In 1971-72 the value of Canadian fur production increased by 20% compared with the previous season, wildlife pelt values being 41% and farm pelts 1% higher. Ontario continues to lead the provinces and territories in fur production, accounting for 29.3% of the total value in the 1971-72 season compared with 28.4% in the previous season (Table 10.21). Increases were common to all provinces except Newfoundland and British Columbia.

Fur trapping. Ontario continued to be the most important producer of wildlife pelts, accounting in 1971-72 for 22.5% of the $18 million of furs produced on the trapline. Other major producers were Alberta (18.3%), Manitoba (14.5%), Quebec (10.7%) and Saskatchewan (11.5%). Although the numbers of all the important Canadian fur bearers are being well maintained, the size of the annual catch is affected by a number of factors not connected with the abundance or otherwise of the respective species. The most important of these factors is the market price of raw furs. In seasons of low prices trappers will, understandably, seek other employment and the fur bearers go unharvested.

The principal kinds of wild fur pelts taken, according to value, are beaver, muskrat, lynx, seal, and fox. These five kinds accounted for 80% of the total value of wild pelts produced in 1971-72, beaver alone accounting for 35%. The number of beaver pelts produced was slightly higher than in the previous year and the average value per pelt increased from $12.55 to $17.18 (Table 10.20).

Both the production and the average values of all but one (seal) of the important kinds of Canadian wild furs in 1971-72 were above the 1970-71 levels continuing the trend toward firming prices which developed at the end of the 1970-71 season. This stronger market with its accent on youth-oriented styling promises to stimulate demand for both the long-haired and short-haired furs.

The role of the fur fashion designer in first rousing interest, then transforming this interest into demand at the retail level is an important one, and the results may extend right back to the trapper in the form of higher prices for his pelts. One example of the influence of the fur stylist is the recent resurgence of muskrat. For many years the coming of fall meant the appearance of the ubiquitous muskrat coat, uniformly styled and brown-dyed to resemble mink. As a result of this over-exposure, as well as in deference to the trend toward slim-line wear, the popularity of muskrat fur declined sharply in the 1950s and 1960s. However, in recent years this fur, now available in attractively styled natural and dyed coats and jackets, has made a comeback and renewed popularity has brought about higher prices for muskrat pelts.

Fur farming. Mink remains by far the most important fur bearer raised on Canadian farms, this species accounting for over 99% of the value of the fur farm production. Chinchilla and nutria are also raised on farms in this country but because of the small numbers involved the collection of statistics on nutria and chinchilla has been discontinued.

In 1935 the Canadian mink ranching industry produced 30,558 pelts with an average value of $10.58 per pelt. At that time mink farmers were operating very much in the shadow of the larger silver fox industry. It was found, however, that mink adapted well to reproduction in captivity and pelt production increased steadily until the peak year of 1967 when the output reached 1,967,323 pelts. Mink are now raised in all provinces except Newfoundland, the principal producers in 1971 being Ontario (38.0%), British Columbia (19.1%), Quebec (10.2%), Alberta (10.2%) and Nova Scotia (9.7%).

Beginning in 1966, the industry went through a series of years when pelt prices were around or below the cost of production. This depressed market situation continued into the 1970 pelt crop year when the average pelt value was $9.65, the lowest price since 1942. This price is substantially below the cost of production and as a result the number of mink farms has continued to decline, from 1,017 in 1969 to 675 in 1971 (Table 10.22). Pelt production suffered in keeping with this decline, amounting to 1,155,020 pelts in 1971 for a value of $14.6 million compared with 1,778,737 pelts in 1969, valued at $18.7 million. As in the case of the wildlife furs, the mink market strengthened in the latter part of the 1970-71 marketing season.

Although the number of mink farms declined sharply a number of the farms that ceased operations were, under the tight market situation, marginal from point of view of the quality of pelts produced, over-high production costs, or other factors. The mink farmers who are still in business are highly skilled operators who produce some of the world's finest quality mink pelts. These producers are concentrating on economy of operation, coupled with production of top quality pelts.