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BETTER MUSKRAT CONSERVATION
IS AIM OF BIOLOGICAL SURVEY'S
NEW FUR ANIMAL FIELD STATION

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Studies of the breeding and other habits of muskrats in the wild and under controlled conditions for developing better methods of managing them will be conducted at a new fur-animal field station recently established by the U. S. Biological Survey at the Blackwater Migratory Bird Refuge, near Cambridge, Md. Dr. Herbert L. Dozier, newly appointed biologist of the Survey, will be in charge of the research work.

The Blackwater Refuge not only attracts large numbers of waterfowl that follow the Atlantic flyway but is also one of the most productive muskrat areas along the eastern coast. It is located at the junction of the Little Blackwater and Big Blackwater Rivers and contains 8,000 acres of marshland--ideal for both waterfowl and muskrats. Facts found in the studies will be used in improving management methods for these fur bearers at the Blackwater and other Survey refuges. The information also will be available to muskrat farmers and others interested in the conservation of these animals.

Each year thousands of muskrats are trapped for their fur, but the information on their breeding habits, gestation period, rate of reproduction, and sex ratios is limited, says Frank G. Ashbrook, in charge of the Survey's Section of Fur Resources. He explains that this lack of data makes it difficult to develop management methods for maintaining adequate breeding stock.

"Until better management methods are developed and put into practice," continues Mr. Ashbrook, "there is great danger of the muskrat losing its status as one of the nation's principal fur bearers. We do not know, for example, whether we are producing 10,000,000 muskrats a year and trapping 13,000,000, or producing 5,000,000 and trapping 25,000,000. We can be pretty sure, however, that on most of the marshes we are trapping more than we are producing."

Large marshes are best adapted to the production of muskrats, as they usually contain suitable food and cover. Because of these favorable conditions more muskrats are found on marshes than in swamps, ponds, lakes, or in other water areas. The animals cannot be raised profitably in small pens as their reproduction under such conditions is not regular, and losses result from polluted drinking water and from fighting.

At the Blackwater Refuge Dr. Dozier and Fred W. Price, scientific aide, will also study the predatory and other habits of minks to determine their relation to muskrats. Scientists in the Survey's Section of Food Habits will assist them in research on the muskrat's food habits.

Dr. Dozier, a native of Wilmington, N.C., was formerly with the U. S. Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine and the Louisiana State Department of Agriculture. He holds a B. S. degree from the University of South Carolina, an M. S. degree from the University of Florida, and Ph.D. degree from Ohio State University. At these universities he majored in biology. Mr. Price, who also joined the Survey recently, is a native of Ruston, La., has studied biology at Louisiana Polytechnic Institute and has almost completed his work for a B. S. degree at George Washington University.

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