

# FURBEARERS OF NEW MEXICO



Cooperative Extension Service

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# FURBEARERS OF NEW MEXICO

James E. Knight, Extension Wildlife Specialist

Most of us hunt, fish or hike in much of New Mexico without ever seeing a bobcat, weasel or ring-tailed cat, and seldom see a beaver or badger. Furbearers are cautious creatures and most active at night. Many of them manage to live their lifetime without being seen by man.

Furbearers are important wildlife. The pelts of many have commercial value. Some furnish sport for the hunter. All are worthy of preservation because of their esthetic value and important place in the delicate balance of nature.

Fur farms and changes in fashions have lowered demands for wild furs for clothing, but some New Mexicans get extra income from trapping. The retail trade in processed furs supports other citizens. From this consideration alone, furbearers need management. Some furbearers can also conflict with man's activities and must be managed more closely than others.

Hopefully, you will learn to appreciate and become better acquainted with these wild mammals through this manual.

## WHAT ARE FURBEARERS?

Furbearers are animals which have soft, silky hair or fur covering their bodies. Short-haired (fine-furred) furbearers have short, thick fur like the beaver. Furbearers with long, fluffy fur like the coyote are called long-haired (coarse-furred) furbearers.

Many fur-bearing animals can be found in New Mexico, from the prairies to the high mountains. The coyote is not an official furbearer in New Mexico. It does, however, have a valuable pelt

and we will include it in our discussion. The official furbearers of New Mexico are:

muskrat   raccoon   badger   beaver   weasel  
bobcat   gray fox   red fox   kit fox   ring-tail

*Suggested Activity:* Make a list of furbearers found in your area. Describe the habitat in which they live. List the foods they eat.

## FURBEARER MANAGEMENT

Furbearer management is the practice of producing yearly crops of furbearers for recreational and commercial use. To maintain crops of furbearers, we must do two things. First, we must harvest the fur crop wisely. Wise harvest, by trapping or shooting, means leaving enough animals to produce next year's crop. In some instances, we must trap or hunt heavily, such as when furbearers do agricultural damage. But usually, trappers should never trap out an area.

Second, we must improve and protect furbearers' habitat (the place where the animals live). Examples of habitat improvement activities are:

1. Protect fields, fence rows and marshes.
2. Protect woodlots and pond, marsh and stream edges from over-grazing by livestock. Such areas provide food and cover for wildlife and can be protected by putting up fences.



3. Prevent drainage of wetlands that are used by furbearers.
4. Plant shrubs and trees to provide food and cover for furbearers.
5. Create homes by building brush piles, and by allowing hollow den trees to remain uncut. Weasels, raccoons and other wildlife will benefit from these activities.

*Suggested Activity:* Draw a map of an area near your home showing areas that provide furbearer habitat. Mark areas that could be improved for furbearers.

## TRAPPING

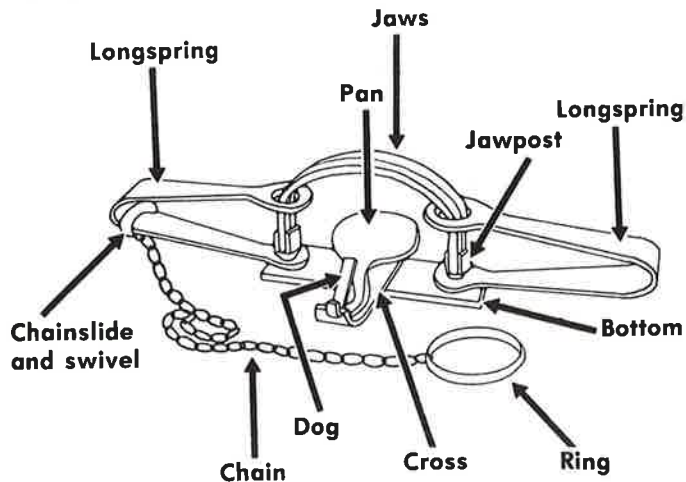
Trapping is the most common method of harvesting the fur crop. To trap successfully, it is not necessary to go into the wilds. Almost any stream, marsh or drainage ditch where there are furbearer signs can be a good place to set traps.

Traps come in various types and sizes for different furbearers. A typical double-spring trap and its parts are shown below.

Many kinds and sizes of steel leg-hold and body-gripping traps are available.

For muskrat and mink, body-gripping kill traps are usually used. The larger body gripping traps are used only in underwater trapping for beaver.

The No. 2 leg hold trap is recommended for fox and the No. 1½ for mink, muskrat and raccoon. The No. 1 and No. 1½ single long-spring are fine, low-priced traps for beginners and experts alike. These small traps (1 and 1½) are fine for all small furbearers. The No. 3 and 4 leghold traps are for larger furbearers.



The parts of a leg hold trap.

Although there are many ways to set traps, two sets are considered basic, the baited set and the blind set. The baited set uses some form of bait or lure to cause the animal to step into the trap. The blind set requires no bait or lure and is set along travel routes with the hope the animal will accidentally step in the trap.

The trapper should follow certain guidelines:

1. Learn the trapping laws and obey them.
2. Always respect another man's trapping rights.
3. Always get permission to trap from the landowner.
4. Be a good conservationist. Leave enough animals for next year's breeding stock. Check your traps each day. Do the best job you can in skinning, fleshing, stretching and drying the pelts.
5. Use traps of proper size and the most humane kind available.

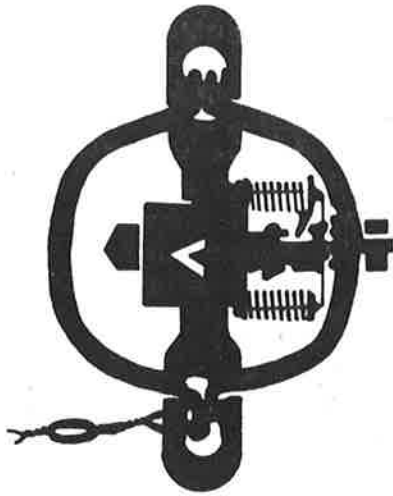
*Suggested Activity:* Go trapping with an experienced trapper (you can learn more by accompanying a good trapper for one day than you could learn in several seasons by yourself).



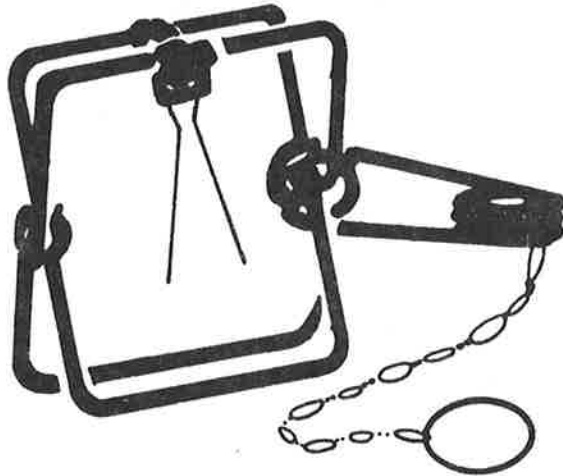
Trapping is the most effective method of harvesting furbearers.

## PREDATOR CALLING

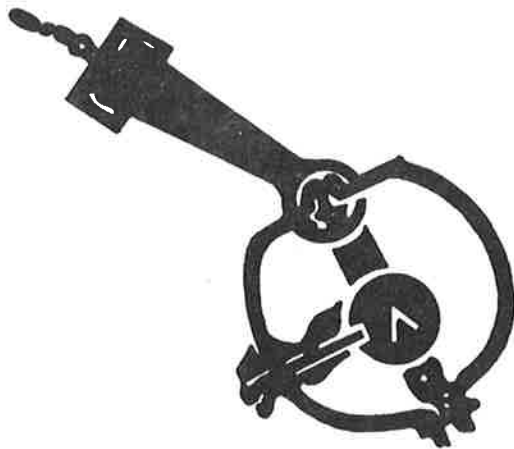
The sound of a dying rabbit is well known to all predators because they hear it many times during their feeding activities. This sound



**Coil-spring trap**



**Body-gripping trap**

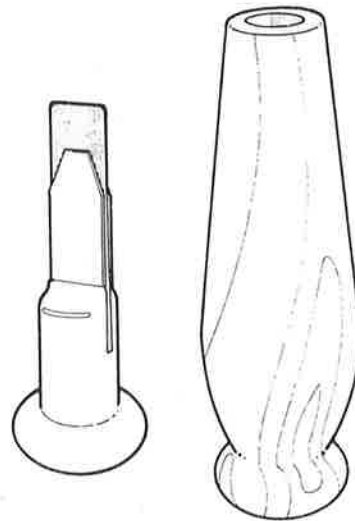


**Long-spring trap**

means an injured animal is nearby, so the predator rushes in expecting an easy meal. Imitating this injured rabbit call is an effective way to hunt, and is a highly challenging sport.

The best way to learn the calling technique is to work and study with a master of the art, and then get plenty of practice. If you can't find a master predator caller, the next best thing is to buy a record or tape of calling and a mouth call from one of the many commercial outlets.

There are two kinds of predator calls: the open-reed call and the closed-reed call. They both make the sound of an injured or dying rabbit.



**The open-reed and closed-reed predator calls.**

The best way to select an area to call is to look for predator signs. Check for droppings and tracks along roads and trails the morning after a rain or fresh snowfall.

Camouflage clothing is well worth the investment. Camouflage your face, hands and gun too. Your face is like a mirror in the sun to a predator.

An important and critical step is your approach to the calling site. It's important to keep the wind in your favor. Always call into the wind. A predator's sense of smell is keen and calling with the wind is usually not successful.

When calling, start with a long wailing series and let it die away. Wait half a minute and repeat, omitting the first prolonged scream and shortening the series. The shortened calls should be repeated at intervals of half a minute to a minute for the remainder of the stand.

It is important to remember that each breath of the dying rabbit is a separate breath and you

should mimic the squalls in separate breaths, waaa-waaa-waaa-waaa. You should *not* play a tune on the call by running the squalls together like waawaaawaaawaaa. Each squall or breath should be distinct. This is the most important part of calling.

One animal may come in sight a minute after you begin calling; the next may take his time. Most, but not all, coyotes and foxes show within 5 minutes. Much depends on terrain and cover. In heavy timber, remain at a stand 15 to 20 minutes; on open plains 20 to 30 minutes. Don't be in a hurry to quit. Many times I've left a stand only to look back when it was too late and see an animal coming in or sneaking away. If a fox, coyote or bobcat stops and turns back without coming into gun range, by all means call again. Often an animal can be coaxed into a return visit. Bobcats and raccoons are especially easy to call back.

Often, a coyote or coyotes (sometimes three or four) decide to respond to the calling on a dead run. Another time the coyote will be cautious and circle the caller, trying to get downwind of the rabbit. Or, a coyote may simply materialize from nowhere. You blink and there he is. You may see only his ears or catch a fleeting glimpse of him. And just for variety, you may be visited by badgers, owls, hawks, cattle, horses, dogs or crows.

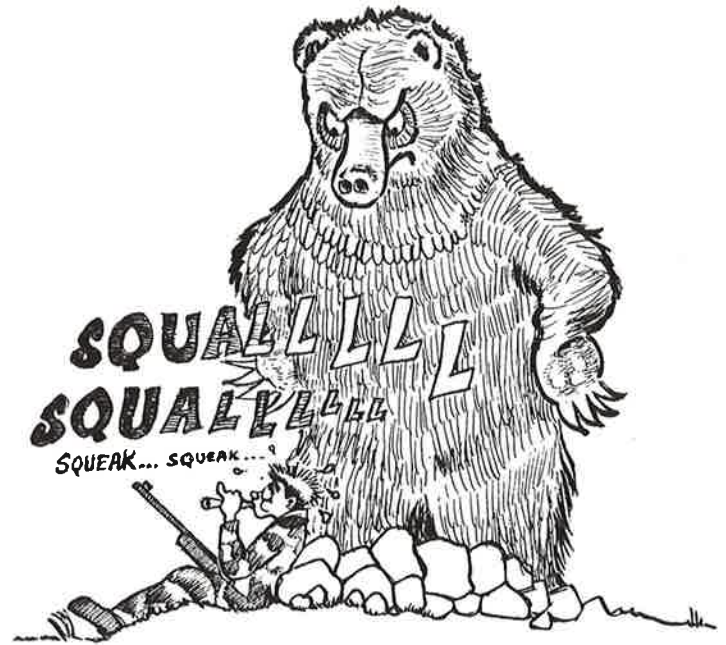
Be sure you remember the crucial importance of *patience* and *persistence* until you've built up some confidence. There'll be days with no action. It's essential the novice caller realizes this and accepts it as part of the game. Have faith and don't give up. The longer you hunt without seeing a predator, the closer you are to some thrilling action.

*Suggested Activity:* Go calling with an experienced predator caller. Give a report of your experiences to other members of your club.

## FUR QUALITY

The proper time of the year to harvest furs, depending on the animal, is from late fall to early spring. Pelts are most valuable in winter when the fur is thick to protect animals from cold. Overall quality of the fur depends upon primeness, condition, size and care in skinning and pelt preparation.

Primeness of pelts is judged by the appearance of the skin side of the pelt. Prime pelts are white or cream-colored (looking at the skin side) with



**Predator calling: expect the unexpected**

the exception of the reddish-brown prime muskrat pelt. An unprime pelt has darker skin or blotches where the winter fur has not come in fully.

Condition is judged by appearance of the pelt's fur side. Many words are used to describe pelt conditions including:

- springy: When guard hairs (the long hairs that overlay the shorter underfur) tend to lie flat due to loss of underfur in late winter.
- singed: When the tips of the guard hairs break giving the pelt a dull, flat appearance (occurs in furs of raccoon, skunk, mink and fox caught in late January).
- rubbed: When pelts have patches of worn or missing fur.
- sunburn: A late winter condition when guard hairs and/or underfur fade (common to fox and mink).

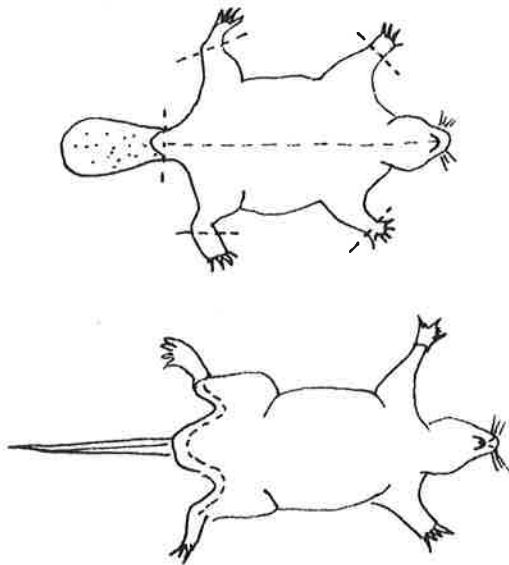
The best protection against poor pelts is to trap animals early in their period of primeness, then prepare the pelts properly.



## CARING FOR PELTS

Once you have caught the furbearer, you have to skin it. Then you stretch, clean, flesh, dry and finally sell the skin.

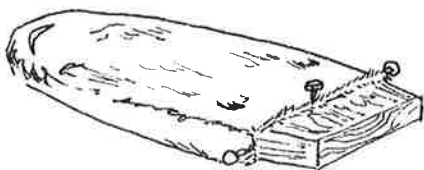
Furbearers may be skinned in two ways, either cased or open. Beavers and badgers are skinned open. All other furbearers are skinned cased. For an open skin, the pelt is cut down the belly from the tail to the chin (see below). In cased skinning, the pelt is cut only across the insides of the hind legs (not down the belly), then removed in the same manner you peel off a sweater. Be extremely careful not to tear or puncture the pelt while skinning animals (except where original cuts were made).



Furbearers can be skinned open (top) or cased (bottom).

After skinning the furbearer, comb or brush the fur to remove all dirt and burrs.

The next step is to clean and dry the pelt. Cased skins are put on drying boards or stretchers which fit the skin snugly (see below). Open skins are stretched either by being laced into iron hoops or nailed onto boards. During stretching, be careful not to overstretch the skins.



Skins are put on boards or stretchers to dry.

All meat, fat and blood must be cleaned from the skin side of the pelt. This process, called fleshing, is done with a dull edged tool such as a spoon or the back of a knife blade.

Next, the pelt is dried in a cool, dry place where small rodents cannot get at it. Once dried, the pelt is ready for marketing through local fur buyers, large fur buying companies or at auctions.

## FURBEARER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

During settlement, New Mexico had no laws or regulations governing furbearers. Heavy trapping caused several furbearing animals to become scarce. As a result, laws and regulations were set up to protect furbearers.

Furbearers such as the foxes, badger, beaver, muskrat, bobcat, weasels, raccoon and ring-tailed cat can be trapped or hunted, but only during the proper season and some only in certain areas. The coyote can be trapped or hunted year round.

Before you harvest furbearers, you must be aware of the laws and regulations. Complete information on laws and regulations can be obtained from the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, or from businesses that sell game and fish licenses.

*Suggested Activity:* Get a copy of New Mexico's furbearer regulations. Learn the regulations for different furbearers. Ask your local wildlife conservation officer about the management reasons for these regulations.



## FURBEARERS OF NEW MEXICO

### Beaver

Beavers are the construction engineers of the animal world. Their dams and lodges, built of sticks, stones, mud and debris, are good adap-

tations for life in and around water. Water backed up by the dam provides a safe travelway from lodge to food supply. It also provides a storage place during the fall for winter food, which includes branches from aspen, cottonwood and willow trees.

Beavers are the largest North American rodent, with adults weighing 30 to 40 pounds. Their flat tails, shaped like canoe paddles, are used as rudders while swimming and also to slap water and warn other beavers of approaching danger.

Once dangerously low in numbers because of overtrapping, beavers have made a comeback throughout New Mexico. Wise management involves considering the beaver's value as a fur producer, water conservationist, and trout pond builder, as well as its unfortunate habit of flooding agricultural land and damaging irrigation systems.



**Beaver**

### Muskrat

The muskrat is the most important fur animal in North America. New Mexico trappers catch thousands of these small animals each year.

Musk rats found in streams and canals live in dens dug in the stream or canal bank. Musk rats build large mounds of cattails and bulrushes, in marshes, and nest in a cavity inside the mound which is reached through an underwater entrance.

These animals were named muskrats because of the two musk glands on the lower belly which secrete a sweet odor to attract the opposite sex. Their fur is composed of a dense, soft undercoat with long outer coat of guard hairs, and is dark brown.

Musk rats eat plants such as cattails or bulrushes that grow in and near water. Musk rats suffer heavy losses to predators such as owls and

hawks. However, muskrats can produce many young to make up for these losses. The female usually gives birth to two or three litters (groups of young) each summer.

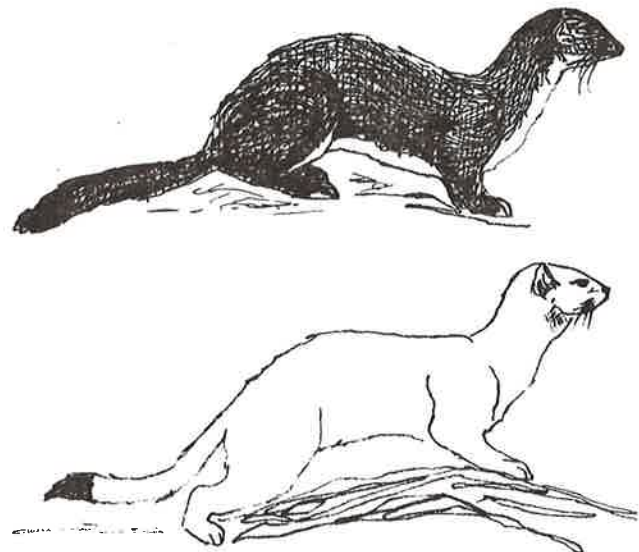
Musk rats sometimes damage ditches and dams in irrigation systems, and it becomes necessary to remove the animals. If muskrat furs are to bring their highest prices, however, they should be harvested during the periods when the pelts are prime.



**Muskrat**

### Weasels

Weasels are small animals no more than 18 inches long. Both the long-tailed and short-tailed weasel live in New Mexico. They are seen from the eastern plains to the mountains. Weasels make their dens just about anywhere from brush piles to old buildings. Small animals such as mice and chipmunks are their favorite foods.



**Summer and winter coat of the weasel.**



In the northern mountain areas of New Mexico, winter brings a striking change of color to the weasel's fur. The summer reddish-brown coat is replaced by one of pure white (except for the black tip of the tail). It is this white fur that is known as ermine.

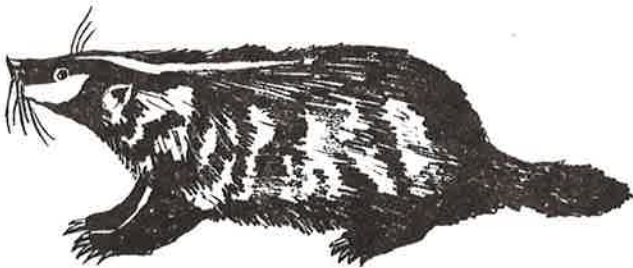
Trappers usually catch weasels in sets made for other animals. They are easily trapped. Their value as rodent-killers more than makes up for the occasional damage they do in a farmer's chicken coop.

### Badger

Badge-like markings on the face give the badger its name. They are known as fierce fighters, but they do not always choose to stand and fight. If they have two or three minutes and loose soil, they can dig themselves out of sight. Nature prepared them for digging by giving them powerful front legs and long, strong claws.

Badgers dig out and eat ground squirrels, prairie dogs, mice, rats, snakes and other small animals during their night-time wanderings. Although they often leave large holes, badgers are beneficial mammals because of their food habits and rodent control ability.

Badger pelts once were in great demand, at one time being worth as much as \$25 each. The long, silvery hairs also brought high prices as bristles for shaving brushes. Artificial bristles, brushless shave creams and electric razors have eliminated this demand.



Badger

### Raccoon

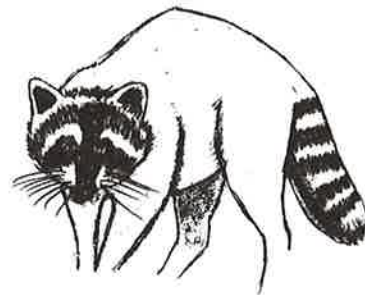
The raccoon is branded with the black mask of a bandit. Sometimes, these night-time roamers raid chicken coops, melon patches and corn fields. However, their main food is crayfish, mice and wild fruits. They hunt most of the time along waterways. Not only are they good swim-

mers, but also excellent climbers. They use their front feet with monkey-like skill to climb trees.

Their dens are usually in hollow trees or holes among rocks. In cold weather they hole up for long periods of time, but do not hibernate. Unlike some furbearers, the coon mates with more than one female.

Raccoons are relatively easy to trap using leg hold or box traps. Raccoons are hunted at night with specially trained hounds. Their habitat is limited in New Mexico and many hunters do not harvest treed raccoons, but free them to provide a chase another night. Coon hunting is a beneficial and enjoyable sport.

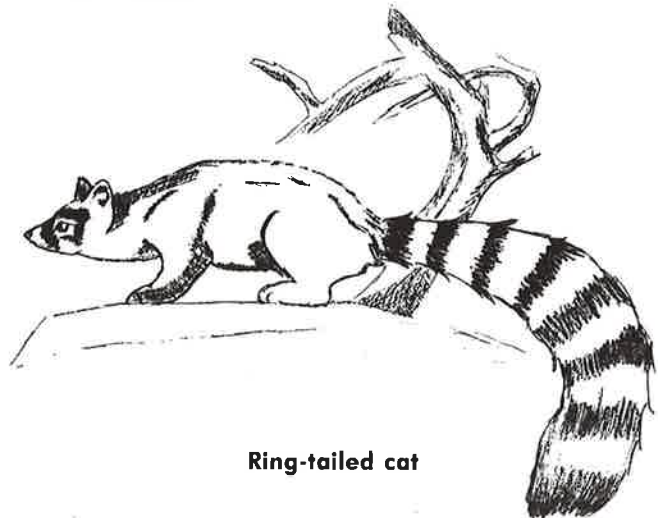
Their coarse, shaggy fur is usually gray with light shading of brown on the back. Their fur is used in limited amounts as trim for sports coats, so raccoons have some economic importance.



Raccoon

### Ring-tailed Cat

Take the tail of a raccoon, the body of a squirrel, the front feet of a cat and the head and bark of a fox — mix them all together and you have a ring-tailed cat, one of New Mexico's most unusual mammals. They also have been called 'coon cats, cacomistles, raccoon-foxes and miner's cats.



Ring-tailed cat

Not too many people know ring-tails exist in New Mexico because they are not active in the daytime. However, there are good numbers of them in rocky canyons where water is available. They feed on rodents, birds and wild fruit. When a ring-tail sleeps, his tail (which is longer than his body) curls completely around him for warmth. Their dens are usually in hollow trees.

Ring-tail pelts are made into beautiful fur scarves which are sold under the trade name bassarisk. Market prices are low and few are purposely caught by trappers.

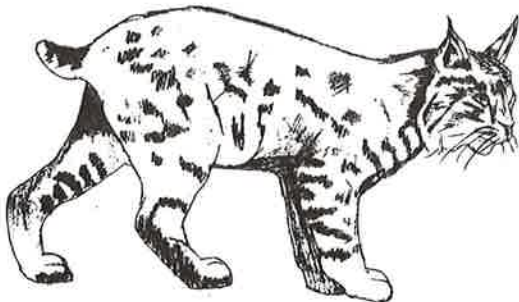
### Bobcat

The bobcat (named for the bobbed tail) lives in the river bottoms and lower mountains of New Mexico. The bobcat has tufted ears and usually weighs 15 to 20 pounds.

Bobcats travel mostly by night, but are sometimes seen in daylight. Their keen eyesight and highly-developed stalking ability make them excellent hunters. Covering four to five miles on a hunting trip, they feed mostly on rabbits, mice and other ground-living rodents. They occasionally kill lambs, small calves and even full grown deer.

Bobcat pelts are valuable, often selling for more than \$200.

Bobcats are common in New Mexico brushy foothill areas and may be hunted or trapped during the open season.



Bobcat

### Coyote

Despite the common name prairie wolf, these wild dogs are also found high in the mountains. They are one of New Mexico's most abundant and widely distributed carnivores (meat-eating animals), although they have been trapped and hunted for more than 100 years. Their great

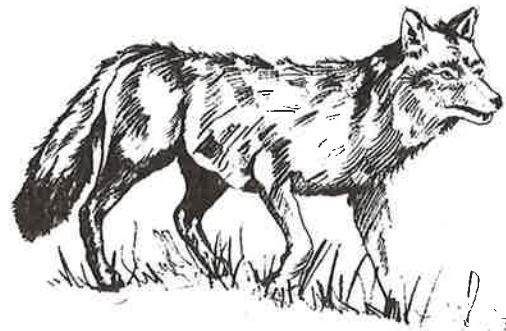
dispersion is possible because they are not restricted to any certain kind of food. Meat comes first in the coyote's diet, but they also will eat fruits and some plants. The coyote's diet is often beneficial to man because they eat many rodents.

The coyote is about the size of a medium-sized dog, is brownish gray in summer and slightly lighter in winter.

A pair of coyotes establish their den by digging a hole in loose soil or finding a ready-made home in a cave or hollow log. They mate in January or February and five or six pups are born about two months later. Once the pups are born, the mother does not allow the father in the den although he may bring food close to the den.

Sometimes destructive to livestock (especially sheep), coyote numbers must be controlled to minimize damage.

Coyotes are intelligent and difficult to hunt or trap without considerable experience and knowledge of the animal. Coyote hunting can provide many enjoyable hours of recreation and will reduce the damage done by this beneficial but, sometimes problem, animal.



Coyote

### Foxes

Not many people realize there are three kinds of foxes in New Mexico. The small, sandy colored kit fox lives in semi-desert country. The gray fox likes river bottoms and foothills. The rare red fox (also called silver or cross fox) is at home in the high mountains. Occasionally one of these foxes wanders into the range of another.

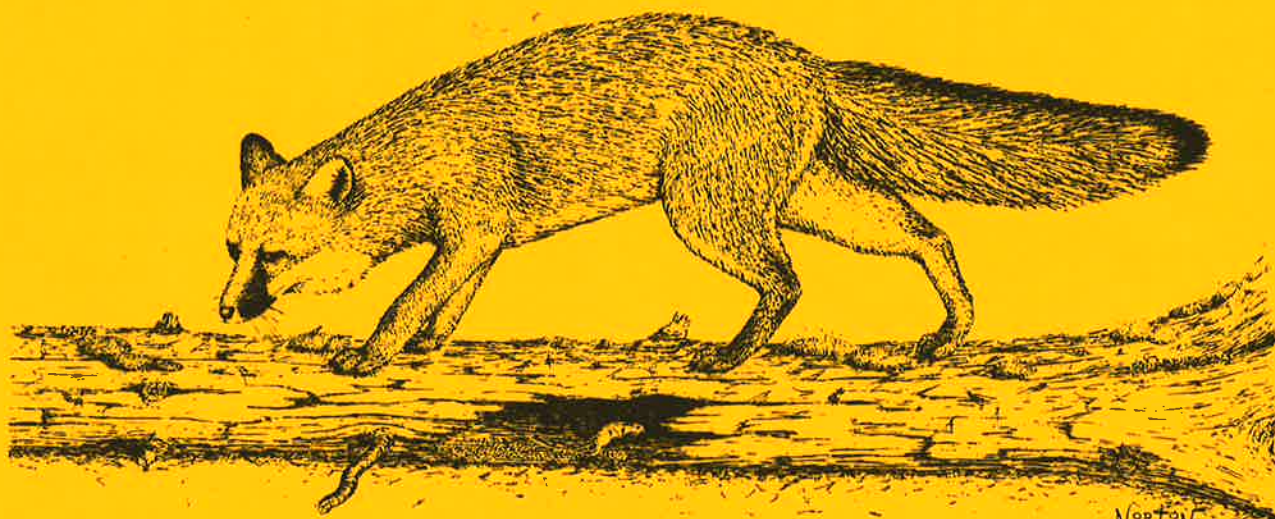
Foxes are most active at night and are seldom observed. Nevertheless, they are abundant in certain areas.

Excellent mousers, foxes are valuable to landowners because they eat many destructive rodents. They also eat rabbits, some fruits and vegetables, and birds.



A good example of the influence of women's fashions on the price of furs is, the rise and fall of fox pelt values. When there was a demand for long-haired furs, fox pelts brought as much as

\$60, compared to prices of less than \$5 in low demand fur markets. Foxes are difficult to trap. Known for their cleverness, they often outsmart both dogs and hunters.



**Gray fox**



