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The Status of the Raccoon in Iowa for the Past Twenty Years as Revealed by Fur Reports

By GLEN C. SANDERSON

In recent years the raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) has become more and more popular with 'coon hunters in Iowa. This is also true in many other midwest and southern states. This increased interest in the raccoon as a game animal, plus the almost phenomenal increase in its numbers, has helped to focus much attention on this animal throughout the United States.

Many papers dealing with various phases of the raccoon's life history and habits have appeared in the past few years. Few of these papers have presented actual figures on the trend of the population in any given area, although there does seem to be general agreement among biologists and others concerned that the raccoon population has increased tremendously in recent years. With no actual figures available, it is difficult to determine when this irruption occurred, since memories usually fail to agree when data are not available.

METHODS

Each year for the past twenty years the Iowa Conservation Commission has received fur reports from each fur buyer in the state. The buyers report the number of each kind of fur they buy from Iowa trappers; furs purchased from other dealers are listed in a separate column to avoid duplication. Delinquent buyers are reminded by letter to send in their reports. If this reminder fails, a call from the local conservation officer usually insures 100 per cent returns from all fur houses in the state. It is believed that these fur reports are unusually complete, and since the hunting and trapping regulations have remained the same throughout the 20-year period, it is felt that the figures obtained are particularly valuable as an aid in understanding the population trends of Iowa raccoons. The limitations of fur reports as an index to fur populations are too well known to warrant further discussion.

RESULTS

This paper presents the number of raccoon pelts reported, the average price paid for each pelt, the total value of the raccoon pelts, the 20-year average value per pelt, and the average number of

pelts harvested each year for the 20-year period, 1930-31 to 1949-50.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the trend in number of raccoons harvested has been generally upward since 1930-31, the first year for which information is available, but that the fluctuations were relatively minor until the 1943-44 hunting season. Starting with the 1943 breeding season (records for 1943-44 hunting season) the irruption is quite apparent; the harvest increasing from slightly over 20,000 to more than 38,000 in a single year. With minor exceptions the trend continued upward until the 1946-47 hunting season; since then the curve representing the population has leveled off. This may indicate that the raccoon population reached a peak

Table I

Number raccoons harvested, average value received per pelt, and total value received per year by Iowa raccoon hunters and trappers from 1930-31 to 1949-50—as reported by fur buyers.¹

SEASON ²	No. of pelts bought by buyers	Av. value per pelt	Total value
1930-31	11,740	\$4.50	\$52,830.00
1931-32	12,951	4.40	56,984.40
1932-33	10,468	2.60	27,216.80
1933-34	15,447	3.45	53,292.15
1934-35	14,719	3.50	51,516.50
1935-36	19,353	3.95	76,444.35
1936-37	15,037	4.00	60,148.00
1937-38	13,287	3.65	48,497.55
1938-39	15,014	2.80	42,039.20
1939-40	16,465	2.45	40,339.25
1940-41	19,756	3.71	73,294.76
1941-42	22,512	4.90	110,308.80
1942-43	20,128	3.65	73,467.20
1943-44	38,303	7.25	277,696.75
1944-45	36,803	2.75	101,208.25
1945-46	41,084	2.89	118,732.76
1946-47	61,880	1.97	121,903.60
1947-48	55,601	2.61	145,118.61
1948-49	61,419	2.23	136,964.37
1949-50	58,527	1.95	114,127.65
20-year totals	560,494		1,782,130.95
20-year average	28,025	3.18	

¹Data from Cons. Comm. fur reports.

²Season unchanged throughout the 20-year period (Nov. 10-Jan. 10 incl.)

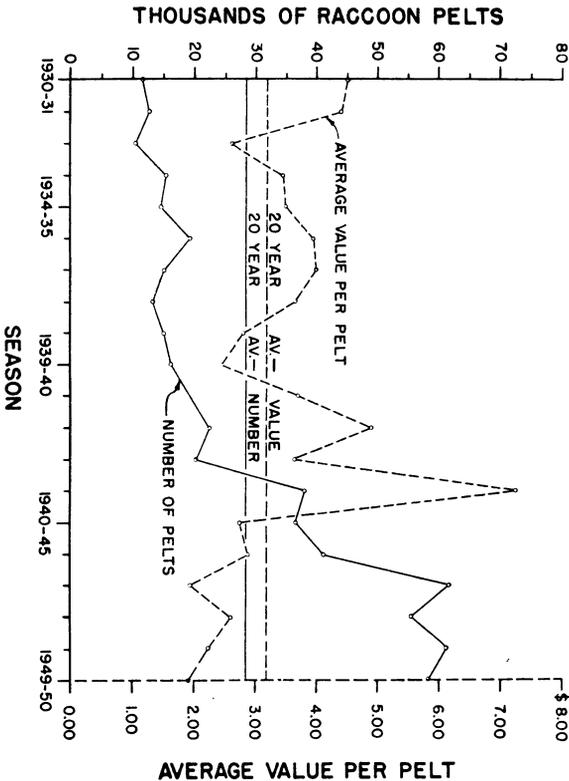


Figure 1. Number raccoons harvested, and average value received per pelt by hunters and trappers each year from 1930-31 to 1949-50—as reported by fur buyers.

in that year. This population curve is strikingly similar to the Missouri raccoon population curve since 1940 as shown by Sanderson (1951).

The reasons given for the phenomenal increase in raccoon numbers have increased with the raccoons, but as Sanderson (*op. cit.*) points out, few of the reasons are supported by evidence, and probably no one factor alone is responsible for the increase. The paper mentioned above shows that in Missouri the sex and age composition of the population has changed to favor more females and more juveniles in the harvest as raccoon numbers have increased. The paper also discusses restocking, den trees, and special regulations and their effects on the population, but does not present evidence showing the effect of pelt values on the harvest and consequently on the population.

Decreased value of raccoon pelts within recent years still receives much credit for the increase in raccoon numbers. General state-

ments to this effect continue to appear in print. Yet no figures have appeared proving that declining pelt values have caused a decrease in the harvest; followed by an increase in the raccoon population.

Yeager, *et. al.* (1949) and Yeager (1951) report that the raccoon has been increasing in Colorado since about 1940, due primarily to very low prices for raccoon fur. Figure 1 clearly shows that in Iowa the pelt value is not the controlling factor in the raccoon population. There does appear to be a correlation between the average price received for the fur and the number of pelts harvested from 1930-31 to 1943-44. However, in 1944-45 the average pelt value decreased sharply while the number of pelts harvested declined only slightly and then continued to rise sharply in the following years while the price continued to decline.

For low prices of raccoon fur to be responsible for the population rise, they would first have to cause a decrease in the harvest. This would allow more breeding stock to remain for the following season. That this is not the case in Iowa is demonstrated by the curves representing the number of raccoons harvested and the average price received per pelt starting with 1944-45 (Fig. 1). No doubt the value of the fur does have some effect on the numbers harvested, but where the raccoon is much sought after for sport, this effect must be insignificant. This is shown by the slight decline in harvest caused by a drastic decline in value during the 1944-45 season.

In states where 'coon hunting has not become popular, prices may exert more influence on the numbers harvested than in the states where the raccoon is prized as a game animal. In view of the raccoon's widespread increase through much of North America in recent years, it would seem that even in the states where 'coon hunting is not a major sport, something other than pelt value is responsible for the increase.

It should also be noted that raccoon hunting and trapping regulations in Iowa have remained constant throughout the 20-year period covered by this paper. Hunting with dogs and trapping was allowed from November 10-January 10, inclusive, during this entire period. No bag limits or other special regulations were imposed.

Another reason often given, especially by hunters, for the increase in raccoon numbers is the decreased hunting pressure during the war years. As was pointed out for pelt values, for this to be true there would first have to be a decrease in the harvest, allowing a greater breeding reserve to remain. Figure 1 shows that from 1942-43 to 1945-46, a time when large numbers of men were away

from home, the raccoon harvest rose sharply. In fact, only once during the war years did the Iowa raccoon harvest fail to increase over the previous year and then the harvest declined only slightly in 1944-45.

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SUMMARY

1. Complete or nearly complete fur reports are available for Iowa since 1930-31.

2. This paper presents the number of raccoon pelts, the average price paid for each pelt, the total value of the pelts, the 20-year average value per pelt, and the 20-year average number of pelts for each year, 1930-31 to 1949-50 inclusive, as reported by fur buyers.

3. In Iowa the number of raccoons harvested has shown a general increase since 1930-31, but variations in the harvest were relatively minor until 1943-44.

4. The major irruption in numbers appears to have started with the 1943 breeding season in Iowa.

5. The data show that pelt value is not the controlling factor in the Iowa raccoon population.

6. Regulations remained constant throughout the 20-year period; therefore, they could not have been responsible for the change in population.

7. The harvest continued to rise during the war years discounting the theory that decreased harvest during that time is responsible for the increase in raccoon numbers.

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