

THE WILDLIFE POPULATION CHANGED OVER THE DECADES

April 8, 2003

Our first of what may be termed a typical Adirondack winter in a long time has caused me to think about all forms of wildlife in general. At first my focus was on how it impacted our local denizens, but ultimately to observations of how actions and populations have changed over a period of 65-odd years on many species.

I was born and raised in Oswego County at a time when farming was the principal industry. It created a habitat that was ideal for all species of wildlife indigenous to much of New York State.

Pheasants were plentiful and provided some of the best hunting one could ask for. It was a cocks-only season and populations were for the most part self-sustaining.

Deer were a scarce commodity and in spite of a bucks-only season and favorable habitat, hunter success rates were very low. The same was true for Canada geese. Both species were very wary and furtive in their movements. When one of either species was taken, it was big news and the lucky hunter was a celebrity.

There were no turkeys, coyotes, or possums. I recalled seeing my first turkey buzzard in the mid '50's. Other than beaver and otter, all other species of furbearers were plentiful. At that time New York was the leading producer of raw furs in the lower 48 states.

Northern leopard frogs were plentiful and provided this writer with hard to come by pocket money. Their typical habitat was low, wet, marshy fields and pastureland. I garnered many a tasty meal of frog legs following behind the hay rake. They were much smaller than the typical bullfrogs from Florida and Bangladesh that are served in restaurants today and they were of a higher quality.

With time, changes have come in both populations of wildlife and humans. Farmland has been developed or allowed to return to waste or woodland.

Pheasant populations are nearly nonexistent and if they are sustained at all, it's by restocking with pen-raised birds. Loss of habitat has combined with peak numbers of predators to bring this about. It appears this trend is irreversible and is a permanent condition.

The leopard frogs have suffered nearly the same fate. Their plight may be due to long-term use of pesticides and herbicides. It's a trend that may be reversed with discontinued use of both products.

Deer and geese now prosper and in some areas have reached nuisance numbers. Coyotes, beaver, otter, possums, turkeys and turkey buzzards are now part of the scene. Bear and fisher have moved into the northern part of the county where they were unknown before.

Animals that were once considered shy and unapproachable are appearing in greater numbers than ever before. Many pose danger to personal health and safety. Polar bear, elk, and moose are just a few of many able to inflict bodily harm. Foxes, raccoon, bats and skunks spread rabies to humans

and other animals. Deer spread Lyme disease as they host ticks. Geese and beaver are polluting water supplies with their droppings.

We are learning that many of the long accepted notions about some species are unfounded. Some that were once considered as strictly wilderness oriented show an uncanny ability to adapt to conditions entirely alien to earlier belief.