

Secrets of furbearers of the north revealed at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center

by Hope McLeod | Posted: Friday, December 19, 2014 8:00 am

Anyone who thought this was going to be a dull science lecture was dead wrong.

On December 3, the auditorium at Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center (NGLVC) was transformed into a furbearer museum. Pelts of every wild weasel, feline, canine and black bear found in Bayfield County were laid out on a long table for audience members to see and feel.

John Olson, furbearer specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), picked up each pelt over the course of the evening and revealed its secrets to an audience of 90 people at, "Life and Ecology of Wisconsin's Wild Furbearers of the North," sponsored by the Friends of the North Pikes Creek Wetlands (FNPCW).

Before introducing Olson, Kathy Wendling from FNPCW shared Olson's history, who has been engaged in wildlife management for 40 years. His work has involved programs with bald eagles, common loons, osprey, black bear and wolves. In the 1990s he began his work with furbearer management, trapper education and humane trap research. He also works with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission on furbearer management.

"I've been around since biblical times," said Olson, leaping to the stage like one of his pelts come to life.

He actually grew up in Winter, Wis., not on Noah's arc, where his father was a subsistence farmer. Baffling his family, however, Olson turned to the woods, instead of the plow. He's always been a gatherer, he said, especially edibles. If it grows out there and is sustainable, he collects it, "from gardens to grouse, wild rice to elk, muskrats to maple syrup, pulpwood to cabin logs."



John Olson, furbearer specialist

John Olson, furbearer specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, shared his knowledge about these elusive creatures in a lecture at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.

On the day of the lecture, Olson had just returned from Madison where he administered a week-long training on furbearer management to law enforcement —something he does every December.

“I kind of have the energy of a weasel,” said Olson pacing back and forth, his silver mustache bobbing up and down.

Olson has taught at numerous institutions, including Northland College. His beady eyes focused intently on each face in the audience — all 90 of them — his childlike enthusiasm keeping everyone hyper-engaged.

Wendling asked Olson to focus on furbearers (creatures with fur) found in Bayfield County. The first creature he picked up from the table was a spotted skunk.

“You might see this little critter on the federal endangered list sometime in the future, even in the areas where they used to do real well, like Missouri,” he said.

Olson’s main job as one of two state furbearer specialists is to monitor animals in their habitats. After determining their numbers and health condition, he and various other groups formulate a management plan for each species. Countless surveys have been conducted both on the ground and in the air, although these methods are fast changing.

“There’s some exciting research we’re starting up in the north right now. We’re doing a shakedown version this winter over in Rhineland: putting satellite collars on bobcats,” he said.

At present four bobcats are collared, and he hopes to have more soon. This collar gives at least two locations a day: one during daylight, one after dark.

“The satellite sends the information right to the computer, to our researcher in Rhineland,” said Olson, who added that they will soon collar wolves.

Because collars are more economical and dependable, this system will eventually replace surveying by airplane, helicopter or on foot.

Olson also shared current research being done on coyotes and raccoons in the urban/rural interface in Southern Wisconsin.

“We’re trying to figure out if the state has disease transmission from domestic animals to wild or the other way around,” he said.

The problem with raccoons is they carry a particularly contagious round worm in their feces which people should never handle, he said. And coyotes carry rabies and distemper. Distemper was detected in all Ashland and Bayfield County coyotes examined this year.

Back to pelts

The second pelt Olson picked up was beaver.

“Europeans first came here to Christianize the people, but were also in search of beaver. They made really good top hats for the aristocrats,” he said.

Olson explained how all furbearers, especially beaver, have a combination of coarse guard hairs as a top coat, which in the beaver’s case keeps them bone-dry. And underneath lies soft under-fur that keeps them warm. Fur industries sheared the guard hairs and used under-fur for their top hats. Though shimmering with elegance, these hides were unfortunately tanned with mercury back then.

“Ever heard that term. ‘Madder than a hatter?’ That’s where it came from: mercury poisoning,” Olson said.

Furbearer numbers fluctuate from year to year. By the 1930s the Wisconsin beaver population had declined to 50 because of over harvesting. But with conservation efforts, by the 1980s these numbers rose to 200,000. Currently, the estimated population statewide hovers around 80,000. Permit trapping is allowed at certain times of year. Olson said it’s a constant balancing act between an “adequate harvest but not too much.” He said the DNR has a love/hate relationship with beaver. Too many beaver can do serious damage, like blocking culverts, but with just the right numbers, these do-gooders can actually benefit the environment. One thing they do is create warm ponds that end up protecting other species whose habitat has been altered by climate change.

Enough of beaver. What about muskrats, mink, ermine?

“The under-fur of a muskrat looks just like mink — a poor man’s mink,” Olson said.

For that reason it is one of Wisconsin’s most sought after furbearers. Numbers are steady in Wisconsin but declining elsewhere in the state.

Mink, though no longer in vogue as stoles, is still used for trim. Wisconsin is the number one mink producer in the United States, on mink farms, however, not in the wild.

“Medford, Wis. has one of the largest mink ranches in the United States,” Olson said.

Still, mink can still be spotted in the wild throughout Bayfield County. A family was located a few years ago playing at the base of the Old City Dock in Washburn.

Ermine, the smallest of the weasel family, may look darling but can actually take down a muskrat, Olson said. He’s a sly little fellow who turns white in winter. His fur has been used for centuries to decorate Native American headdresses.

Zippering along through the underbrush, Olson picked up the American Martin, an endangered furbearer.

“Once extirpated from Wisconsin (trapped until none were left), they were reintroduced and are now found primarily in and around the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest,” he said.

Though rare, they are out there.

Realizing he couldn't explain every little hair on each animal's back, Olson raced through each pelt like a sped-up cartoon. Polecat, aka. fishette, aka fisher gets a bad rap for its nasty habit of killing domestic cats, he said. (They eat martens and porcupine too). Maybe that's why numbers are mysteriously plummeting in the last few years: bad kitty karma. In truth, it's more likely connected to canine diseases.

“Female fishers are dying at a huge rate,” Olson said.

In the '50s, fisher were brought down from Canada to deal with an oversized population of porcupine in the northwoods. They thrived here; that is, until recently.

One of the most interesting topics Olson touched upon was the wolf/dog. More common than the DNR would like, these canines are a cross between wolf and domestic dog, mostly German Shepherd or Husky. He said people find them endearing as puppies, raise them until they're about two, then release them because they start biting people.

“I had to shoot one once,” said Olson, wistfully cradling the pelt of one of these enormous creatures.

This is the hard part of his job, killing animals that become a danger to the public. Luckily this doesn't happen often. Someone in the audience asked if the DNR had any coy-wolves on record in Wisconsin. This is a new hybrid between coyotes and wolves detected in Canada and on the East Coast. Unlike their wild ancestors, they are undaunted by the presence of humans and can be quite ferocious. Luckily, Olson said no.

Most furbearers keep their distance from humans. It's rare to see them. However, Wendling said FNPCW members have spotted beaver, muskrat, river otter, fisher, weasel, mink, bobcat, wolves, red fox, coyotes, and black bears in the North Pikes Creek region, a 280-acre forested wetland recently purchased and protected by the Bayfield Regional Conservancy.

Olson, who said he's looking for a young person to take his place so he can retire, works closely with other groups in the area, especially the tribes. Together they track these elusive creatures and develop management plans for each species so that furbearers can remain in the wild yet in balance with the ever-changing world around them.

Hope McLeod can be reached at hmcLeod@ashlanddailynews.net.

To learn more about Wisconsin furbearers go to <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/furbearers.html>

For a schedule of other FNPCW sponsored events go to <http://www.northpikescreek.org/events>.