

RAISES THOUSANDS OF TURTLES A YEAR

Iowan Runs World's Biggest "Turtle Farm"

"As far as I know, no one in the world raises more turtles than I do," says Fred Millard, Birmingham, Iowa, who claims to be the world's biggest turtle meat producer. He calls himself the "turtle king".

Millard raises and processes thousands of turtles a year, shipping the meat to distributors all over the U.S. He also sells turtle parts such as shells, skulls, legs, and foot bones that are made into buttons, dishes, necklaces, ornaments, etc. In fact, he has found a market for nearly every turtle part. "I don't throw anything away," he says.

Millard raises several varieties of turtles, including snapper, soft shell, alligator, red ear, and western paint. Only the snapper and soft shell turtles are used for meat. Alligator and red ear turtles are raised only for their shells. He sells the other turtles to distributors overseas. Western paint turtles go to the European pet market and soft shell turtles go to the Japanese meat market.

Turtle meat is low in cholesterol and appeals to a variety of tastes. A 10-lb. turtle produces about 5 lbs. of meat. There are seven types of meat on a typical turtle, and they resemble pork, beef, chicken, white fish, mutton, frog legs or alligator in taste.

Millard's ponds are 6 1/2 ft. deep and up to 100 ft. in diameter and are surrounded by fences to keep the turtles in. Underground pipes keep the ponds full of water. Millard keeps turtles that are ready to be butchered inside a pit. He drains the pit whenever he's ready to butcher.

Millard also buys turtles from area trappers for 60 cents a pound. Some of the 30,000 to 40,000 turtles hatched at his farm every year are turned back into the wild. "A lot of trappers end up selling me back turtles that I put in the wild," he says.



This snapper turtle weighed 62 lbs. when it died and is the world's record.

Although only 4 percent of turtle eggs will hatch in the wild, Millard says about 90% will produce a turtle on his farm.

Turtles are fattened on a diet of catfish food, ground turtle parts, beaver meat, fish carcasses, and vegetables such as lettuce, crabs, apples, etc. They grow 3 1/2 lbs. a year after the first year, cost 22 1/2 cents a pound to raise, and are slaughtered when they reach 10 to 12 lbs.

Turtles hibernate underground during winter beneath railroad tie embankments built into the banks of the ponds.

Millard sells turtle meat for about \$2.75 a pound and retailers typically double the price. He sells deboned meat for \$4.75 a pound. Some of the meat is shipped overnight via United Parcel Service. A load of turtle meat and other byproducts are flown out of Des Moines on a regular basis.

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Metker builds a new cabin each year out of 40 to 50 cords of wood.

LOOKS REAL BUT IS JUST FOR LOOKS

He Builds "Houses" Out Of Firewood

About seven years ago, Joe Metker decided to make a small building out of stacked firewood - not to live in, but to draw atten-

tion to his firewood cutting business. His first effort was so popular with customers that every year since then he and his crew



Kids' entertainment center includes these pool tables and arcade games.

"IT LET US DIVERSIFY OUTSIDE AGRICULTURE WITHOUT SPENDING A LOT OF MONEY"

Ranch Family Buys Kids' Arcade Center

Most farmers or ranchers who diversify their operations usually add a livestock enterprise or grow specialty crops. However, rancher Jerry Doan, McKenzie, N. Dak., decided he wanted to diversify outside agriculture. So he and his wife Renae bought a bankrupt arcade in Bismarck, 25 miles away, and remodeled it. It's now a successful kids' entertainment center complete with bumper cars, arcade games, and even special rooms for birthday parties.

"We had to learn everything from scratch. A lot of people didn't think we'd make it," says Doan, who named the arcade "Snoopers" - the nickname of his 11-year-old son Jay. "We wanted to diversify beyond our cow-calf operation. However, we wanted a business that we could get into without spending a lot of money so that if we failed, it wouldn't bring the ranch down. We looked at a lot of different businesses including restaurant franchises, retail clothing shops, etc. But they all cost too much to start up."

They bought the bankrupt arcade at a liquidation auction for less than \$10,000. "The building had been run into the ground and was in terrible disrepair," says Doan. "It had a bad reputation and needed a whole new look, theme, and name. We spent \$5,000 to \$10,000 to clean and remodel it. The

bumper cars had to be taken apart and overhauled, and we had to buy a lot of arcade games. Some artistic friends put caricatures on the walls, using neon colors to cheer the place up.

"The special room for holding birthday parties is really popular - on a good Saturday we can host up to 12 parties. We offer party packages complete with balloons, games, and yogurt birthday cakes."

Renae is the manager. The Doans also hired a full-time assistant manager and three other employees. Their three teenaged children also help out. "It instills business sense in the children," says Doan.

During the school year, the building opens at 3 p.m. and closes at 10 p.m. Soft drinks, hot dogs, and other snacks are available. Admission is \$3.75 per person (\$1 for adults) and most of the arcade games are free. 4-H club members get a discount.

"The key is to find a 'turnaround' business that's in trouble because of management mistakes but that still has potential. If you can find a down and out business, you won't have to put so much money out front," notes Doan.

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have built a new "firewood cabin", each one more sophisticated than the last.

The cabins are made out of 40 to 50 cords of split wood. Metker comes up with the design and a crew of college kids puts it together. All of the firewood from each cabin is eventually sold, making room for next year's model.

"It's a lot like building a house out of Lincoln logs as a kid. I try to add a few new touches every year. It's kind of fun to see what you can think of next.

"People come from all over the county to see the cabins. In fact, some out-of-state customers tell us they buy their wood here each year just to see what we've come up with.

"Each cabin takes only a day or two to

construct and about three days to landscape. We usually put up the cabin in April. We sell all the firewood that's stacked outside the house first. Then we sell firewood from the building itself, cord by cord, until the last piece of wood is gone. That usually happens by mid-February, and then it's time to design the next project."

"People can't seem to tell that it isn't a livable house," says Metker. "A woman stopped by one morning and asked if she could rent it. I didn't know what to tell her, so I said I didn't have the right zoning to rent a home and she left."

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