

Oregon State GAME COMMISSION BULLETIN

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What Value in Our Furbearers?

By Chester E. Kebbe, Chief Biologist

In these days of shrinking wilderness frontiers it might seem strange to suggest that a once valuable and seriously depleted wildlife resource could ever become a detriment because of renewed abundance. Yet some of the elements involved in the proper management and use of Oregon's furbearing animals have brought some reality to that suggestion.

Management factors such as open seasons and bag limits on various species of animals are, generally speaking, easy to apply. Other factors arising mainly from demand and supply are more elusive and more apt to upset the basic economy of those individuals whose income is derived from trapping.

Very few persons engage in trapping purely for the recreational values, for the optimum investment in time and materials makes it desirable for even a part-time trapper to obtain a reasonable net return for his season's work. Since the furbearing animals are an integral part of the renewable wildlife resource of this state they logically become the concern of the State Game Commission. A review of certain aspects of the fur industry, both wild and domestic, brings out some of the seldom mentioned and often puzzling problems of game management in this field.

Trapping and prospects of obtaining furs to the Oregon pioneer created excitement comparable with the gold rush days of California. Our history books and stories of pioneering keep vividly alive the intense and often bitter struggle for control of our western empire with its wealth of timber, minerals and wildlife. Hudson's Bay Company, Northwest Fur Com-

pany, John Jacob Astor and others became wealthy through early day fur trade, capitalizing upon a resource which was then thought to be inexhaustible. Today the fur resources of the state, which were so important in early history have been relegated to a rather insignificant role in its economy. In fact there appears to be about as many fur animals and as many trappers in the state today as there were when the fur industry was at its

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An extended open season on raccoon is required to control numbers since low pelt prices reduced harvest by trappers.

DEER REGULATIONS CHANGED

At the request of concerned sportsmen the Oregon Game Commission held a public hearing at its Portland office on October 16 to receive information and give further consideration to the "Hunter's Choice Deer Season" scheduled for October 21 and 22.

After receiving the almost unanimous protest of hunters and analyzing available hunting season data, the Commission concluded that there were so many unused deer tags in circulation that the proposed season might jeopardize some deer herds and human lives.

The Commission canceled the "Hunter's Choice Season" and extended the buck deer season through October 22 so that persons who had planned to hunt on the 21st and 22nd would not be denied the privilege.

The original intent of the "Hunter's Choice Season" was to permit Oregon's citizens to harvest problem animals on agricultural lands and resident animals on some eastern Oregon winter ranges.

It was estimated that during the 18-day buck season approximately 50,000 bucks would be killed, leaving only approximately 100,000 to 150,000 unused tags in circulation. Hunter reports indicate that during the first 10 days of the season 14 per cent less bucks were taken than during the first 10 days of the 1949 season and reports from the field indicated that hunting pressure dropped far below normal after the first week-end. It was obvious that many hunters were waiting for the two-day season to fill their tags.

In lieu of the "Hunter's
(Continued on Page 2)

☆ THIS AND THAT ☆

The 1950 antelope hunt figures (based on 1,335 reports from 1,500 tag holders) show 650 hunters killed an antelope, 629 made no kill and 53 reported no hunting. Kills were distributed by county as follows: Lake, 265; Harney, 197; Malheur, 132, and Deschutes, 55. As a whole, antelope were more widely distributed this year than was the case during the 1949 season. A lack of major concentrations existed since water was available and fairly well scattered. This made hunting more difficult and necessitated laborious stalks.

* * *

An unusual number of pintails and mallards has been utilizing the grain crop planted by the habitat improvement department on Gibson Island in Fern Ridge Reservoir for the benefit of waterfowl.

* * *

The public waterfowl shooting ground on the Malheur national wildlife refuge will not be operated by the Game Commission this year because of the low water levels on the area.

* * *

Arid sage lands in Wasco county may again be populated by sage hen. Eighty-seven of the large grouse were recently trapped from sage hen concentrations in Malheur county and transported to the Wasco county home-site by agents of the Game Commission. Once found throughout most eastern Oregon sage country, the birds are now restricted mainly to southeastern Oregon. This is the largest number of sage hens yet transplanted by the Game Commission in its program to re-establish the birds on ranges from which they have long vanished.

* * *

Approximately 600 chukar partridge are being held at the Hermiston game farm as breeding stock. The birds were hatched from eggs received this spring from the states of Washington, Wyoming and Idaho. From the 750 Hungarian partridge eggs received from Denmark this year, there was a 70 per cent hatch. Most of these birds are being held at the Corvallis game farm for brood stock although a small number were planted in a study area.

DEER HUNTERS!

Mail your hunting report.

Deer tag reports are due!

FEDERAL AID TO ADMINISTER DINGELL BILL

Plans are being made by the Fish and Wildlife Service to merge the administration of the recent Dingell-Johnson Federal Aid to Fisheries Act with the existing Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration.

Funds for fishery program under the Dingell Bill will not be available until appropriation is made for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 1951. If the income from the excise tax on the sporting items specified in the law amounts to \$3,000,000, Oregon's apportionment of federal funds would be \$58,829.89. To this the state would have to add \$19,609.96, making the total available for such work \$78,439.85.

In order to qualify, each state must have a law prohibiting the diversion of any of the license fees paid by anglers for any other purpose than the administration of the game department.

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Deer Regulations Changed

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Choice Season" the Commission scheduled a public hearing on October 20 to consider the feasibility of establishing controlled seasons in a few of the more critical problem areas and in that way alleviating some of the many range and damage problems confronted.

Although the hunter's choice type of season has been used successfully in many other states it must be conceded that it does not provide as much control as limited special seasons and, if Oregon's hunters prefer, many of the damage problems on agricultural lands can be partially controlled by fencing and issuing kill permits to landowners.

The Commission still feels that Oregon's hunters should have an opportunity to harvest problem animals and will continue to seek some type of regulation which will be acceptable to the public and provide for the selective harvest of problem animals without jeopardizing the deer resources or public safety.

ERNEST W. SMITH

Ernest W. Smith, veteran foreman of the Game Commission's Willamette trout hatchery at Oakridge, died October 5, 1950, as a result of a heart attack.

"Pop" Smith, as he was known to most of his fellow workers, was born in Coos county on August 31, 1877. He was the son of a pioneer logging operator, Ole Smith, and spent his boyhood and early manhood in the woods.

Logging, however, eventually gave way to fish raising at which "Pop" spent the last forty years of his life. He first was engaged in the operation of a private fish hatchery and then in 1915 went to work for the State at the Marshfield hatchery on Coos River. When the fish and game commissions were separated, he transferred to the Game Commission. He had held the position of foreman of the Willamette hatchery since April 1, 1931.

Devoted to his work, he was fortunate enough to be able to stay on the job almost to the very end. Finding his services invaluable, the Commission had retained him in spite of the fact that he was several years past retirement age.

Survivors include a son, Charles, and two brothers, Frank and Ed of Coos County.

SAVAGE RAPIDS SCREEN PLANS UNDERWAY

Plans for screening the turbine and pumping system intake at Savage Rapids dam on the Rogue River are being prepared by the Oregon State Game Commission for submission to the Grants Pass Irrigation District Board.

Each year thousands of young salmon and steelhead are pumped into the irrigation district's highline ditches or killed while passing through the dam's turbine cylinders, according to a Game Commission study of the Savage Rapids dam and its effect upon the Rogue River fishery.

Three traveling water screens set into the pump and turbine sump on the north end of the dam are called for in the plans. Fish striking the traveling screen trays, including small fingerlings, would be channeled off into diversion tubes which would carry the fish around the pumps and turbines to the downstream side of the dam.

Game Commission engineers have been working on the screen plans since June, and the engineering department at Oregon State College has aided on many problems affecting fish including the rate of water flow against the screen and pressures in the diversion tubes. Dr. Harlan Holmes, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service fishway and screen expert, has also been consulted.

The traveling screens are self-cleaning and require little attention, according to Game Commission engineers.

A Game Commission study at Savage Rapids dam in 1947 indicated a minimum loss of 210,000 steelhead and salmon entering Grants Pass irrigation district ditches that year. A trap suspended below the tailrace of the turbine system showed that 38 per cent of the fish passing through the turbine cylinders were killed or injured. A partial fish loss in turbines for the year was estimated to be 25,000 salmon and steelhead. The percent of mortality increased with the size of the fish, yearling silver salmon, chinook salmon, and steelhead, five to eight inches in length were the most seriously affected by the pumps and cylinders.

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Members of National Association of Conservation Education and Publicity hold their ninth annual meeting at Timberline.

NACEP Meets at Mt. Hood

The ninth annual conference of the National Association of Conservation Education and Publicity was held September 25 to 28 at Timberline Lodge, Mt. Hood, with the Information and Education Division of the Oregon State Game Commission acting as host.

Education and public relations personnel from conservation and wildlife departments of 24 states gathered to discuss problems of mutual interest. In addition to the workshop sessions, talks were given by Arthur S. Einarson, Leader of the Oregon Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, and Robert Mansfield, Professor of Journalism, University of Washington, on "Methods of Establishing Good Press Relations."

In accordance with its policy, the Association announced its national awards for outstanding work in furthering conservation education. One award was to the Conservation Foundation of New York City for its work in the field of youth education, particularly for its production of visual education films in its "Living Forest" series. The other award was to Bill Wolf in the field of journalism, for its series of articles on pollution, "Running Sores on Our Land." No book or radio-television awards were given this year. Judges were Seth Gordon of San Fran-

cisco, member of the California wildlife conservation board; Tom Wallace, editor-emeritus of the Louisville (Ky.) Times; and J. N. (Ding) Darling of Des Moines, Iowa dean of conservation cartoonists.

Awards also went to Guillermo Nannetti of Colombia, head of the Pan American Union's Education division, for outstanding service to conservation through adult and youth education, and to Amigos del Suelo (Friends of the Soil) of Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico.

President of this year's convention was F. O. Capps, chief of the Information and Education Division for the Missouri Conservation Commission. New officers elected for 1951 were: president, Richard Gearhart, assistant chief of Education Division for Michigan Conservation department; vice-president, William G. Kah, associate editor of Conservation Bulletin, Ohio Conservation Department; secretary-treasurer, Jack Culbreath, educational manager, Colorado Fish and Game Commission; directors, F. O. Capps, Missouri Conservation Department; Marshall Edson, Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Rod Amundson, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission; and Carl Moen, Minnesota Conservation Department. Minnesota was selected as the 1951 meeting place.

PLANNING FOR



Plastic disc tags were placed on the majority of the sturgeon in an effort to trace the migration of transplanted fish.

If some day twenty-five to fifty years from now you should happen to hook and land a sturgeon in the Upper Willamette River, it will very probably come as a result of experimental work now being carried on by the Oregon State Game Commission.

Periodically, through the late summer, tank trucks containing young sturgeon have been transporting these fish from the Bonneville area to selected liberation sites along the middle reaches of the Willamette River.

This excellent food and game fish, once numerous throughout the Columbia and Snake River systems, has never been able to migrate above the Willamette Falls at Oregon City. They do ascend the lower river in limited numbers and are taken by anglers in the deeper portions of the stream between Ross Island and Oregon City.

The life story of our two Pacific Sturgeons has many unwritten chapters. Because of the more or less secretive nature of this species, plus the fact that it may spend a measurable part of its time in the ocean, our information on its habits is rather scarce. Liberation techniques are still in an experimental state as is the matter of tagging and recovery of liberated fish.



Sportsmen willingly volunteer to aid fisheries crew in transporting the fish from tank truck to river. Liberation sites were limited to points where the trucks could be spotted.

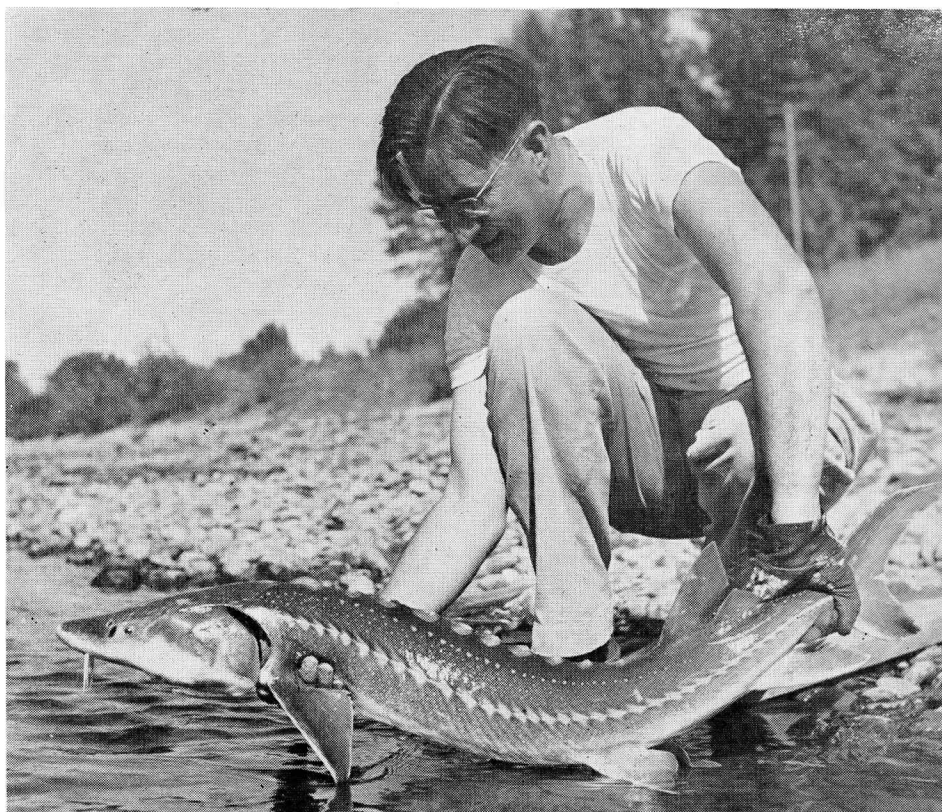
FUTURE FISHING

A fish that has been authentically measured at nearly a ton and which was once commonly taken in the Columbia and Snake Rivers at weights between 500 and 1000 pounds must either grow very rapidly or be of extreme age.

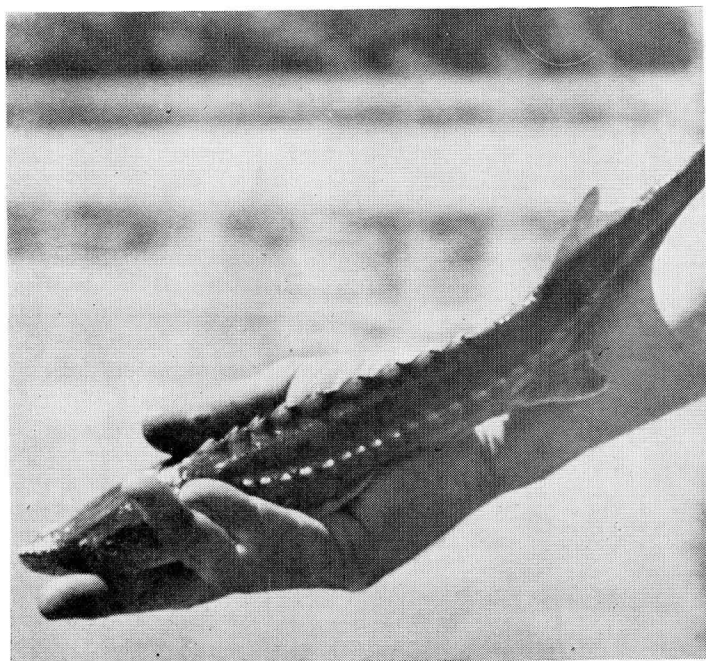
Studies are being conducted to determine the normal rate of growth. Present knowledge points to the fact that a sturgeon must be around 100 pounds in weight, about 6 feet in length or 15 years of age before it is capable of reproduction. The fish liberated in the Willamette ranged from a foot to four feet in length. Their age varied between one and about twelve years. Assuming that the environment in the middle reaches of the Willamette is suitable and that some of the fish being planted will remain in good health until spawning occurs, it will still be many years before any logical conclusions can be reached.

The known mortality from all causes of the 509 fish planted in the Willamette is at present writing 170, or about 33 per cent. The unknown losses may be as great thus leaving a rather small number of fish having a reproduction potential. No one can say whether or

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The sturgeon is a "living fossil," being one of the few remaining forms of prehistoric armored fishes of the Mesozoic age.



Size of fish ranged from veritable infants of one or two years to juniors of eight to ten. Adults range upwards of 100 pounds and may continue to grow for half a century.

What Value in Furbearers?

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peak in the early 1800's. It is true that the present day trapper, in general, traps as a sideline to other work, while in pioneering days trapping was often the major source of income. It is also true that the most popular furbearing animals, such as the beaver, marten, fisher, otter and mink, have been depleted while many of the less favored species have increased greatly. In many instances they have increased to a point where immediate and local control measures are necessary in order to protect other sources of income to the affected parties. There are, however, some very definite reasons for this unbalanced condition.

During the last trapping season, the winter of 1949-50, 1,490 trappers reported catching 67,361 animals which had a commercial fur value of \$123,702.63. The average price per pelt amounted to \$1.83 and the average return per trapper was \$83.02. Despite the low average a few men in good trapping territories realized over \$1,000 for their three months of hard work. This average is based upon all reports and includes full and part time trappers as well as those men who did little or no trapping. Immediately after the war the fur market was much more active as indicated by facts and figures for the winter of 1945-46. At that time 2,009 trappers received \$326,141.33 for 80,309 pelts. This average amounted to \$4.06 per skin and brought an average return of \$162.34 to the trapper for his season's effort. These figures indicate a serious condition and

are presented as a basis of comparison to show what has happened to the fur trade within the past few years. In view of the fact the cost of living has continued to rise it is apparent the unit value of furs has dropped considerably, with the trapper thereby receiving much less for his efforts.

Many recent developments have been influential in the lowering of fur returns to the trapper. Fashion stands number one on this list. During the past ten years the trend in fur fashion has been moving toward that class of wearing apparel made of genuine mink. Such a trend has already moved the mink to an almost complete dominance of the quality fur market. This has resulted in good prices being paid to the mink farmer and mink trapper at the expense of other more plentiful furs. Muskrats which averaged \$2.06 in 1946 dropped to 86 cents in 1950. Fashions no longer dictate the use of long-haired furs, such as coyote, fox, raccoon and skunk, and since there is no demand for these pelts they have become practically worthless. A few years ago the coyotes taken in the state sold for an average of \$10.00 per skin; raccoon, \$6.00; fox, \$4.00; and skunk, \$3.00. Good pelts brought considerably more than these averages. Now any quantity of similar pelts can be purchased for 50 cents each, as fur buyers have warehouses full from past accumulations which have no market value.

As a means of obtaining additional revenues during the war a 20 per cent federal excise tax was placed on all fur garments and garments containing

fur trim. Wearing apparel containing no fur were not taxed. Manufacturers promptly stopped using fur trim to avoid having the price of the coat raised by 20 per cent to the consumer. The fight to repeal this revenue measure in Congress has met with no success. Fur farmers, as well as the entire fur industry from trapper to the consuming public, are all being hurt financially. The 200 mink farmers in the state feel it is a discrimination placed indirectly on their farm product, as compared to a lack of any similar tax being levied against producers of other agricultural products.

Another factor influencing the price being paid for domestic raw furs is the large and unrestricted imports of foreign produced goods, admitted into the United States free of all import duties. Russia alone in 1948 exported to this country furs valued at \$38,506,127. Other Russian satellite countries exported additional smaller amounts. In the United States over one-half the total imports from Russia in 1947 and 1948 were furs and fur products.

All of these conditions have a direct effect upon the returns received by the Oregon trapper for his furs. The state produces a considerable number of wild pelts for annual harvest but because of fur values the greatest portion of the crop of most species remains untouched.

As previously noted the Oregon Game Commission is charged with the administration of the state's fur resources. In carrying out this responsibility, a long-range program of fur management has been developed which allows for the maximum possible harvest of the fur crop each winter when the fur is prime. Trapping seasons are authorized when a harvestable crop is indicated through census samples, field checks and analysis of the data presented on trappers' report cards. Whenever the trend of a species indicates a serious decline the animal is given year-around protection.

The beaver is the only furbearing animal over which the Game Commission does not have authority to set open seasons and other regulations. A legislative law provides protection to this animal at all times and delegates only the responsibility of removing nuisance beaver to the Game Commission. This statute became necessary after periods of open seasons which had reduced the beaver population to virtual extermination. The beaver has,

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A beaver dam can be either good or bad in its effects. It may prevent a stream from drying out during the summer but also may be the cause of an overflow.



Live-trapping beaver is a policy whenever feasible.

What Value in Furbearers?

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perhaps, responded to management better than any other wild animal. Because of this response it may again in the future become the most valuable species to the commercial trapper. In the early day fur trade beaver pelts were the most sought after article. They are still a valuable commodity today. Pelts taken by the Game Commission last winter from areas of damage averaged \$17.01, with the best pelts selling for \$30 each. However, in 1946 beaver pelts brought an average of \$47.23, with top quality goods bringing \$70.

A great deal of work has been done by agents of the Game Commission since this department took over active management of beaver in 1939. Approximately 3,000 animals have been live-trapped and transplanted from areas of damage and over population to mountainous streams where their activity of constructing dams is beneficial not only in soil and water conservation but to other wildlife species as well. Native food plants are also being distributed along many streams to again make the habitat suitable for the re-introduction of beaver.

The only other fur animal which has responded to management practices, exclusive of protection, is the muskrat. Practically all suitable waters in the state have been stocked and are now in production. Marsh improve-

ments for waterfowl have also benefited the muskrat by creating large areas of ideal habitat.

The muskrat and beaver are the only native furbearers which are almost entirely dependent upon vegetation as their source of food. All others depend in part or entirely upon flesh for their diet. When the fur of any of these species becomes valueless, trapping pressure eases, their numbers increase and their depredations on other valuable domestic or wild life increases greatly. It is then the animal is considered a predator and any management practices previously used to increase the population must be changed to methods of control.

An excellent example of the effects fur prices play upon management can be shown with the raccoon. During the 1930's this animal was avidly sought for its high fur value. So great was the take that deep inroads were being made on the available breeding stock. A closed season became necessary to protect this diminishing species during the winters of 1940 and 1941. Shortly thereafter, however, the price on raccoon skins declined and continued to fall until it no longer became profitable for trappers to trap for them. As a result of this light trapping pressure the raccoon population commenced to increase and has now reached a point where the animals are becoming a serious predator on farm crops, poultry and game birds. Control measures are now necessary in place of a program calling for increased production through protection and management.

The same trend of from low populations to vastly increased numbers can be seen with other long-haired fur animals. Since all of these are more or less predatory by nature, higher densities mean increased predation and in this respect follow the same general pattern as that outlined for the raccoon.

During times of high fur prices all fur animals are eagerly sought by trappers and their predations, consequently, are held to a minimum. No additional control work is then necessary. But with light trapping pressure the animals not sought for continue to increase and are soon looked upon by the farmer and sportsman as a serious problem to their future success as a producer of crops and livestock, or as a hunter of game birds and animals. A dividing line as to whether an animal is an economic asset or a costly predator depends entirely upon the value of its pelt. Harvesting a valuable fur re-

source today may become a job of predator control tomorrow.

In the administration of this fur resource the many variables mentioned must all be taken into consideration in carrying out a long-range program of fur management. Unforeseen circumstances often arise which will completely change the entire picture in a short time.

In view of the ever changing fashions, world affairs and economic conditions it has become increasingly important to maintain the resource at a high level so that it will be available to trappers when the country again demands those particular furs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chester E. Kebbe is a native of Tillamook county and has spent all his life in Oregon with the exception of several years overseas service in the army during World War II.

He graduated from the Department of Fish and Game Management of Oregon State College in 1938, and worked for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service before joining the staff of the Game Commission.

While he has had various assignments in the game division, most of his time has been spent in control and management of other furbearers. At the present time he holds the position of chief biologist in charge of such activities.

As with many of his co-workers, hunting and fishing take up much of his spare time.

Future Fishing

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not the inherent migratory habits of these fish will cause them all to ultimately move back down the Willamette to the Columbia from which they were originally obtained. This habit must be very strong as most of the dead fish recovered have been taken from the trash racks and screens above the paper mills at Oregon City. Unlike most of the fishery management work being done for immediate or short term returns, the sturgeon program is an example of a long range plan contemplating the desires of generations of anglers as yet unborn.

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