

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOR

The Deadly Weasel

NOW in midwinter is the time when the creatures still abroad in northern woods and fields are most rigorously tested for survival. Blizzards come without warning now, the wind-swirled snow burying partridgeberries and bitter-sweet and the seed-bearing tops of the meadow weeds, so that juncos and tree sparrows are faced with abrupt starvation. Sometimes the drifting whiteness lies so deep that even among the deer there are some which can no longer struggle through it, but can only stand motionless, imprisoned belly-deep, and wait quietly until hunger and cold bring oblivion. There are sudden downward plunges of the temperature now, taking the roosting crows unaware in their sleeping places among the hemlocks, and on a morning after some bitter, gale-swept night they may be found hanging head downward by their dark, crooked feet, lifeless — frozen grotesquely as they slept. None but the hardest and most watchful creatures of the outdoors can survive this season, this time

of snows and winds and icy coldness when, as the north-woods Indians like to put it, there is "Death, the dark mother, always gliding near on soft feet."

It is not only the elements that bring death now to so many inhabitants of the wilds. There are the preyings, as in any other season, of animal upon animal: fox on squirrel, owl on hare, hawk on scampering deer mouse. Particularly, there is abroad in the cold woods one predatory death-bringer from whose attack none but the largest animals, like the bear and lynx, are exempt, and whose toll of lives is scarcely smaller than the toll taken by freezing and starvation. It comes in white, and silently, like the great white enemy, the snow. It is an animal, this marauder, not much larger than a squirrel, but far fleet; and it is motivated by a blood hunger that sends it forth constantly to seek for victims. In the far northern part of its range men call it an ermine; elsewhere, they know it as a weasel. To grouse roosting during

these cold nights in low evergreen branches, to rabbits in their "forms" of snow among the underbrush, and to white-footed mice in their intricate tunnels underneath the drifts, it is a threat of death against which they must be incessantly wary. All the year round the weasel seeks their blood, creeping stealthily along the trail of their scent, watchful and forever hungry. But now in midwinter there is no foliage to hide them from those sharp preying eyes, and there is snow to hamper most of them in their flight, and the weasel is nearly invisible in the general whiteness. This is the peak-season in the weasel's year of killing.

For every creature under the sun there is a particular function in the natural scheme: for bees, the bearing of pollen for the fertilization of plants and trees; for earthworms, the aerating of the soil to make it fecund; for crabs and crawfish, the scavenging of sea and stream bottoms. It is the grim and singular function of a weasel simply to kill . . . to carry the principle of carnivorousness to its maximum development. Save for the first few weeks of its life, when it is still blind and helpless in its nest in a hollow log or deserted woodchuck burrow, and for those two or three times a year when, if

female, it is preoccupied with the tending of its own litters of six or eight young weasels, its days are wholly given over to ceaseless slaughter among the small mammals and birds of its environment. The weasel has an unappeasable lust for prey, an insatiable appetite for fresh, hot blood. Its destiny is to serve — like epidemic plagues, and parasites, and a variety of other death-bringing forces — to thin out the populace of wild creatures, to keep the mice from becoming too many and the cottontails from too far exceeding their optimum number.

For the pursuit of this bloody destiny it is admirably equipped. It has a long, thin body, almost worm-like, sixteen or seventeen inches in length including the furry tail. Short, powerful legs allow the body to be flattened concealingly against the earth as the weasel goes creeping forth on its endless search for blood. On the soles of the feet there is a covering of hair whereby the animal's weight can be sustained on snow surfaces which may not support fleeing victims. The flat-crowned, triangular head is joined to the long, thin neck in such fashion that it can be held at right angles to it; the weasel can halt in its tracks, rearing up, and sway its narrow head

from side to side, testing the scent of the air, in the same pose that a snake adopts when it is endeavoring to locate with precision the hiding place of a nearby frog. The weasel's teeth are exquisitely sharp, and the great muscles of its flesh-hungry little jaws form a bunching mass that entirely covers the sides of the narrow skull. The whole body has such muscular strength and suppleness that the slayer can turn and twist to attack its prey effectively from any angle, and the nostrils in its sharp-pointed little snout are keen enough to catch the subtlest scent of game. The weasel has sharp eyes — sharp enough to see a tiny stirring in the snow, where the deer mice are tunneling under it to forage for nuts and seeds — and its rounded, furry little ears can hear the movement of any but the wariest and softest-treading creatures.

In every detail of anatomy and sense-endowment the weasel is equipped for following successfully its bloody role, and it has as well the equipment of protective coloration: in summer, earth-brown upper parts that permit it to blend concealingly with the color of the ground and the fallen pine-needles and last autumn's withered leaves; in winter — in the northern part of its range — a uniform whiteness

except for a tiny black tipping of its tail. In midwinter now the weasel can steal through the deep drifted woods, moving soundlessly across the crust on its hairy-soled feet and sniffing the frosty air for a scent of prey, in almost complete invisibility except perhaps to a sharp-eyed hawk hovering directly overhead.

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The weasel hunts both by night and by day, but it is in the darkness that it does its deadliest work. Moving swiftly, nervously, its lean muzzle lifted in the frosty moonlight to catch scents, it finds out the places where the grouse and pheasants are roosting asleep, or raids sometimes one of man's poultry-yards into which it can insert its wriggling, vermiform body through an interstice. The marauder closes its jaws on its victim's throat, or the back of the neck, so that the killing may be instantaneous and cause no outcry to rouse the other members of the flock; for the weasel is not content with a single victim. If it can, it kills a dozen or twenty or thirty — sometimes even as many as forty fowl in quick soundless succession. It does not generally devour the prey it slaughters. It makes only a

neat incision in the flesh and drinks the warm blood. Sometimes, if very hungry, it cuts with its sharp-pointed little teeth a small hole in the skull, and sucks out the soft brains as the yolk might besucked out of an egg.

When its butchery has been done and its blood hunger is momentarily appeased, the weasel withdraws as stealthily as it came, across the snow, and in a quiet place in the darkness licks away the blood from its white fur and sucks its small paws clean, for it is fastidious as a cat.

Commoner victims than sleeping fowl are rabbits and rats and mice and squirrels. These are the weasel's habitual prey, and in hunting them the killer is fearless and implacable. As it pursues a running rabbit, it moves across the snow in a series of long, gliding leaps, hurling its thin body forward almost in the manner of a lunging snake. It holds to the pursuit in the face of whatever obstacle or deterrent, racing even through water if need be, until at last the exhausted rabbit bogs down in some deep drift and the teeth of the weasel snap its spine. Rushing after a squirrel, the weasel undertakes even to climb trees, and in chase of the deer mice it forces its lithe body into their tiniest tunnels. The weasel is gripped by a kind of

frenzy of blood lust, a fury of appetite that makes it heedless of fatigue or danger. Even when, as sometimes happens, the weasel's loping pursuit of its prey is interrupted by the most formidable of all creatures, Man, the killer is not deterred. It faces this towering opponent without terror, giving off in its fury a musky stench that is the odor of weasel anger, and if resolutely balked it flies at the throat of the man creature as fiercely and fearlessly as at the gullet of a mouse or a quail. It has an insistent, imperious hungering for blood, and it will not be denied.

So enormous is a weasel's appetite, so single-minded its following of its carnivorous destiny, that the small creatures of the woods would soon be decimated if the weasel were not itself preyed on by enemies. The great horned owl is such an enemy; so are the foxes and lynxes and sometimes the martens. All these are big enough and adroit enough to kill a weasel. But they cannot often kill it with one bite or blow. They cannot often kill it until it has writhed its tough, sinuous body in a final death-twist, and snapped its powerful little jaws one last time, tellingly. A weasel customarily dies as it has lived, fearless and furious and with the taste of hot blood in its gullet.

THE LIBRARY

Quincy Howe and How To Understand Him

THE little book here under review ¹ is called *The News and How to Understand It*. Could anyone ask for a more artless title? The modest purpose of the volume, the jacket flap explains, "is to help you understand what is happening in the world." The author's Foreword confirms that this is merely one more "how" book — "to show you how you can get more pleasure and profit from following the news." The public-spirited house of Simon & Schuster has published any number of elementary texts of the self-help and self-improvement kind, from how to plant gardens to how to play poker, and here is another in the series. A book with such a label would be picked up just as unsuspectingly by a high school freshman or a William Allen White.

But author and publishers are altogether too modest. Will White would drop it like a hot potato. Personally I am not sure what kind of vegetable it is, but I can attest

that it's hot. The guileless title covers a deft political tract — one of the most provocative and provoking in this most forensic of literary seasons. It is a "how" book all right — a Quincy Howe book, and hence as charming, testy, mock-naïve and purposeful as everything he writes. Several years ago he composed a book demonstrating that *England Expects Every American To Do His Duty*. The present little treatise on current news in the papers, on the air and in the magazines demonstrates that every American — well, nearly every American — is living up to England's expectations.

The amusing pretense that the volume aims to teach you how to read and relish the news may be smiled away as a cute conceit. True, Mr. Howe does offer a round dozen rules for reading and listening, but they are so elementary he can scarcely have written the book for their sake. Anyone sufficiently literate to buy or borrow such a book and read it as far as the last chapter, where the rules are re-

¹ *The News and How To Understand It*, by Quincy Howe. \$2.00. Simon & Schuster.