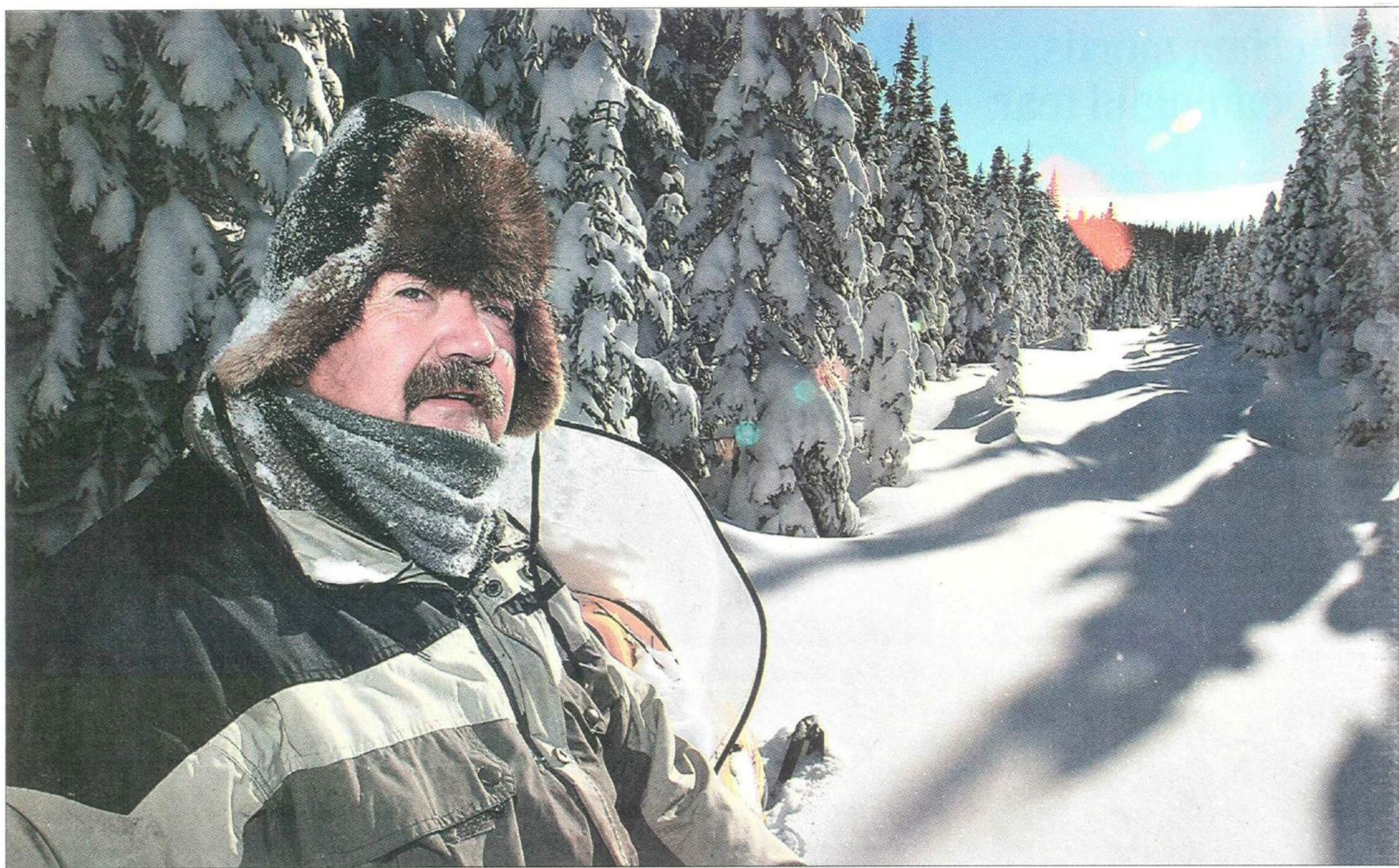


BACK TO THE LAND

"Trapping's a lot like hunting and fishing, but it's even better because you have to get a lot closer to the animal, to nature." LUCIEN GRAVEL

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PHOTOS: FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

Lucien Gravel, a police captain from Quebec City, takes a brief rest from checking his trapline in the Réserve faunique des Laurentides, about halfway between Quebec City and Chicoutimi.

GUARDIAN OF TRADITION

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

FOR THREE HOURS in the bitter cold, Lucien Gravel wove his snowmobile through a narrow trail in the heart of this boreal forest.

He stopped frequently for a minute or two, the time it took to wade into the nearby bush through waist-deep snow to check about 40 animal traps.

Baited with beaver meat and set mostly in low-lying branches of the firs, spruce and pines that dominate the landscape in the Réserve faunique des Laurentides, halfway between Quebec City and Chicoutimi, the devices were primed to catch one of the fiercest predators in Canada's northern forests: the marten.

Apart from a small bird and two red squirrels, which will be sold to a wholesaler in Quebec City for \$1.50 each, the burly Gravel came up empty-handed at most stops along his 12-kilometre trapline. Finally, on this last afternoon of the marten-trapping season, which ended Jan. 15, he emerged from the forest carrying the frozen, bent carcass of the small brown mammal, a close cousin of the weasel.

"Trapping's a lot like hunting and fishing," said Gravel, a Quebec City police captain and hobby trapper who also is president of the Fédération des trappeurs gestionnaires du Québec, which represents about 2,000 of the province's 8,000 trappers. "But it's even better because you have to get a lot closer to the animal, to nature."

While that might seem paradoxical to some — heretical to those who see trapping as senseless and cruel — it reflects the enduring appeal of an economic and social activity that is as old as Canada.

Four centuries after the fur trade drove and, in many ways, shaped the development of the New World, Canada continues to produce about 2 million pelts a year for the domestic and international fur markets. Used to make coats and an array of stylish garments — 80 per cent of which are manufactured in Montreal, Canada's fur capital — roughly half of those furs come from commercial farms. The rest are harvested from our forests, rivers and lakes and come mostly from muskrats, which account for 35 per cent of total wild fur; beavers, which make up 22 per cent of wild fur; and martens which contribute 17 per cent of wild fur.

Trappers like Gravel are the backbone of Quebec's wild-fur industry. Licensed and controlled by the province's ministry of natural resources, which is responsible for forests and wildlife, they are active in every region of the province, operating more than 2,000 seasonal traplines on registered territories that, for the most part, are set up on publicly owned land.

Gravel, a 51-year-old Chicoutimi native

who has hunted and fished since the age of 13, got his trapping licence six years ago.

"I wanted another arrow for my quiver," he quipped. "I'd always been attracted to the idea of trapping, so I thought I'd give it a try. And I'm glad I did because I love it."

Much of that pleasure, he said, comes from the natural beauty and convenient location of his trapping territory. Even in the dead of winter, the smell of pine is intoxicating. Visitors can't help but be seduced by the glistening shroud of snow and, at night far from the urban glow of Quebec City, a canopy of stars that seems to go on forever.

Located just off Highway 175 near the junction with Highway 169, it is one of approximately 120 trapping territories set up in the massive Laurentian wildlife reserve.

Like most trappers, Gravel won his territory in a government lottery soon after getting his licence — a terrific stroke of luck, he said, because only a handful of such good-quality territories become available each year, usually as a result of the death or disinterest of the rights holder. As long as he continues to pay the government's annual lease fee of \$150, he can enjoy exclusive access and use of the territory on a year-round basis.

And trapping, Gravel pointed out, is a year-round activity.

Outside of the trapping season, which runs from October through March, Gravel comes here several weekends a month to stake out appropriate sites, prepare his traps and cut the trails he uses in the win-

ter. During the trapping season, Gravel makes the trip every week on his days off.

Staying in the tiny, wood-stove-heated cabin he built at the edge of his territory several years ago, Gravel cruises his trapline regularly to check and reset traps.

Sometimes, like on this day, Gravel is rewarded with a catch.

Holding up the dead marten stuck in the quick-kill body grip trap, which strikes the back of the neck or behind the shoulder and snaps an animal's spine, Gravel was quick to point out that he only uses devices that respect his association's "code of honour," which calls on members to use the most humane and environmentally friendly trapping methods possible.

And Gravel does consider his hobby to be an honourable one. He sees himself and his fellow trappers as guardians of a proud Québécois tradition — one that is at risk of fading into the history books.

In addition to helping control populations of carnivorous predators like the marten, which preys on nesting birds, squirrels and other small mammals, Gravel said the presence of trappers helps dissuade poachers and provides understaffed wildlife officials with eyes and ears in isolated areas.

This trapping season, which he called "below average because of the unstable weather," Gravel caught a total of six martens, two lynx, four beavers (he usually gets a dozen) and his first wolf.

Together, those furs, which Gravel cleans and dries himself before selling them through Canada's monthly fur auctions or to licensed wholesale buyers, will fetch approximately \$1,000. While the sum is roughly one-third more than he would have received just a few years ago — thanks to the recent upswing in demand for wild Canadian furs from the United States and emerging markets in China and Russia — Gravel said his trapping revenues "don't come close" to covering his expenses.

The big money in the \$800-million Canadian fur industry, which employs about 65,000 people across the country, is in fur farming and the manufacture and retail of expensive handmade fur garments, Gravel said.

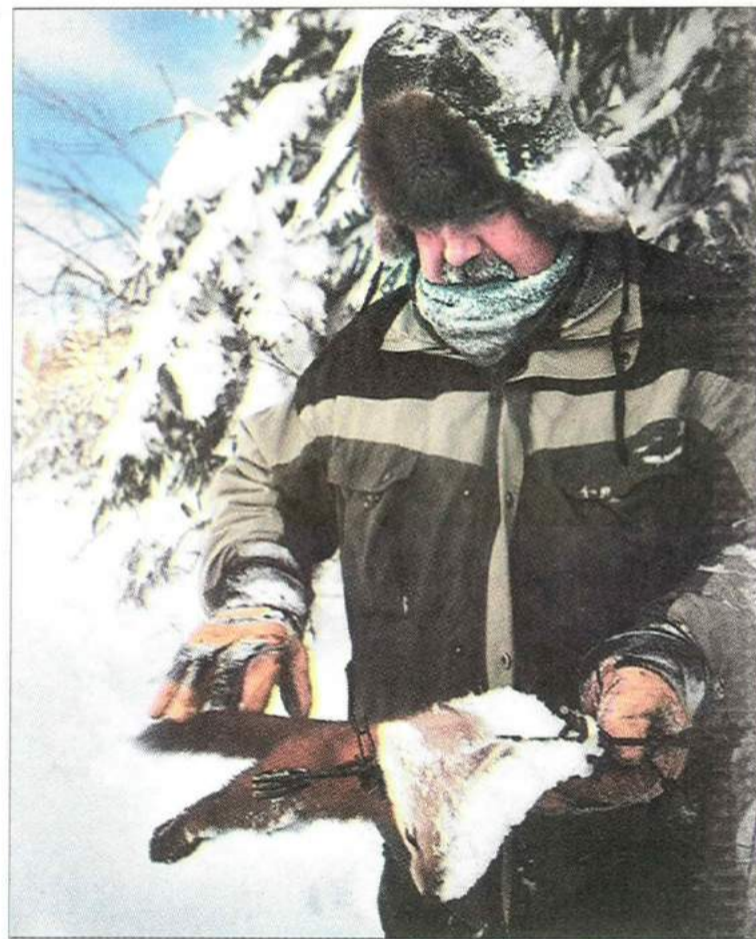
"Trapping is more of a hobby or a sport now than a way of life, like it used to be," Gravel said, adding that the majority of trappers in his organization are men with hunting backgrounds and steady, non-trapping related jobs.

"Nobody I know can make a living just from trapping."

So why does he do it?

Trapping, Gravel said over a lunch of real Lac St. Jean tourtière in his cabin, is a labour of love, a relaxing pastime that lets him get away from the noise and bustle of the city.

"There's no hurry involved with trapping. And it requires you to be direct contact with nature all year long, so you get a real feel for every season."



About 17 per cent of wild fur used commercially in Canada comes from martens like this one caught in a trap set by Lucien Gravel.

'Humane' traps fail to blunt opposition

Few industries in Canada are as controversial as the fur industry, and trapping in particular.

"It's simply not right to derive enjoyment from such a wanton form of cruelty," said Andrew Plumbly, a co-founder and volunteer with the Global Action Network, a Montreal-based animal rights group.

He said furs are "unnecessary" in an age when manmade fabrics with superior insulating properties are widely available.

Although body-gripping traps, like the ones advocated by the Fédération des trappeurs gestionnaires du Québec, result in almost instantaneous death — a big improvement over traditional snares and steel leg-hold traps that inflict painful injuries and result in long, drawn-out deaths — Plumbly said trapping is disruptive to animal populations and ecosystems. He said many non-target animals (like birds and squirrels) are often caught, while other species — including beavers, pine marten and wolverines — have been trapped to the point of near extinction.

Michel Huot disagrees. A biologist with the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources for the past 25 years, he sees trapping as the harvest of a renewable resource

that helps rather than hinders wildlife in the province.

"Trappers help to control and stabilize the populations of many carnivorous predators in our forests and around farms," Huot said. "That leads to a reduced mortality of other species of animals."

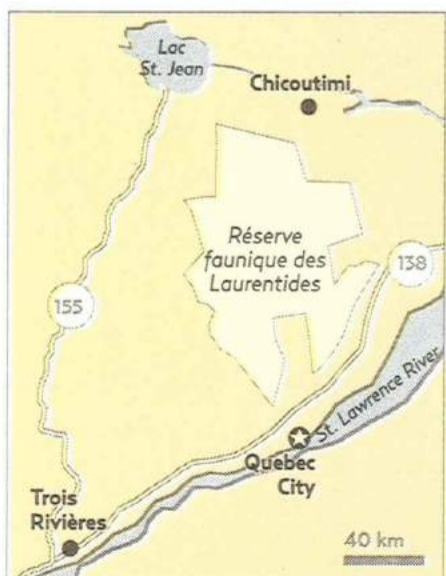
Plumbly called that argument "a very arrogant attitude. Nature is perfectly capable of taking care of itself. When humans intervene, the results can be disastrous."

According to Huot, Quebec trappers kill an average of 80,000 animals a year from seven species of the mustelidae family — marten, fishers, martens, otters, minks, weasels, skunks and wolverines — and three species of the canine family — foxes, coyotes and wolves.

"When you look at the size of the province and the numbers of each species, it's really not a lot," he said. Wildlife officials, he added, also consider trappers to be a positive presence in the bush, helping to keep poachers at bay in areas where they operate traplines.

"Sure, trapping looks bad," Huot said. "But you don't hear people complain when they use traps to catch rats or mice in their houses."

MARK CARDWELL



THE GAZETTE