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Attempted Extermination of the Pocket Gopher, *Geomys bursarius*

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ATTEMPTED EXTERMINATION OF THE POCKET GOPHER, *GEOMYS BURSARIUS*.

THE ravages of the pocket gopher extended very generally throughout the State of Iowa, but came under my own personal notice in the rich and fertile farm lands of Poweshiek County and surroundings. The annual loss they occasioned became a matter of such serious moment to the farmers of this county that on Jan. 8, 1890, an unusually liberal measure was voted by the board of supervisors, to the effect that "a bounty of ten cents a head be paid on gopher scalps taken in Poweshiek County, subject to the same laws and conditions that pertain to the payment of bounties on wolf scalps, and pockets must be produced in each case before the claimant will be entitled to the bounty."

These concealed little pests not only feed on surrounding vegetation, but, what is worse on the whole, choke it out by the innumerable mounds of earth heaped up by them everywhere.

I have seen fields which were literally black with gopher hills, and, if rooting swine can be said to upturn a field, so can the gopher. Besides, the loss by accidents to machinery and animals occasioned by striking against the gopher hills, or by sinking into their runs or holes, is very considerable. So while it is not to be marvelled at that some concerted action should be taken towards the extermination of such a pest, yet the high price paid for the experiment must excite some comment.

Taking into account the liberal bounty offered, the universal prevalence of gophers in countless numbers, and the fact that their capture was attended with but little labor, and only trifling cost, it can readily be seen how trapping by men, as well as boys, was at once tremendously stimulated.

It actually became a lucrative employment, at which the trappers spent their time in whole or in part for practically the entire year. The trapping began as early as February, and continued as late in the fall as December; the result of it all being that the incredible number of 140,000 was trapped and paid for in Poweshiek County during eleven months of the year ending December, 1890. The gopher pockets were taken instead of their scalps, and the price paid for 140,000 pockets by one county amounted to \$14,000. As skill comes with experience, and as the great gopher populace of the county was but slightly thinned out, it was my judgment and that of others, that the catch of 1891 would considerably exceed that of 1890; some estimating the number that would be trapped as high as 200,000.

Accordingly the probable price which the county would have to lavish on gopher bounties bade fair to reach proportions that might bankrupt an ordinary county. While these facts were forcibly borne in on all taxpayers, yet the farmers were willingly taxed, even adding to the bounty in many cases to encourage trapping on their own lands, and stoutly defended the measure in opposition to the citizens of towns and villages who very unwillingly submitted to a taxation that seemed to them to discriminate between town and country rodents, believing that it was quite as fair and reasonable to apply the tax to the extermination of town rats as to field gophers.

An attempt to change the law failed, owing to the farmers' support, but in the winter of 1891 a resolution was passed reducing the bounty to five cents and requiring the claimants to present the fore legs instead of the pockets.

As a direct result of the reduced bounty, rather than a result of diminished gophers, the catch for the year ending December, 1891, was but 18,000, and of these no doubt a part was trapped in 1890. Trapping began in April and ended in December.

The gopher is a prolific rodent, and it seems almost absurd to believe that in a county where they probably number millions that their ranks have been noticeably thinned or their ravages diminished. The most sanguine supporters of the gopher bounty allowed not less than five years for their hoped-for extermination.

Taking into account their present numbers, their prolific natures, and underground habits, the attempt to oust them once for all seems almost a ridiculous undertaking. But what renders the present errand particularly bootless is the gopher at large in surrounding counties where no bounty is offered for their capture. The most persistent concerted action on the part of all the counties, while it might check the pestiferous gopher, could scarcely expect to destroy it; much less can an isolated county like Poweshiek, in the very heart of a gopher paradise, expect to reach that unattainable end.

Among the interesting nuts to crack offered the bounty supporters are a few considerations like the following.

As the gophers are thinned out in Poweshiek to the point where trapping is less profitable than in adjoining counties, the elastic consciences which some trappers are said to have will suffer them to trap outside and sell to the more liberal county, in spite of the binding oath which they must take.

But another absurd temptation was placed in the way of the faltering trapper. He could, in Iowa County, present to the county auditor the fore-legs of the gopher he had trapped, and draw his bounty where fore-legs were equivalents of scalps, and by crossing the line he could present the pockets of the self-same abused gopher and draw from the Poweshiek treasury an additional bounty on their pockets, thus making the poor gopher do him double duty. It is a known fact that all have not been slow in rising to their opportunities and drawing double bounty on the unfortunate victims of the trap.

In trapping gophers, it is the common practice to dig down and bury ordinary steel traps in their runs, and to visit these at stated intervals. The traps are not baited.

Among the gophers caught albinos are met with occasionally. During the fall of 1890 there were brought to me several gophers with white pelage — a dirty white — looking like a winter coat.

If albinos, their eyes were not pink, which suggested the possibility of an overlooked variety. From Mr. F. W. Porter,

the auditor of Poweshiek County, who has furnished me many facts and figures, I learn that trappers speak of a white variety, counted by them particularly wary and hard to catch.

One caught in Grinnell was marked with hinder parts white and fore parts brown.

To those who have not seen the pocket gopher, it may be well to state that they are a small rodent of about the same color as, and perhaps a shade larger than, the domestic rat.

They have no external ears, have small bead-like eyes, a short tail, and powerful fore-legs, armed with strong claws for digging; and, what is very characteristic, they have large extensible cheek pouches or pockets. The presence of the gopher is made known to you by its mounds of earth, about the size of large ant-hills, rather than by its own presence, for it is rarely indeed that they are seen.

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