

Controlling Muskrat Digging in Ponds

Good Pond Construction is Best Insurance Against Damage

Any permanent pond in the Midwest is apt to have muskrats in it sooner or later. In the Midwest, most muskrats live in streams. In spring or fall, some of the muskrats move. In their spring travels, they are hunting food and safe places to rear young; in fall, they are hunting food and safe winter quarters. These traveling muskrats usually stay in their summer locations until fall and in their winter homes until spring. They may stay in either location permanently if the food and denning facilities are good enough. When they travel they may go several miles, even across dry uplands, in their search for better places to live.

It is on these travels that muskrats find farm ponds and it is usually during spring that they locate in them. If the pond is large and contains abundant food, they may stay. But ponds seldom contain enough aquatic vegetation to hold muskrats past the fall season, especially if they can find better homes.

Pond muskrats dig burrows, and may also build homes of mud and vegetation in shallow water. It is the digging that most pond owners object to, especially when holes are dug into the dam. In digging and working around the shallows, muskrats stir up mud that may keep these areas or the whole pond cloudy. This is objectionable in a pond where clear water is wanted for swim-



Photo by Russell Verobisky/Panet Inc.

ming, livestock use and fish production. way: these keep the water from coming up high enough to force the muskrats to dig new higher chambers dangerously close to the surface. Also, one reason for keeping livestock off a pond area is to avoid the chance of putting a hoof through

the roof of the den and starting a wash.

Old or abandoned muskrat dens may cave in. Then it is usually a simple job, if done at once, to fill in the cavity and reseed to prevent washing. Since muskrats are especially attracted to ponds containing large amounts of muskrat food plants, eliminating these plants is good muskrat control. Plants most favored by muskrats are the starchy ones such as cattail. These plants should never be planted in fish ponds, because they interfere with fish production. The spike rush, leafy bulrush, and water willow recommended for ponds have little attraction for muskrats. Plant control is also good muskrat control.

Trapping with pinch-type lethal traps is the most efficient way of removing muskrats. If done during the open season, the pelts can be sold for a profit. However, if damage requires immediate action, a landowner should contact the local conservation officer about regulations for emergency out-of-season trapping.

Good pond construction is the best insurance against actual damage by muskrats. In all cases of muskrat damage that have come to our attention, there has never been a case of dam destruction where the following minimum standard specifications were met: dam with water face slope 3 to 1, outer face 2 to 1, width at top 8–12 feet, and freeboard 3 feet after settling, dam sodded and livestock kept off; spillway wide enough to carry off surplus water so it never rises more than 6 inches on the dam. These specifications are likely to agree with those of agricultural agencies.

When muskrats dig into dams, it is to make homes. The burrows start under water, then rise to a chamber hollowed out above water level, with from one to two feet of solid earth and sod above. The muskrats don't tunnel through the dam unless the water rises high enough to make them dig a new chamber, higher up. That is one reason for specifying high freeboard and a wide spill-

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Keeping Snakes Out of Buildings

Remove what attracts snakes. The most effective and lasting way to discourage snakes around a home, such as in the yard and garden, is to make the area unattractive to them. You can do this by removing their survival needs, especially shelter or hiding places.

During warm months, when snakes are active and when most people see them, they are attracted to cool, damp shelter. Remove cover such as boards lying on the ground, rock piles, and weedy growth near buildings. Check around cement walks or porches for cracks or holes that might provide an entrance to snakes for shelter. Repair or close these access points so they can't be used.

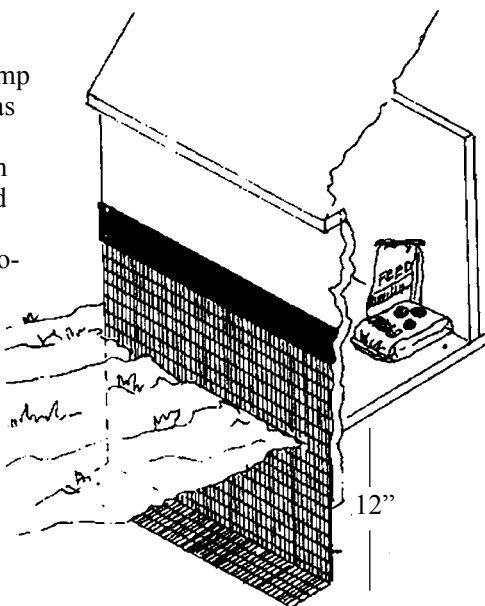
If you have a wood pile for a fireplace or stove, make the stack away from the house. Wood can be moved near the house as needed during colder months, when snakes aren't active. Building a rack to hold the wood pile at least 12 inches above the ground will discourage snakes because the wood (shelter) is separated from the cool,

moist soil.

Check the base of storage sheds to see if snakes might crawl beneath for cover. If so, close off access beneath the shed with packed soil or building materials such as metal or ¼-inch or smaller hardware cloth. To form a tight barrier against snakes, building materi-

als should be buried about six inches under the soil. Although some snakes can push through loose soil, they can't dig or go through hard soil because they have no digging adaptations such as legs or claws. Snakes will use holes made by mice or other rodents, so controlling these rodents may be needed in some situations. Often, removing snake shelter and hiding spots also removes the habitat of insects and rodents that are snake foods, further reducing the attractiveness of the area to snakes.

It's also a good idea to check around the house foundation for cracks or openings where a snake or other unwanted guests (such as mice) might enter. Close all openings larger than ¼ inch and caulk any gaps where surface wires or pipes enter. Holes or cracks in masonry foundations (poured concrete and concrete blocks or bricks) can be sealed with mortar. Holes in wooden buildings can be repaired with fine mesh hardware cloth and/or sheet metal.



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Upcoming Acreage Insights Clinics

"Acreage Insights — Rural Living Clinics" are designed to help acreage owners manage their rural living environment. This series of seminars are presented by University of Nebraska—Lincoln Extension at various locations in the state.

Pre-registration is \$10 per person and must be received three working-days before the program. Late registration is \$15 per person. For more information or to register, contact extension at 441-7180 or go to the Acreage & Small Farm Insights Web site at <http://acreage.unl.edu>.

The following seminars will be held in Lincoln at the Lancaster Extension Education Center, 444 Cherrycreek Road on Thursdays from 7–9 p.m.



Large Pond Maintenance • Aug. 11

If you have a body of water on your acreage larger than a backyard pool, you'll want to attend this clinic on pond maintenance. Expert Tadd Barrow, UNL Water Resource Specialist, will explain the ins and outs of keeping large ponds clean, healthy and a real asset to your acreage.



Septic Systems • Sept. 15

Have you ever wondered what happens to wastewater when you take a shower or flush the toilet? Maybe not — unless it's backed up into your house or surfaced in your yard. This clinic will cover:

- 1) What happens to wastewater when it goes down the drain
- 2) How your actions — operation (O) and maintenance (M) — affect your system's performance. Lincoln clinic will cover septic system and lagoon O and M.

Note: NebGuides will be available on design and installation, but these topics will not be addressed in the clinic.

Grapes • Oct. 13

Steve Gamet, UNL Viticulture Technician, will discuss topics such as variety selection, the types of fencing and equipment



needed for grapes, the economics of grape production, insect, disease and wildlife control for grapes, and the marketing of grapes to wineries. Steve will also answer your questions regarding grape production.

Woody Florals • Nov. 10

What are woody florals? Plants commonly grown in Nebraska with decorative stems, such as curly willow or redbud dogwood, that are harvested for use in decorative arrangements. Who buys them? Wholesale and retail florists. Can you really make a profit with these plants?

Yes, you can! Join us for this presentation by the Nebraska Woody Florals group to learn the basics of this acreage enterprise, including plant species, planting and growing requirements, and harvesting techniques. Marketing and sources of plant material will also be discussed.

