



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Increased taking of jack rabbits and other domestic rabbits and hares to relieve the shortage in pelts used for the manufacture of felt hats was urged yesterday (Oct. 3) by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior and the War Production Board.

Domestic wild rabbits, especially jack rabbits, long considered by farmers to be economic pests, can be made a natural resource of considerable value, the agencies said. The American hat industry, now facing a tight supply situation since the war reduced rabbit skin imports, is in urgent need of more rabbit pelts to meet trade requirements.

Rabbit fur is essential in the hat industry, J. H. Bleistein, New York fur dealer and consultant on fur problems for WPB, explained. A large portion of the skins imported in normal times came from countries now controlled by the Axis powers. Besides the curtailment of imports, inroads into hatters' supplies have been made by the fur trade, which uses rabbit skins to make fur coats and to trim cloth coats.

"Our felt shortage threatens to reach serious proportions," Mr. Bleistein said. "Unless we increase immediately the present volume of rabbit fur taken from domestic wild rabbits, the hat industry will face a raw material shortage."

Plans have been laid by the War Production Board, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the felt hat industry to stimulate the taking of wild rabbits. Fish and Wildlife Service officials believe that a large quantity of wild rabbits could be obtained if farmers and landowners received sufficient money for their labor in taking, skinning and drying the pelts.

A statement on the subject from the hat industry said that even in the event of decline in the hat industry, there would be no difficulty in consuming very large quantities of domestic wild rabbits. It added that with the establishment of price ceilings, the element of speculation would not be injected into the rabbit business.

Frank G. Ashbrook, in charge of the Fish and Wildlife Service's fur work, who was recently appointed as an advisor to the War Department on furs and the fur industry, declared that not only will trappers and hatters benefit from the increased taking of wild rabbits in Western States but that farmers will welcome the idea.

These animals do considerable damage to grain, hay, garden truck and other farm crops, especially on lands recently opened to cultivation, and are among the most serious pests with which farmers have to contend. Both the large and the small rabbits feed exclusively on vegetation. Jack rabbits, however, are by far the most destructive because of their size and their great abundance in parts of their range.

"Greater efforts to trap rabbits will thus serve a two-fold purpose," Mr. Ashbrook said. "The essential rabbit skins needed for the American felt hat industry will be secured and valuable agricultural crops will be saved from losses through rabbit depredations. Any step taken today to protect our food supplies aids the war program."

Populations of jack rabbits exhibit cycles during which they build up to a saturation point and then are drastically reduced by disease, Service biologists explained. A cycle is completed about every seven years, though it may vary from five to 10 years.

According to information available to the Service, indications are favorable, cyclically, for a large quantity of rabbits this coming winter. This is particularly true in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Idaho, Utah, eastern Oregon, and Colorado. Farmers will find it possible, therefore, through the utilization of pelts, to obtain some reimbursement for capturing crop-destroying rabbits.

For persons interested in trapping rabbits, the Service stresses the importance of stretching and drying skins properly as otherwise their value is greatly reduced. The following method, extracted from "Rabbit Production," by Mr. Ashbrook and Charles E. Kellogg, another Service biologist, is recommended:

While still warm skins to be cured should be placed flesh side out, the fore part over the narrow end of wire or board formers or shapers, care being taken to remove all wrinkles. (Satisfactory skin shapers can be improvised from willow twigs, shingles or boards, since galvanized wire is no longer available.)

This equipment has been called a "stretcher," but the term may give an erroneous impression; it is not desirable to stretch the skins unduly, as this tends to weaken certain parts and also opens the fur. On the day after skinning, the pelts should be examined to see that the edges are drying flat and that the skin of the front legs is straightened out.

Rabbit skins should not be dried in the sun or by artificial heat, and they would be hung in such a way as to have the benefit of free circulation of air. All skins must be thoroughly dry before being packed. If they are not to be shipped for some time after being dried, they should be hung in loose bundles of 50 in a cool dry place away from rats and mice. If they are kept any length of time in a warm climate or during the summer, they should be sprinkled with naphtha flakes. Salt should never be used in curing rabbit skins.