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Missing the Muskrats

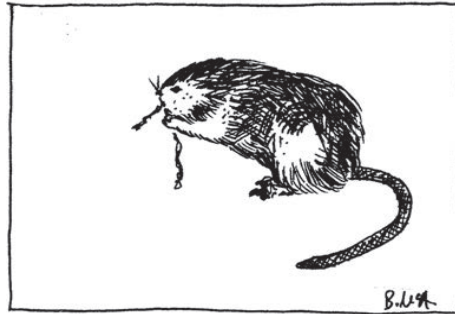
Near the public beach in Monterey there lived a woman who enjoyed watching muskrats swimming just out from her house. This was Helen Shaw, and when the local powers that be decided to adopt the practice of “drawdown” for Lake Garfield, Helen protested. The original pro-drawdown argument was about flood control. We had a new dam out there and if there were to come a winter with lots of snow-pack and then a sudden spring thaw, rain, and runoff, that dam might give way and threaten public health and safety downstream. The new dam was designed with a standpipe and a gate and a plan to drop the water level every year in the fall so if we got a big spring melt, the dam would not be stressed.

Of course, the site was engineered also with a big broad spillway beside and bypassing the dam, capable of taking quite a load of water down to the Konkapot, so the lake level would not crest and breach the dam. Still, drawdown looked easy and made doubly sure the lake would never flow over that earthen dam and wash it out.

This plan was not in the interest of health and safety for local citizens of other species, though, since many of them had lifestyles dependent upon a reliable lake level. One of these was the musquash, or muskrat, a big rodent related to voles and lemmings.

Some folks, when seeing a muskrat swimming along in a lake or pond, think this might be a small beaver. I always take a closer look at the tail design if I am in any doubt. Beavers have a big flat one with which they can loudly smack the surface as a warning. Muskrats have a long slim tail, flattened from side to side, rather than “dorso-ventrally,” like the beaver’s tail. It makes a good rudder and can be used also for sculling, to propel the muskrat along. Otherwise, the muskrats pump with their hind feet, the way beavers do. Beavers have big hind feet with strong skin webbing between the toes. Muskrat hind feet are not really webbed, but there is stiff bristly hair growing between the toes which makes them good paddles.

Over the decades of drawdown, muskrats have sometimes come back into Lake Garfield. Thanks to tributaries with resident beavers for engineers, there are some small ponds not affected by the changing water level in the main



lake. Any muskrats in these places may live in what is called a pond lodge, or they may be dug into the bank in tunnels or bank dens, which can be ten to fifty feet long, with underwater entrances, two or three chambers, and interconnecting passages.

Muskrats mate in March and give birth to a first batch of babies after a month. These kits weigh less than an ounce at birth and are blind and naked. But in a couple of weeks their eyes are open, they have some fur, and start nibbling vegetation. They can already swim and dive, and are weaned at four weeks.

Sometimes muskrats will give birth to several batches of youngsters in a season, with as many as six in each one. The reason our beaver



swamps are not overrun with them is not because they range so far from the home place, but because they make a good meal for pickerel, pike, snapping turtles, raccoons, foxes, bobcats, hawks, owls, otters, and mink. Mink will prey upon adult muskrats, too. One naturalist investigated a mink’s den in a hollow ash stub, about six feet off the ground. Inside there were thirteen freshly killed muskrats, two mallards, and one coot.

There was a time when muskrats were also preyed upon by folks, both for their hides and for their meat. I have an old book that says back in the day, muskrat meat was sold in shops as

“marsh rabbit.” The fur was trimmed and dyed and made to look like seal fur, even labeled “Hudson seal.” This was good for marketing back in the day, and American trappers “harvested” and sold more than ten million muskrats in a year. The money was good and people got advice from the USDA about muskrat management. How to make the wild wetlands particularly “productive” of so many wonderfully warm furs, ready to pass off as seal in the coat industry.

Fortunately for the muskrats, and many another creature, Congress passed the Fur Products Labeling Act in 1951. We could still manage the wetlands to favor muskrats and then kill them off to make into coats, but we had to call a muskrat a muskrat. Now all that work in the swamps was not so well rewarded. No more interest in maintaining certain water levels to keep the muskrats happy. Some folks moved on here to flood control and dropping the water level.

In Monterey, years went by, the flood control idea faded from memory and lakeshore property owners decided that drawdown was intended to protect docks and boathouses from ice damage in winter. Also intended to make repairs to pilings and moorings easy, now that the shallow parts of the lake were exposed.

And the next thing you know, we now believe that drawdown is really all about killing off pondweeds. So, stay posted for new reasons why drawdown is good for us, how it is saving our lake.

If Helen Shaw were still with us, she would be shaking her head over the choices we have made and the consequences. She would say, “Once there were muskrats here.” I know someone who used to say Helen Shaw was “the Muskrat Lady.” She gave him a piece of her mind. He was the man in charge of opening the gate every year to let the water level down and then closing it again in February, letting the lake fill up again. He said, with a grin, he did this as a Valentine’s Day present for Helen, but I doubt she knew about this. It was a joke, and she would not have bought it for a second. She missed the muskrats. — Bonner McAllester