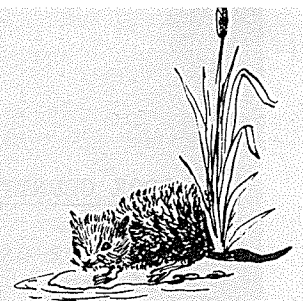


Muskrat house



Muskrat

THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

WINTER 1980



Droppings



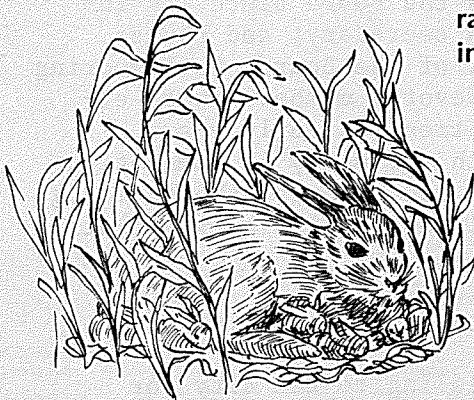
Muskrat tracks

WHAT TO LOOK FOR – Rabbits and Muskrats

Two animals that are awake and busy all winter long are rabbits and muskrats.

The heavy early winter rains have been kind to the muskrats. Lincoln Marsh, north of Wheaton on the Prairie Path, has more than a dozen new muskrat houses that can be seen from the Path. During dry seasons, muskrats will live in burrows in the banks but prefer the safer watery marsh. About half the houses in the marsh are feeding houses which are smaller than the others, with thinner walls. The bigger nesting houses have walls 2 feet thick with the nest well above the water level. Muskrats eat roots and stems of cattails and other water plants. They have dark brown hair and a long naked tail. The female has a litter of four in May and again in midsummer. At the age of a month, muskrats can fend for themselves. Look for a population explosion next spring unless we have a severe flood.

Rabbits are the same size as muskrats. The Eastern Cottontail is the rabbit of the Prairie Path. Rabbits like grasses and broad-leaved plants but during heavy snows nibble willow shoots and the twigs and bark of dogwood, roses, and fruit trees. Rabbits have many enemies which they try to escape by "freezing"--until danger approaches too closely at which time they explode in a burst of speed. Last winter was very hard on rabbits but they bounce back producing litters of five to six, three times a summer. Many, many rabbits live along the Path. Early in the morning or at dusk they can be seen in open places grazing. Follow their trails in the snow for a woodland drama.



Cottontail rabbit



Rabbit tracks



Droppings