

# The fur farmer



— that's how Gerald Nadeau, 20 years a trapper, sees his business

Citizen photos by Lynn Ball

## The harvest is beaver pelts (a prime fur fetches \$35); the secret is careful conservation

By Harry Jennings  
Citizen outdoors editor

CHALK RIVER — Gerald Nadeau considers himself a farmer — a fur farmer. Not the kind with long rows of pen-reared mink. His farm is 25 square miles of bush bordering Algonquin Park north-west of here.

Being a registered trapper, Nadeau is one of the strongest conservation advocates you'll meet. He has to be. His livelihood depends on it.

For over 20 years now Nadeau has plodded the bush in Wylie Township, first on snowshoes, now on snowmobile, tending his traps and reaping his harvest.

There's nothing romantic here. No yards of near-freezing in the Ontario winter. Or being chased by wolves. Or hand-to-hand combat with a spring-angry bear.

To him trapping is a business. There are rules to follow or the harvest won't be there. And once nature gets behind, it's a long, unrewarding wait until she catches up.

Nadeau's main harvest is beaver—he's become a walking encyclopedia on Canada's national rodent.

### Preserving the beaver

In the 20 years he's been in the business, pressure from the public, natural resources officials and trappers themselves have changed harvest methods, implemented seasons and limits and established serious enforcement.

"This is what it's done," says Nadeau as he lifts a trap with its shiny-coated beaver

through the hole he just chopped in the ice. "It means the beaver will always be here."

The first catch in several traps Nadeau has lifted that day, the beaver is sleek and fat, a sign this late in March that the litter in the nearby lodge has enjoyed a prosperous winter.

Nadeau takes the trap and instead of resetting it in the hole, packs it away.

"This is the last one I'll take from this house," he explains. By limiting his take to three animals from any one house, Nadeau knows there will be enough left to propagate in future years.

Each year the number of beaver lodges are counted and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources sets a quota based on this count.

"It's the humane movement we have to thank for that," says Nadeau, holding up a Conibear trap, the only one which has anything like a blessing from the anti-trapping groups who protest the suffering of animals.

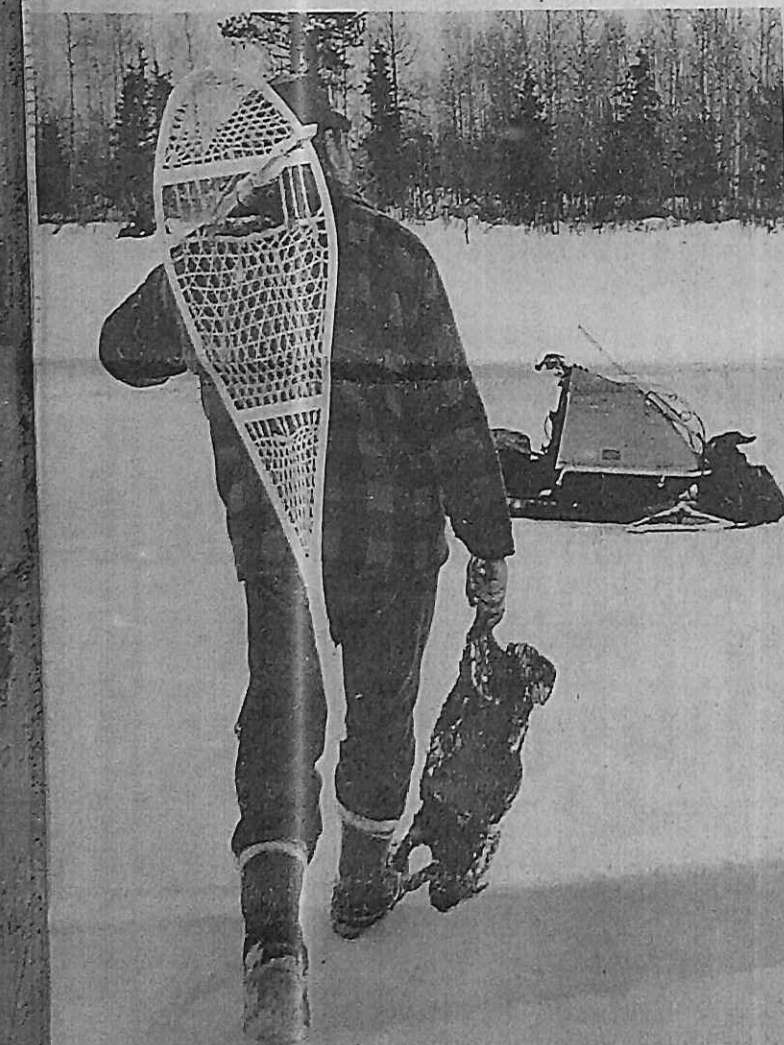
This double-frame trap has extremely strong springs. It is used in water and when the beaver swims through, the trap snaps shut breaking the animal's neck. "It's instant death," says Nadeau.

One day are the days of animals gnawing off toes to get clear of leg-hold traps, or suffering exposure by being held in a trap for a week until the trapper returned.

"If it was left up to the trappers, we'd never have done it," states Nadeau.

The old way was open-water trapping. With it there was a lack of control.

There may be four or five beaver lodges



Nadeau takes 170 beavers a year— up to three per house



The Citizen

4

Outdoors

general news/travel/religion

Ottawa, Saturday, March 18, 1978, Page 61

— set, Conibear trap, whose powerful spring breaks the beaver's neck— quickly



Snowmobile relieves much of the trapline plodding round 25 square mile 'farm' in Wylie Township

on one stretch of water. When beaver are caught after ice is out, no-one could tell for sure which lodge the beaver came from.

"You could be taking all the beaver from one house. Then there was none for next year."

Nature has her own methods of conservation. Each litter is 12 kittens. But mother beaver has feeding stations for only four. Those who can't push their way to a teat soon die. It's survival of the fittest.

"It takes three years for a family to really settle in. You don't trap a new pond until the third year. That gives them a chance to make it home."

Nadeau points out the poplar growth that surrounds his ponds.

"By thinning out each lodge, it means the (poplar) growth keeps up with the beaver's feeding," he says of the their prime food source.

"Nature just can't look after them on her own," he says, citing Algonquin Park.

### Too many beaver in park

There beaver meadows abound. "There are just too many beaver and they eat themselves out of house and home."

"That's the way it was here 50 years ago and we've got no-one to blame but ourselves. We've interfered too much with nature."

Nadeau offers as proof his own line. When he took over the registration there were only 23 house by conservation department count. Today they number "in the 70s".

Yearly he takes about 170 beaver, "give or take a few", to meet his quota. With the market price at about \$35 for prime fur, less for secondary qualities, monetary gains aren't the best.

Add to that revenue from other fur bearers, marten, mink, fisher and some muskrat, and a "trapper can get by."

Nadeau's 200-pounds plus frame moves with ease and grace, not fast but steady. You know he could snowshoe the six hours out from his trapline if the snowmobile broke down.

He traps from mid-November until the season closes at the end of March. Then it's a few days holidays, "usually a trip into Algonquin Park to catch some fish", before striking off to the bush again to lumber for the summer.

The last time he was away for a vacation? "Oh, we went up to Thunder Bay to



Stretching beaver pelts: 'a trapper gets by'

see what the bush was like there" a couple of years ago. "We" are his wife and two daughters, both in nursing.

Nadeau is highly critical of loopholes that permit a class of "resident trappers" to work at his trade.

Not to be confused with registered trappers who trap only Crown lands, resident trappers usually school children or

adults learning to trap who have permission of a property owner to use his land.

What results is they set old leg-hole traps around someone's cottage catching cats, dogs and a pet racoon or two— and give all trappers a bad name.

"As soon as they get tougher laws and the right to enforce them on private land we'll all be the better for it."