

Grading Furs – Part 1
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by Jack Hatfield

The kind of grade you get for your fur will determine how much you get for them. Grading is the most important part of the buyer-seller chain. Sell to someone who doesn't know how to grade properly and it's a crapshoot. They may shortchange you or themselves. Been there and seen it happen. It pays to sell to someone who knows what they're looking at. Usually buyers who can't grade properly aren't in business over one season because they either go broke or lose so much it's not profitable to stay in business. It's said a fool and his money are soon parted. That really is true with fur buyers who don't know how to grade.

It takes time to learn fur grading. There's a lot to it. If ever there's something you need to serve an apprenticeship for, it learning how to grade. No two wild fur skins are ever exactly the same. There are major differences in some while it may be subtle in others. It takes a trained, educated, experienced eye to see the differences. The biggest problem with grading furs is there are few set guidelines for how to grade specific pelts. No two graders ever see pelts the same, so they'll usually come up with different grades. Basically though, a good pelt is good and a bad pelt is bad. When a grader tries to tell you that your good ones are bad, he's taking advantage of you and ripping you off. If it's not highly evident, always have your grader explain why he threw out a particular pelt you felt was good. Honest graders will be glad to explain because they want to educate you. Educated sellers are always easier to deal with than uneducated ones. Dishonest graders want to keep you in the dark. If they become offended when you ask for an explanation, beware of them.

There are two basic kinds of grades – a buyer's grade and a seller's grade. When someone buys, he will grade you tough because he wants to make as much money as possible. Some will virtually count every hair on a fur pelt. That's known as a tough grader and they'll cut you no slack on any pelt that's borderline between being good or bad. You'll lose money selling to them because they grade too tough. You can expect such grades farther up the selling chain like world auctions, but they don't belong with country buyers. Switch buyers if yours insists on grading you as hard as he can. He's simply not being fair with you. Learn as much as you can about fur grading and they won't be able to take advantage of you. Know what you have and have a ballpark figure of what your pelts are worth before you sell to anybody. If the offer isn't even close, walk. Dishonest buyers thrive on sellers who don't know what they have.

On the other hand, a seller's grade will always be easier than the buyer's grade. Some buyers who graded you though may go through the parcel after you've sold and "upgrade" them for himself. He'll then attempt to sell them to his buyer the way he upgraded them. He'll take every pelt he considered borderline and threw it out on you and upgrade it to a good one. Some buyers play that grading game religiously and make a pile of money doing so. That is one reason I always stayed away from tough graders. Most are dishonest.

You're entitled as a trapper to look at your fur this way. You caught them, you handled them, and you did a lot of hard work doing these two things. You caught them, you handled them, and you did a lot of hard work doing those two things. No buyer should ever be entitled to make more money on them than you. He's entitled to make a profit, but you should come away with the bulk of the money they're worth. Some buyers don't care how hard you worked or what you're entitled to get. That always irked me. That gets worse the farther up the buying-selling chain those furs go. At world auction, no buyers care about you. They care only about how cheap they can buy your furs. That's part of the fur trade that is as old as the trade. I once sold three coyotes, which I had an hour's labor each in processing, for 78 cents on a Canadian sale. Do you think their buyer cared? Absolutely not! It can be a brutal business and often is. Those coyotes weren't worth 78 cents, but much more. Still, that's all I got and nobody cared by me.

Let's take a look at our most common furs and see how they'll be graded and why they're graded that way.

Mink

Mink will be graded by sex, color, and size. Quality, damage, or primeness will also be used as grading criteria. All furs will be graded as per those three things. Male mink are usually twice as large as females. They usually bring twice as much money based on that. Females are thinner and silkier than males, but make the best garments. However, because of their size it takes more to make that garment. Off grade mink will bring only a fraction of good ones. Off-grades will be unprimed, springy, damaged, or cottons. Cottons, those with white under fur, must be dyed and seldom bring one-third of full price that good ones do. Un-prime ones are either caught too early or too late. Pelt leather doesn't lie and those early caught ones will have blue or black pelt leather, indicating they have little or no fur. That includes short guard hairs and little or no under fur. They are considered low grades and bring a dollar or two. Springy mink will have their hair follicles showing through the pelt leather. That indicates they may already be shedding fur or are about to start. They won't have much fur when tanned and are virtually worthless, being bought as low grades or having no value. Nobody likes to get back a piece of leather without any fur when they've paid to have a fur tanned. Depending on the amount of damage and where it is damaged, mink will bring different prices, but none will be top dollar. Repairs cost money and the trapper pays for them. Old scars, black kidney spots, and cuts are common damages on mink. They must be repaired.

Different sections of the world produce different qualities of fur on mink. Country buyers seldom pay attention to sections, but they're graded as per section on world auctions. Why? Because southern mink won't mix with northern ones. Sections tend to mix only with their own specific one as per color, texture, and quality. Arkansas mink tend to be much redder colored, shorter napped, with thinner under fur. They mix only with their own kind and so do other sections. At world auctions, mink are sold in lots that are ready to be tanned and made into garments so they must all be the same. Mink have so many subtle differences it truly does take a trained eye to spot them. Guard hairs have different lengths. Under fur has different thicknesses. Color varies so much it's doesn't quite match the rest. Its fur may be thicker, thinner, lighter colored, darker, or something else that'll show. Mink must be matched perfectly to make a top-notch garment. Look at most garments closely and they aren't.

When you sell mink to a country buyer, it'll be the easiest grade they'll get. It gets tougher down the line. You'll be paid for a male or female. It'll either be a good or bad one. Your small young-of-the-year males will be bought with females because that's where they belong for both size and fur texture. That's it. There are usually three prices: male, female, or off-grade. Ship to a world auction and see how many grades you get.

Raccoon

Raccoon are Ohio trappers' bread and butter fur. They weren't always. Muskrats once were. There are basically six size grades for raccoon. A board is used to measure each dried pelt and a set price is given for each one. Off-grades include threes, damaged, low grades, and no values. Add those six size grades to the fur off-grades and it makes ten. There can be two to five dollars between each grade, so raccoon prices vary greatly. I long for the days when raccoon were either large, medium, small, or lows. That's four grades and they produce basically that same averages today's ten grades do. Country buyers seldom buy as per color, but farther up the chain there's A, B, C, and D colors, which may have a five dollar bill per pelt difference in each grade.

Fur thickness, primeness and damage produce a number three grade. Tougher buyers have also been known to split ones and twos and pay different money for them. That's splitting hairs and a buying gimmick that I never endorsed. One and two quality raccoons mix readily and their fur differences are so subtle they're barely noticeable. I never split them. There is an obviously difference between good and bad raccoon (low grades). They may be damaged, between being prime and low grade, or so badly handled or extremely ugly that they'll mix with nothing but their own kinds. Unprimed sow raccoons are often threes, but if they're extremely

unprimed, will be lows. Some early caught, not fully prime pelts will also be threes. Usually there are large or small threes. And they bring only a fraction of a good pelt, but more than a low. It's said the ability to grade raccoon properly hinges on the ability to separate the off-grades properly. Sometimes that can be tough. Nearly anyone can tell a good pelt from a bad one, but the differences between the off-grades must be learned by handling lots of them. Only then will it come automatically to graders.

Raccoon are also graded as per section. That's done by both country and auction buyers. It must be because raccoon quality and fur thickness may vary greatly from state to state. Southern raccoon are called "coat coons." Their relatively light weight, small sizes, and bright colors make them a natural fur producing coats. Because of their thin fur quality and small sizes, they bring only a fraction of the northern raccoon. There have been a few years when that wasn't true, but most years they don't bring very much. Generally the further north you go, the larger and heavier furred raccoon get. Undoubtedly the weather controls that, but so do genes. It seems the more inactive raccoon are, the larger they grow.

Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Iowa raccoon tend to be huge, colorful, heartily furred, and command higher prices annually than any others. Why not? Fur quality, size, and color are all there. Most years they'll bring nearly twice as much as semi-heavy or southern coat raccoon. Most eastern raccoon are considered semi-heavyies, which means their under fur and guard hairs aren't as thick and long as western raccoon. Still they're heavier than southern. Each of those sections must be used with their own because they're so different from each other. Adjoining states Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York produce different textured raccoon. West Virginia and Virginia raccoon mix, but don't do so with other so-called semi-heavyies. A raccoon's longitude and latitude make a great difference in what kind of fur it has. We are a big sprawling country that produces all sorts of raccoon furs. There are short napped raccoon in Florida that are red, called saltwater 'coon, and have fur so short it resembles felt. Near the Canadian boarder, raccoon are so thickly furred it's unreal. There truly are tremendous variations in raccoon furs. When they get to Canadian auctions, they all get sorted into a million different grades. Like mink, they must be graded as per section, quality, color, and various other things.

Under fur in the fur trade is called "nap." Its density is what holds in a raccoon's body heat and keeps it warm. Usually the colder the climate, the thicker the nap. That's why northern raccoon have such thick fur. Can you imagine what a coat would look like if was made from raccoon fur from down south and up north? It would have flat sections and raised ones that would look terrible because that furs wouldn't blend together. That's why raccoon pelts must be graded as per section.

All sorts of things happen to raccoon throughout their lives that will damage their pelts. Many are permanent. They survive encounters with cars that leave permanent scars, which will be devoid of fur. They may encounter predators and dogs and escape with wounds that leave scars. Entire patches of fur may be missing around scars. Mating marks on their back and neck may never heal properly. Bare or rubbed spots are nearly always there during breeding season. There's an endless list of why raccoon pelts may be damaged. Raccoon hunters' dogs are one of the most common. Usually the older a raccoon is, the better its chances are that it'll have a damaged pelt. Raccoon lead pretty tough lives.

Raccoon come into heat every two weeks until they get bred. They do not have more than one litter per year. When sow raccoons get bred very late and have late litters, their pelts are virtually worthless during the trapping season. They'll have little under fur, will dry black, and the areolas around their teats will be jet black circles on their bellies. Those late litter bearing females are a fur buyer's worst nightmare. You must recognize them immediately and throw them out as low grade or number three. Sellers see a big raccoon and feel they're getting ripped off. You cannot pay top dollar for such low end raccoon and stay in business. That's why it's important to buy fur instead of size. Those big females will remain unprimed because the pups nurse and take away all the protein that would have gone into producing fur. If you catch such a raccoon that is still alive, release her. If your dogs tree one that has her small pups in the same tree or nearby ones, don't shoot

them – you won't get much for them. The entire fur business benefits when you leave them alone.

There is no such thing as a perfect raccoon pelt. Some are beautiful and others ugly. The bulk live between those extremes. Graders must send them as per where they belong. That's not always easy.