

Dormouse hunting

Today I am going to talk about dormouse hunting. Dormouse hunting is very popular in Notranjska region simply because there live lots of dormice. Dormouse hunting also appears in Dolenjska region, Savinjska valley and in Kozjansko. These are all areas where a beech tree grows. A dormouse is a small grey animal with a long hairy tail, which lives in trees, in cavities, under the rocks and in the holes under the stumps. Its favourite food is fruit and beechnuts.

But we have to know something about the history of dormouse hunting if we want to understand today's customs and traditions.

Janez Vajkard Valvasor was the first who represented dormouse hunting in Slovenia.

Dormouse hunting was already present in Middle Ages. Serts were barred from catching a deer; they were only allowed to defend their cattle from bears and wolves. Consequently they were obligated to be wild hunters. Hunters who hunted dormice. Although later on they had to pay some taxes to their landlords for hunting dormice.

When Valvasor was in infancy he believed to the rumours that the devil grazes dormice every night. Peasants were assuring him of the devil with a whip cracking over dormice. The devil also marked his dormice with a tiny notch on one ear. In addition to this there was also a popular rumour, which said that devil, arrogated only spotty dormice to him. When hunters heard the click of a trap, they ran to the tree, took down the trap and saw a caught spotty dormouse. But suddenly they heard a voice from a forest, which said - give me my dormouse back, it's mine not yours! Hunters released the dormouse, which was still alive and ran rapidly to their homes. However, that kind of stories didn't bother people, so they have been hunting dormice until today, although not with such an enthusiasm and eagerness as they used to.

The beast, which runs like a devil can be caught in more ways. Female dormice with their progeny live mostly as I said before, in holes under the stumps and under the rocks. When males usually drone in beech trees cavities and on brunches. When the night falls dormice come out to feed them. They prefer fruit like pears and apples, but they like beechnuts, hazel nuts and acorns the most. An experienced hunter immediately knows, by the leftovers if there was a dormouse, a mouse or even a hedgehog on the tree. Therefore hunters set traps in the trees where dormice are present.

Hunters wait until the dormice get fat. That is in September and in October. In that time the hunting begins. A dormouse hunting is officially open from 25th of September to 15th of November.

Hunters hunt dormice in many ways with many different instruments.

Valvasor mentioned the simplest way. When he and his peasants went to woods one night, they saw a mob of dormice crawling on the ground. Then they took off their coats and boots and throw them on the ground. Dormice got in them so all the boots and coats were full of them. The peasants took them and kill them. That way of hunting is completely forgotten nowadays. But on the other hand people still hunt dormice with traps called samojstre, which were known also by Valvasor. In time Samojsre were slightly improved for the reason that as many dormice as possible could be caught. The most common traps like these consist of the wooden and steel part. When a dormouse comes into the trap in which there is a piece of food, the trap actuates, squeezes a dormouse's neck and a dormouse chokes. In some places hunters caught dormice with boxes and cans, which were set in front of the hole or the cavity, and they could catch more than 100 dormice per night. Therefore this way hunting was banned.

A real dormouse hunter has lots of traps. When he goes hunting he puts them in the large rucksack and take also an axe. When he gets into the forest he cleaves some sharp sticks. He sets a trap with them in front of a cavity or a hole. Sometimes it lasts the night that dormice get caught. Therefore people organize special nights called Polharska noč when they have a party and fun with music and dancing which usually ends with an abundance of drunk people lying under the trees and at the same time their traps are on the brunches. The most popular night is at Snežnik castle. The one who catches the biggest and the fattest dormouse is the winner of the night. The hunting is the most successful in warm bright nights. When gets really cold, dormice get into their cavities and sleep for even 7 months.

Now there appears a question what to do with caught dormice. People can make delicious soup called golaz, or they can taxidermy them. Or even warm and precious hats and coats can be made out of a dormouse skin Dormouse skin was very valuable and also exported to Netherlands, England and France.

A dormouse has more fat than meat. Dormouse fat was famous of its medical effects. It was sold even in pharmacies.

People have always hunted dormice not ony for fun but also for their own benefit. My personal opinion about that is that all should have its limits. Dormouse is a beautiful animal, but we cannot allow that becomes endangered.