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Life in America
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It's a wild life



When I moved to the Adirondack Mountains last year, I knew that I'd be sharing my property with wildlife: chipmunks, squirrels, fox, raccoons, deer and other critters – some of whom I don't really want to know about. For instance, skunks. But a skunk is not something to be ignored. So, when I discovered one living beside my house, everyone told me, "Call Jim the trapper."

Jim showed up in his pick-up truck with a license plate that reads COYOTE. When I showed him the hole where I thought the skunk had taken up residence, he stroked his beard and looked skeptical. It might be difficult to trap, he told me, since this isn't the only entry (or exit) for him. But he proceeded to set up the trap, a metal cage that catches the animal without hurting it. He built a kind of makeshift tunnel outside the hole –

the skunk would smell the bait and the horrific-smelling liquid that Jim referred to as the lure and be led right into the trap. As one wall of the tunnel, he used a metal sign that he had brought along. It read "No Trespassing."

"Do you think that's smart, this "No Trespassing" sign?" I teased. "We *want* the skunk to go into the cage, right?" Jim looked at me briefly, then continued his work. "Skunks can't actually read," he said matter-of-factly. At this point, I thought that he must take me for a complete idiot. Or maybe he was just as much of a tease as I am. Turns out, fortunately, it was the latter.

I had never met a trapper before, and I was eager to learn. I started asking questions, and he seemed pleased that I was interested in the art of trapping – and not just some squeamish city-slicker who couldn't deal with wild animals living so close by.

Jim said that he's been trapping since he was a kid. His explanation of just how much he loves trapping was a gem: "Ever seen a dog hangin' out the car window, tongue a-dangling and ears pinned back by the wind? Is there any happier being than that? That's me when I'm trapping." It gets him up and out on cold winter mornings, he added. "I used to hunt. But when you hunt, you might wake up, look at the thermometer, and decide to go back to sleep. With trapping, you have to be out there every day, checking your traps. It wouldn't be humane to leave the animals in the trap any longer than necessary."



Jim explained that there are two kinds of trapping licenses: nuisance trapping and commercial trapping. "I guess all skunk trapping is nuisance trapping," I said. "They're certainly a big nuisance. And you don't see many women rushing to buy skunk coats."

But this wasn't always the case, according to Jim. Skunk used to be passed off as Alaskan sable and it was a prized fur – until the early 1950s, when the courts ruled that customers must be informed if something had skunk parts in it. That put a quick end to the skunk trade.

We then got onto the topic of beaver, of which we also have plenty. Every schoolchild here knows that the early American settlers were always out trapping beaver. I never really thought too much about what they did with it. But, of course, Jim knew. They shipped it to Europe, where it was turned into felt for hats, including the popular top hat. When silk hats came into vogue in the 19th century, it was very good news for the beavers. It was also good for the hatters, many of whom had become mad over time, poisoned by the mercury used in felt processing. Hence the term mad hatter.

Who would have thought that my encounter with Jim would be so educational? Now you want to know, did we catch the skunk? Well, no. But I did learn that skunks hibernate in the winter, so I'm not going to worry about it – until spring! And then I'll invite Jim back. I still have so much to learn.