

# The Importance of Wearing Fur

by Sheila Schmutz – Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Articles in *The Canadian Trapper* typically focus on trapping. However, this article is written about wearing fur caught by trappers and how I decided to become involved in that side of the trapping industry.

I have loved fur since I was a little girl, as well as animals. I was very lucky because my parents indulged me in this. I lived in towns or cities but was allowed to nurse baby birds in my bedroom and bring home tadpoles to mature into frogs. They also bought me a real fur hat, collar and muff for Christmas! They were white with little black “tail” trim, but I am pretty sure they were rabbit, dressed up to look like ermine. They



would not have been able to afford ermine, even if it had been available.

By the time I was a teenager I had graduated to raccoon. I had a red wool coat with a raccoon collar! When I grew out of that coat, I took off the collar and, with my mother’s help,

turned it into a bonnet-type hat that I wore for a few more years.

My mother had a mink boa, and my grandmother had one made from three martens complete with heads and tails, both of which I still cherish. I have been known to wear the mink boa, but not the marten piece.

I do not think young town and city kids have such experiences as readily today. There are still some rabbit-lined kids’ hats around but mostly there is fake fur, or no fur. However, kids often do have rabbit-trimmed moccasin slippers, and many young women wear rabbit-trimmed mukluks. But how easy is it for them to graduate to raccoon or beaver or coyote? Thanks to the wide availability of parkas such as those made by Canada Goose, a hood with a natural coyote ruff can be purchased in most Canadian cities today.

The availability of other clothing trimmed with wild fur has been minimal for several years. However, in the last two to three years the fashion industry has begun to show wild fur accessories more and more. Coyote and fox collars, often huge collars, have appeared



*Fur fashion by New York Furs, Toronto.*

on jackets and coats in many design houses. A few have models wearing trapper-type hats made entirely of coyote. Wild fur has also shown up on purses and even shoes, not just boots.

I did not see this trend coming though, and have not really seen it hit the pavement in Saskatoon. Coincidentally, I decided to begin making fur-trimmed accessories using wild Canadian fur a couple of years ago. I wanted the items to have a modern look and to be interesting, but also to be affordable. Wearing such fur items is possible for many more people than wearing a fur coat, warm as it is. Availability and affordability may mean that wearing fur becomes more widely accepted again.

When I embarked on what was meant to become my retirement hobby, I decided it was important that I learn as much about fur as possible from trapping through to garment making. The Saskatchewan Trappers Association holds many courses for new trappers, and I was fortunate to take one given by Wrangler Hamm in November 2014. He covered the basics about humane trapping. There were demos on skinning and boarding a coyote and muskrat, as well as the preparation of a beaver. He also included a bit about sending pelts for tanning and having hats or mittens made from them as an additional way to add value to trapping. I hope that is a part of all the trapper courses.


Coyote Communications archives.



*Sheila proudly wearing her rabbit fur hat, collar and muff. Sadly, her mother is furless in this 1956 photo.*

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My love of animals led me to a professional career studying them. It also helped me bond with my husband who is a wildlife biologist. Although my own career has primarily dealt with the genetics of domestic animals, such as cattle and dogs, in the later years my research has included some dog ancestors – wolves and coyotes (<http://homepage.usask.ca/~schmutz/WolfColorGenetics.html>). That led me to the chance to get behind the scenes at a fur auction. Trapper and trader friends and acquaintances had been supplying my samples of coyotes and wolves for several years but I reached a point in my research where I needed many wolf samples in a variety of coat colors.

Dave Bewick invited me to a NAFA auction in Toronto in February 2014 to make that possible. I could not believe how many beautiful pelts were there when I arrived on the first day of the sale. I think I decided that day that I had to be able to work with such pelts more, but just how that could happen took several more months of thinking.

I ordered some tanned fur online and purchased a few pelts from a Maverick Tannery booth at a powwow in Sask-

atoon. They stocked some garment tanned pelts, as well as doing taxidermy tanning in-house.

I also ordered a used fur sewing machine from Montreal. The salesperson kept asking me who was going to teach me how to operate it. Having sewn most of my own clothes, including coats since I was a teenager, I did not see this as a problem. Boy, was I wrong!

A fur sewing machine operates entirely differently than a normal sewing machine used to sew cloth, or even a heavier leather sewing machine. A fur sewing machine needle is horizontal and comes toward you as you sew. The fur is fed from beneath the working surface. However, I persisted and read what I could and watched YouTube videos. Gradually I was able to sew most of the fur I had purchased, except the beaver.

I have since learned that there are many different models of fur sewing machines and mine, a Bonis B, is good for fox, coyote, marten, etc., but not the heavier skinned fur like beaver.

I also cannot sew sheepskin with this model, but luckily that was never my intent. Therefore when I want to work with beaver, I sew by hand.



*A coyote fur-trimmed women's hat, a red fox fur collar on a brown wool Melton cape, and a brown wool vest with chevron strips of badger and skunk that were entered in the Saskatchewan Art Showcase of the Saskatoon Exhibition, under the 2016 theme "Mother Earth."*



I originally thought I would buy fur directly from trappers and have it tanned, so I purchased a fur buyer's license. But then I learned how long it takes to get back a small batch of fur, especially mixed species, from the tannery. My husband and I then took a trip to Winnipeg to buy tanned pelts. The two garment level tanneries still operating in Canada are in Winnipeg and Montreal, so that is why we headed to Winnipeg from Saskatoon. Our first trip was in late February and it was about -30 C. There were so many people wearing fur on the street that I felt like I was watching a fashion show! It helped reinforce my belief that availability of fur garments, and of fur cleaning, may be a key factor in how many people wear fur.

There are still furriers in operation in Winnipeg and they were both welcoming and helpful to me. I booked a visit ahead at International Fur Dressers & Dyers Ltd. Matthew Stepien gave me a lesson in wild fur buying which was fantastic. I also visited some of the boutiques at The Forks that stock home accessories made of fur, as well as fur hats, mitts, etc. Although pillows, throws, candleholders, etc., are not something I plan to make, it is clear there is a market for such items. Some people clearly crave having fur around but may not be ready to wear it.

Sewing with natural fur has become something I truly enjoy. I have been very lucky because there seems to be a group of people that enjoy wearing what I make. I had booths at three craft fairs in fall 2015 and have been accepted back at all of them for 2016. One of the bonuses of being at a craft fair is the joy of watching so many people's faces light up when they try on a fur-trimmed hat, even if they do not buy it. A fellow artisan said to me that mine was the happy booth. She said she often looked across the aisle and people were smiling, laughing, taking selfies, etc., as they chose a fur hat to try on.

Another plus for being at a craft fair is the instant feedback you get from people about what they like

and what fits and what does not. For a person who is a new artisan, this is very valuable. The younger the person, the more unusual the item they choose! I was so glad to see teenagers and university students buying fur-trimmed items.

I realize that many trappers think of fur-trimmed articles of clothing as a trapper hat and large gauntlets. I have decided not to make either of these items. Many people make fur trapper hats, and even some mass production still exists, so me making those would not offer people a new option. Fur gauntlets are fantastic on a snowmobile but are not that practical for everyday downtown wear to the office or to a university classroom. Those people are my target customers.

My articles are fur trimmed – not fully fur. They include hats for women and men, wool capes with detachable fur collars and wool vests with many different types of fur trim (<http://munster.sasktelwebsite.net/Fur.html>). The capes are sizeless so they make great gifts, and capes are very fashionable right now. Because I'm a trimmer, wild fur is perfect! Also, because the articles I make are fur-trimmed, they are more affordable than full fur items, which means that my customer base is larger. I have chosen *Wear Our Heritage* as my brand name because I want people to wear fur and be proud of our fur heritage!

In closing, I encourage more trappers to wear fur when they go to town, to meetings, or work booths about fur trapping. Promotion is often visual and if we want more



*A red fox and leather slide that can be worn with large women's scarves and a coyote and leather tie slide worn with a silk Western tie that can be worn on a men's corduroy or denim shirt – each making a subtle "I believe in wearing fur" statement.*

people to wear fur, then we should be setting an example, even by wearing a simple tie or scarf slide made with wild fur. Also, be ready to tell people where to buy what you are wearing or how to buy the fur to have it made.

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