

## Muskrats pose moral dilemma

By Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—At 6:05 a.m. on Monday morning as I lay in bed reading and not quite awake, Melissa shouted from the upstairs hall: “The muskrat’s crossing the pond!”

Paul Revere had just warned the local Minuteman.

I ran to a second-floor bedroom. I’d left my antique bolt-action rifle on the bed. It’s a German-made Mauser Modelo Argentino 1891 that’s chambered for a 7.65x53mm cartridge. (It resembles an old .30-caliber American deer rifle.)

Our black cat was sleeping next to the rifle, its head against the walnut stock. He hisses when he first sees me in the morning. He hissed.

This cat defines me either as his enemy or as his rubbing station. He hissed again as I grabbed the rifle.

I use the original V-sight rather than a high-powered scope...and not just because I’m too cheap to buy one. The open sight gives all varmints a better than 50-50 chance of laughing at me all the way home. I try to be fair in these matters.

I opened the window. From there I had clear sight of the far half of the pond. The first-floor roof blocked the other half.

I saw no movement in the water or on the banks.

Then I spotted a brown hump at the water’s edge on the dam. I waited.

Over the years, I’ve shot a number of muskrat-imitating mud humps. I have at least five confirmed kills. I’m told that local humps fear my presence.

Every spring, at least one muskrat couple shows up in the pond. They’re omnivores and particularly fond of cattails of which we have a growing unwanted population. Cattails crowd out other vegetation and turn ponds into unusable bogs. I don’t like cattails.

Muskrats burrow an underwater entrance to their den in the vulnerable fill of our dam. I noticed a fresh leak when I was cutting the grass on Saturday. They seem to tunnel in this bank either for the fun of it or to annoy me.

Left to themselves, muskrats would turn the dam into Swiss cheese and drain the pond. This would destroy their habitat. I don’t like muskrats.

I think muskrats ought to be sent back to the drawing board. Perhaps they could be reprogrammed to frack gas-bearing shale deposits.

After a couple of minutes, I saw the hump move. In my experience, mud humps stay put. I was not interested in shooting any species of moving mud hump, which I'm sure are on the federal endangered list.

The muskrat started swimming in a straight line across the pond at a consistent speed. It was traveling away from me.

To get a more secure shot, I rested the rifle on the window sill. But in this position, the first-floor roof blocked my sight line.

I was reasonably sure that Melissa would not appreciate her husband putting a bullet through our bathroom skylight. She's sticky about this sort of thing.

I raised the rifle without support and aimed for a spot where I thought the muskrat would cross. A moving shot was beyond me.

I'd learned to shoot stationary targets with a .22 rifle as a kid at summer camp. My mother sewed my four National Rifle Association patches on my favorite red jacket, which a year later she pitched into the "too-small" Goodwill bag. I've harbored ill will against Goodwill since.

I was kneeling, aiming, breathing slowly.

I was also naked.

(This is because I was in bed when Melissa sounded the alarm. I don't normally hunt muskrats without clothes—I mean normally *I* have clothes on when I hunt them, but they normally don't have clothes on when they're being hunted. I think I'm like most guys in this respect, but it's not something we talk about.)

The black cat saw the open window and me. He thought: New information!

He chose this moment to investigate unexplored territory down under, rubbing this way and that. Purring.

I suggest snipers in training should be cat-tested in this fashion.

How do I get into these situations?

I fired.

The cat hissed and ran.

This was a pretty good shot for me—about 200 feet at a small, moving target.

I was Melissa's hero for at least 30 seconds.

I shot the muskrat's mate after lunch.

I try to live and let live with wildlife. But I make exceptions to this general principle.

Exceptions are the bones of philosophy and the sinews of the law.

Having to handle exceptions always complicates complying with simple declarative precepts about what is right and what is wrong.

Consider the circumstances that modify the Commandment “Thou shalt not murder.” It’s sometimes presented as “Thou shalt not kill.”—a far broader prohibition and harder to follow.

The Old and New Testaments made exceptions for state-sponsored capital punishment as well as killing in self-defense and in war. Some denominations and individuals don’t believe in these exceptions, but most go along.

Where does that put turning off life-support technology in hopeless end-of-life situations in accord with the individual’s written instructions? What about killing in defense of another but not yourself?

I know a few individuals who refuse to take life of any kind on purpose. Some vegetarians, obviously, refuse to sustain themselves on the flesh of sentient creatures or eat eggs. Those standards are too high for me.

We’ve euthanized terminally ill dogs, cats and horses as mercy killings. Was that morally wrong?

When might an exception be allowed for theft? Stealing food or medical supplies to save a life? Stealing a weapon that’s about to be used in a crime against innocent people?

If the muskrats had free rein, it would cost about \$10,000 to reconstruct a ruined pond. And another \$10,000-plus a couple of years later to do it over again. And so on.

It’s arguable that I should solve this problem by giving up the pond. This would remove muskrats from my life. But then we would have no place to swim in the summer and sit in the evenings. I’m purchasing selfish comforts in muskrat coin.

I have resolved the question of muskrat murder in terms of my own comfort, convenience and cash. Such reasons, I admit, would embarrass me in any moral philosophy class, even a bad one.

The trouble with making small exceptions for such reasons is that it becomes increasingly easy to make larger exceptions for even less defensible reasons.

So here I perch on the horns of a dilemma of my own making. The horn I’ve chosen to bear my weight is less immediately pointy than the other. But I’m not sure it’s where I should be.

I wish I could run my life on simple rules that always apply.

And now the black cat approaches as I finish this column.

He hisses. He likes rubbing me the wrong way.  
I hiss back.  
That stops him.  
Perhaps he's serving as my conscience.  
Or maybe he just needs to be reprogrammed.

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