because of lack of food.

While you would think northern muskrats would tend to be thicker leathered because of the cold climate, northern 'rats are the opposite. It seems the farther north you go, the thinner their leather is. Alaskan 'rats are paper thin and can be so extremely thin they're hard to sew. While their fur may be silky, their pelt leather is paper thin. Why? They're beneath the ice so long they dehydrate badly. There's no fat and little tissue on the pelt to make it thicker. Most also have limited protein.

On the other end of the spectrum are southern muskrats. Louisiana once led the nation in muskrat production because of all her wetlands and marshes. These 'rats never brought more than a buck and some were huge. They were flat as a pancake with little or no underfur and very short guard hairs. They were used almost exclusively for coat liners, mainly in China, where it gets damp and cold in the winter. Almost all southern 'rats are big and flat. The muskrats between these extremes are what make up the bulk of the world's collections. They also vary greatly with each other in terms of fur and pelt thickness. Sizes are pretty much standard with most states, but there are places with super good, outstanding 'rats. The Finger Lakes Region in New York

produce the largest, finest 'rats in the entire world. Twenty inch or more sized 'rats are common and there is no more beautifully furred muskrat anywhere. They always top world markets. Some sections produce plenty of black furred 'rats. They, too, are beautiful, but it is a result of genes and not a regional area. They can pop up anywhere.

On world auctions, muskrats are graded as per sizes and sections. Like all furs, different sections must be sorted and sold together where they belong. Western 'rats are usually poorer in quality than eastern or northern 'rats. The prices they bring reflect that. Why are they poorer? Lack of food and genes are probably why. They are flatter with thinner fur, are poorly colored, but unlike southern 'rats, have very cold weather that should produce better fur than they have. Why western 'rats are so poorly furred is always mystery to me.

Muskrats are graded as per when they were caught. I know of no other fur that is graded like that. Fall, winter, and spring are 'rat grades and has everything to do with fur texture. Fall 'rats are usually taken in November and December before they are fully furred. Their pelt leather color shows it because it will be darker and not red or reddish white. Fall 'rats usually show dark splotches or dark patterns on the pelt leather, denoting they're not completely prime. They must be used together to make garments. Winter 'rats are those taken in the dead of winter – usually beneath the ice or when there has been ice and it's gone. They may be dehydrated somewhat for lack of simple food. Their pelt leather is red or reddish white with no black color at all. The fur is thick with blue underfur and long guard hairs, indicating full primeness. Spring 'rats are those taken in March or April. They are highly desirable in the fur trade because they are so silky and the pelt leather seems to be perfect because it has little or no fat and not much tissue. Most 'rat seasons are closed then because the muskrats are breeding, but spring 'rats are usually the best. Further north there are spring 'rat seasons.

Muskrat prices are controlled primarily by ranch mink prices. Why? Because they're used as substitutes when ranch mink prices are high. They become the alternate fur for mink. That demand nearly always boosts their prices. Low mink prices produce low 'rat prices due to decreased demand. Regardless of that, when you look at today's 'rat prices and compare them with how everything else has risen, they are extremely undervalued. There is a definite connection between how tough or easy 'rats are graded and their current market value. High prices tend to bring tougher grades. Lower prices bring more lenient ones. It has to be that way because muskrats are usually bought on a fifty-cent margin. A grading mistake on one can eat your profit on several others.

An honest muskrat grader/buyer will look for reasons to upgrade your parcel instead of reasons to downgrade it. If they complain continually and don't have a good word to say about your 'rats, they're trying to make you feel badly about them so they can buy them as cheaply as possible. When you encounter someone like that who has more pelts in the bad pile than in the good one, get your furs and walk away. The whole 'rat pile should contain less than 10% throw-outs or smaller sized 'rats. There may be exceptions, but that's a pretty good rule of thumb. Beware of those who advertise paying more than others; they'll get you on their tougher grade. There are no magic muskrat markets.

## Red Fox

Reds are one of the toughest furs to buy, sell, and make a profit on. Why? No two buyers ever grade them the same way. If you doubt that, take a parcel to five different buyers and see how many different grades you get. Been there and seen it many, many times. Grading reds is tough because there is no set criteria. Each grader tends to look for something different to determine a red's value. One may look for flatness near the neck or overall flatness on the entire pelt. Another may look for frosty rumps or light or dark fur colors. Another may look at the pelt leather color and throw it out if it's dark – regardless of how well furred the pelt is. There seems to be an endless list of how graders categorize red foxes.

Reds come in different sizes, but unlike most other pelts, there is no medium size. They're either adults or small pups. Some in between sizes may be graded at times, but they're usually bought with ones for the same money. It truly is a tough grade when a grader throws a number two grade at you for less money. Don't sell to such buyers because they're only looking for a way to cut what they have to pay you. They won't sell that way, so why should you? Usually older, longer foxes are much heavier furred with thicker pelt leather than younger ones. When you see a large red that's not as heavily furred as others, but still as large, chances are it's a young one that grew extremely fast. They can do that when there's an exceptional amount of food available. Such pelts are true number twos.

Reds have delicate fur that's soft and damages easily. It's one of the poorest wearing furs when made into a garment. Those soft guard hairs break off easily when a coat is worn often. Still, they make a beautiful and highly desirable garment. It's rare to see a red fox pelt completely free of some sort of damage. There always seems to be something waiting to damage that delicate fur. As January arrives, reds have been fully prime for some time. They'll sleep in the snow, wake up, and leave patches of fur clinging to the snow. These are called "brush whipped" pelts. Why? Brush has nothing to do with it, but I suspect running through heavy brush causes the same loss of fur. Reds always begin shedding long before it gets warm, so the chances of getting a good one diminishes greatly as time marches on. Our best red pelts seem to come between Thanksgiving and Christmas. After that, it's all downhill. Fall caught reds are seldom fully prime.

Red fox off-grades are usually determined by their lack of primeness or amount of damage. Threes are usually flat, unprimed, or damaged ones that can be repaired easily. Fours are badly damaged or badly flawed. Fives are usually garbage not worth owning or tanning. They are the same as low-grades, which may be summer kills with little or no fur, or extremely damaged ones beyond repair. I've never heard of a low grade for reds, but those numbers for off-grades are substitutes. Bad, freaky, off-colored reds may be bought as these or have a set price paid for them. Usually gray colored rumps qualify for that too. Remember, red foxes are wild canines and canines may produce offspring of any color at any time. It all depends on what's in their family bloodlines.

## Beavers

Beaver grades are tough. They're bought per sections, sizes, colors, textures, damages, and anything else a grader wishes to add. No other fur is tougher to buy and sell and make a profit on. That's not necessarily because of grading, even though grading does make it tough. No country buyer can ever buy and sell beaver pelts on the same tough grade he'll get further down the line, such as at world auctions. No trapper would sell to a country buyer on such a tough grade. That helps make it tough to make a profit because buyers should grade the same way as their own buyers. Beaver markets sometimes fluctuate wildly, and do so quickly. Rarely are prices stable from beginning to end during any season. Miss the peak and you'll take heavy losses. Been there and done it. Today's good buy can be tomorrow's bad one. You must sell at the right time and sometimes that's hard to determine. As soon as beaver buyers get what they need, prices often drop dramatically. Beaver buying is tough.

There are seven different basic beaver pelt sizes with different price brackets. Buy a borderline one and it may shrink into the smaller size and cost you money. Sometimes graders automatically throw these borderline sizes into the smaller category. Beaver pelts have more off-grades than any other fur. Damage is common and comes in various degrees. Graders have categories for these degrees. Old scars may reopen during tanning so they must be bought cautiously. Each good sized hole (larger than a silver dollar) must downgrade the pelt one size. They cost more to repair, might get bigger during tanning, and limit what the pelt might be used for. Flat or unprimed pelts, often southerners, must be regarded as hatters for the hat trade. Extremely damaged ones that can't be repaired are handled the same way. They are regarded as section threes and bring only a fraction of what a good one brings. Beaver pelts have more grades and wider price ranges than any other fur. Nobody cares how much work it takes to put up a bad one except the fur handler.

Country buyers may grade and buy your beavers several ways. They pay so much per pound on the carcass or measure skinned pelts and buy them according to what size they figure they'll stretch to. Put-up, dried pelts take all the guesswork out of buying and usually bring a five-dollar bill more. Carcass and skinned beavers are always a pig-in-a-poke for buyers because damage isn't revealed until the pelt gets scraped and stretched. It's easy to lose money on unseen damaged pelts. Because of that, it's said that it is impossible for beaver graders to grade too hard. Rubs and bad cuts are easily detectable, but all those unseen damages are not. Don't complain about tough beaver grading – it's necessary.