

Poor Man's Mink
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In the fur trade, muskrats have always been known as the poor man's mink. That simply means those who can't afford to buy an expensive mink coat can often afford to buy a cheaper muskrat coat. When you figure the average price paid for raw mink pelts is several times what it is for muskrats, it's easy to see why mink coats cost more than muskrat.

I'm one trapper/ex-fur trader, who likes muskrat garments better than mink garments. I have vests made from coyote, otter, and muskrats. My favorite is the muskrat. They are prettier, softer, and silkier than the others. Unfortunately, mink has a rich reputation, which has made it a status symbol with fur garment lovers. I believe muskrat fur is much nicer, but many fur people don't share my view. You have a contrast in most muskrat furs that mink pelts don't have. I used that contrast of the light belly fur and darker back fur to create a beautiful vest. I told the furrier what I wanted, provided the muskrats, and he made it. I could never have made such a vest from mink.

The muskrat market has never been as unstable in the past as it now is. Why? Because there's no individual fur company, brokerage house, or individual who now buys most of the world's muskrat fur. For years and years, an individual in New York City, who owned a big brokerage house, bought most of the world's muskrats. He more or less set the prices they'd bring every season. As a result, muskrat prices were usually the most stable on the fur market. He died several years ago, his accounts were all sold, and the muskrat market hasn't been the same.

I once rode a commuter plane from North Bay to Toronto, Canada with that old gentleman. We sat together and chatted about the fur industry the entire flight. He was 80 years old and had a wealth of knowledge about the fur industry. He told me muskrats could command a top price of \$5 per pelt before the price of the fur garment fell into, or close to, the same category, as a mink garment. That meant the higher over \$5. Muskrats sold for, the harder the garments made from them became to sell. He told me the biggest trouble the muskrat market ever got into was when the raw pelts sold for over \$8. When furriers saw they couldn't move those high dollar coats, the price dropped close to the \$5 range the following season. A lot of muskrat buyers, furriers, and speculators really got hurt with the huge price transition. I know one buyer, who took the biggest single loss in the fur business I've ever seen, on 35,000 muskrats.

When an average customer is offered a mink coat or a muskrat coat for comparable prices, there's no contest. The mink coat is the automatic winner. Consequently, to sell consistently, muskrat garments must be much cheaper than mink garments.

Few fur customers know much about fur quality. Even worse, fewer don't care. They shop fur name and price. That's not always a bright thing to do. Why? Most mink garments are made from ranch mink. Like the proverbial "little girl", when mink are good, they're very, very good. But, when they are bad, they're often junk. A mink garment is only as good as the quality of fur that goes into it. Most mink are butchered whenever they are at their peak primeness period. Consequently, their fur quality is A-one. But, there are an awful lot of ranch mink that die, or are killed, before and after, their peak primeness period. Garments are still made from them and sold at reduced prices. Their buyers are those shopping price and not knowing much about fur quality. You truly do get what you pay for when you buy a cheap mink coat. That's why it's not always wise to choose mink over muskrat, simply because of its superior reputation. Today, more than any other time in the history of the fur business, there are far more cheap mink coats on the market than there are expensive ones, *Caveat Emptor. Buyer Beware.*

There's a Korean furrier that specializes in making cheap ranch fox and mink coats. They're cheap because

they use cheap off grade pelts. They mass produce the garments and export most to the United States. Ironically, their federal laws don't allow them, to use any American raw, wild fur. They use Scandinavian ranch fur. How's that for free trade between the U.S. and Korea? That situation has existed for many years but no American politician has ever cared enough to do anything about it. Sadly, no thanks to our politicians, the American Fur Trade is one of the few businesses that enjoys favorable balance of trade. We export far more fur, and fur products, than we import. It could be even higher if our politicians would do something about the Korean fiasco. America has always been a fur-producing nation. We've never been known as a fur-consuming nation because we produce far more than we use. Our culture is responsible for that.

Louisiana leads our nation annually in the production of muskrat pelts. They're very flat furred muskrats and used mostly for lining coats. They make an excellent coat liner because they're so warm. Recent fur technology has allowed furriers to make felt-like sheets or plates from sewing muskrat pelts together. They're dyed in different colors and hard to recognize as fur. Since all the guard hair is removed, it doesn't matter how flat the pelt is. It only needs underfur.

There's as much a difference in southern and northern muskrats as there is in night and day. And the farther apart they get in those two climates, the more extreme those differences become. The flat muskrats of the deep south are very heavy leathered and have thin fur. The muskrats in Alaska and other northern extremes are extremely thin leathered, but have thick, silky guard hair and underfur. They seem to become dehydrated because of the extremely cold temperatures and have zero body fat. Some are so thin leathered you can hold them to the light and see through them.

The best over-all quality muskrats in America come from the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. They are big, they are super-furred, and they are beautiful. They are the closest thing to a perfect muskrat that America produces. Their prices are always fifty per cent more, or better, than most standard muskrats. They can be sheared, because of their beautiful, heavy underfur, or used natural because of their long, silky guard hair. Their large sizes make them go far in making a garment.

Muskrat size, and fur quality, is usually controlled by the climate where they are found, and the amount of food available. Western muskrats demonstrate this very well. Climate seems to take a back seat to food source with western muskrats. They're generally poor to mediocre quality furs. They don't normally grow large or have heavy fur, despite harsh winter, because there's rarely an abundance of food available for them. Being iced under most of the winter only seems to make their fur worse, because they have to survive on a minimum of food. Western muskrats are in a separate class on the fur market and worth less than northern and eastern muskrats, but more than southern.

Food is a very important factor in muskrat fur size and quality, no matter where they are. Marsh rats, where there's plenty of food, like cattails and roots, are almost always large and have good fur. Pond or lake rats will be the same as long as there's plenty of food. Take away that food supply and make them live off a minimum of vegetation, and they become small and have poor fur. I've seen many, many examples of that. Golf course ponds or lakes, where there are only grass roots for food, will produce small, poorly furred muskrats annually. Strip pond muskrats, where there's not much food, may grow big, but they're almost always poorly furred. They'll eat whatever is available, and more often than not, that's not much. A lot of flat muskrats come from strip mine pits because they don't get enough nutrition to produce good fur. A muskrat must get ample protein to produce both fur and growth.