RAGNAR'S TEN BEST TRAPS

And A Few Others That Are Damn Good, Too

Ragnar Benson

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Direct inquiries and/or orders to the above address.

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Introduction

Running a trap line is incredibly hard work. Yet for a lot of farm kids like myself raised in rural America during the Thirties and Forties, it was the only winter source of hard dollars.

My brothers and I had a line that eventually ended up being over ten miles long. It took at least one of us from right after we got done feeding the sows and filling the hay bunker in the morning till well after dark to look at every set. But if Dad had more work for us to do on the farm, we skipped some of the sets.

Dad was reasonable about our trapping, though. The fifteen or so dollars we made a week had an almost unbelievable impact on our total family well-being.

At first light, I would saddle up. Everybody has a different system. I carried a short three-quarter length Hudson Bay axe, a wading pole, and a four-peck pack basket. Instead of taking off my hip boots when I ran the line through the woods, I just left them on and turned them down. That way I didn't have to carry around the extra weight of my leather boots. It's a tough way to make a few bucks, but we didn't know of anything better in those days.

One particular day, I had been checking the trap line in and out of the creek and through the swamp and the woods since first light. After ten hours of foot-freezing trudging

An old, old picture of my brother and I with the first red fox I ever trapped. The pleasure was purely psychological, having outsmarted one of the area's really crafty critters. At the time, longhaired furs were not popular. I got $1.25 for the hide.

with a pack now filled with rats, a couple of coons, and an opossum, I was finally headed back to the house. It would be completely dark in about ten minutes.

It was the time of short-fur critters. Fox, skunk, and coyote didn't sell worth a damn. Beaver and muskrats did OK, but the real money-makers were mink. I hadn't, up to that time, ever personally caught one of the elusive brown critters. My brother had. Although I definitely knew how, I had never been lucky enough to nail a mink in one of my very own sets.

People in good physical condition used to hard physical labor develop a kind of reserve second wind. Late in the day with the end in sight, they actually pick up the pace. I've seen this myself many times: lumberjacks in Washington State, kids bucking hay in the withering sun in Illinois, horse wranglers in Wyoming, and Rhodesians on patrol on the Zambezi River. As I headed home, I picked up the pace, cutting across a shallow little creek that led past the north pasture

field to our last line shack. The line shack was about a third of a mile from the big barn. Sometimes Dad or my brothers watched for me from the granary window as I came in at dusk. By today's standards, it was god-awful rough duty for a kid not even twelve years old.

A couple of days previous, I had made a set using an old, weak, leftover Number 1 long-spring trap under a big, old tilted flagstone. One of my brothers had brazed some nails on the trap for teeth. It sounds pretty makeshift, but at the time I thought it was first-rate. The water had washed away a big, dark tunnel under the rock. Ideal place for a bait set, I thought.

At the time, all I had left were a few bobwhite feathers and some sardine gravy in the bottom of one of those odd oval cans. I usually carried a few tins of cheap Norwegian sardines and either ate them for lunch or used them for bait. In this case, I did both.

Using a little stick for a scoop, I had dribbled the last of the gravy into the back of the hole. Then I threw in the quail feathers. The bait combination sounds as though I expected the mink to think a quail had caught and eaten a fish there.

Perhaps sixty meters from the set, I headed down the steep bank, intent on crossing the creek and walking to the flat stone in the water, where I had my little trap guarding the odd bait. I never made it.

A very heavy, ominous snakelike hiss stopped me cold in my tracks. It was a huge brown mink, caught by the front foot and madder than hell. The critter was so large, I later figured the only reason I still had him was because the trap had a drag and not a stake and because of the nail teeth.

Those were our prepistol days. As a result, because of the weight, I sometimes didn't carry a rifle. Unfortunately, this was one of those days. Under similar circumstances I would usually brain the critter with my axe, a good way to knock it out of the trap. Not something I was going to try this time.

So I ran for it. I ran more than a quarter of a mile to the cabin where I knew one of my brothers kept his Stevens Little Scout. One of my brothers saw me from the barn and knew something was up. He hollered to Dad.

Our barn where I lived during the summer when I was a kid. A small creek runs past the large cottonwood. We trapped the creek west to a river, then to a large bayou, and then through a hardwood forest back to the home place.

Running with the heavy pack nearly killed me. I threw it off at the shack, grabbed the little .22 single shot and three rounds of ammo, and headed back to the trap. My brothers and even Dad came running from the barn.

I stopped about twenty meters from the mink. It humped up defiantly and screamed. We used standard-velocity shorts to shoot game in traps. I drew a bead at its head, squeezed the trigger, and acquired my first mink.

About three weeks later, we sold it for $16.50, which I figured was just about all the money in the whole world. It was a time in my life when the best I could possibly hope for was $5.00 for working from 9:00 p.m. till 3:30 a.m. catching and loading chickens.

However, you won't find that famous old flagstone set among the traps I write about in this book. The best trap sets, in my opinion, are ones that consistently produce good results. As you will find out as you read this book, good results can be defined in a number of different ways. The important thing is that good results will replicate themselves

again and again wherever the trap is used. It would be ridiculous for me to recommend that you go out and look for flat rocks under which to set home-modified steel traps. On the other hand, that old set is one that I still remember most vividly.

There is a tank trap that I used in southern Sudan which, like the flagstone set, I have a lot of nostalgia for. However, it can never be duplicated. In that regard, it isn't a particularly good trap for people to know about.

Other unique traps like these are the icebox set that I mention in *Survival Poaching* and the moose-snare trail set from *Live Off the Land in the City and Country*. If you want trap concepts and ideas, read these two books.

This manual is about little-known traps. Traps that are relatively easy to build and set and are consistent producers even when used in the far-flung corners of the world. Traps that are easy to maintain and will work on a variety of different animals. I have also included a chapter on baits. These are baits that are outstanding even in a worldwide context. Survivors and paramilitarists should know about them.

The following are my favorite traps, collected from over sixty years of experience in the bush. I hope you enjoy reading about them and have good success using them.

PART 1

The Ten Best

1. Bait

Good trappers know how to use bait. This includes not using bait when that's the best alternative as well as taking advantage of a situation where animals are attracted to a place, without actually using a baited set.

In this latter case, I am referring to the fact that in spring, deer will come to a salt lick and in the fall to an apple tree. Squirrels will travel miles to visit a ripe hickory nut tree, and bears will sell their souls for oats in the milk stage. The critters are attracted to an area and the trapper is smart enough to know why. It's a matter of identifying what is attracting the animals and then setting a trap that will catch the critter while its mind is on other things. This may sound simple, but many trappers I have met have never figured this part of the program out.

Bait, with a couple of notable exceptions, should be native to the area in which the trap is set. And don't mix up sets that should be baited with sets that are basically run sets. Run sets rely on the fact that game use a regular path.

Once when we were kids, I spotted a big old mink track along the river at a place where the water had washed under the bank. The water had eroded away all the soil, but left the sod layer on top. After a couple of months, the grass slumped down, breaking off at the new water's edge. A crack, perhaps sixty meters long and twenty-five centimeters deep, ran along the creek where the sod had split away from the high bank.

I saw the mink track after a spring flood swept the area clean. Later in fall, we decided to put a trap in the V-gully and see how it worked. My plan was to wade to the creek bank and carefully dig a clean, deodorized small trap in the crack. By placing a couple of sticks in the path, I hoped to get the critter to jump into the trap.

My brother thought we should put a small fish nearby on the bank to attract the critter. I thought that that would distract the mink. We got into a hell of a brouhaha about that set. Big brother was bigger, older, and had caught more mink than I, so I agreed. However, he didn't come when I made the set and I forgot the fish.

Four days later, the mink jumped into the trap with both front legs. It pulled itself, the trap, and the drag down to the creek and then drowned. It took maybe ten minutes to dredge it up with my Hudson Bay axe. This was not a bait set and never would be. At best, the mink would have ignored the fish. At worst, the fish might have alerted the critter. That old mink was using the path for reasons other than trying to find something to eat.

Good baits are usually the same thing the critter would like to find on its own roaming around the country. In the Midwest, fox, mink, and coons are suckers for a bit of pheasant guts hashed in with a bunch of feathers. Farther north, grouse guts work better. In the South, try quail.

If the critter is working an area for something like sweet corn, as in the case of fall coons, it usually works to take some of these kinds of groceries and move them closer to the animal's living area along with a trap or two. On the other hand, don't expect to buy an ear of corn in the Safeway and use it to bait coons in the middle of winter.

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule. Through the years, I have found that sardine oil left over in the can after you have lunched on the fish works fairly well on carnivores. Mink, coons, marten, fox, and skunk are some of the animals that will always come over to look if you put a teaspoon of sardine oil out for them. Another reasonably good, non-standard bait is peanut butter and even better, honey.

Honey is, of course, native to a lot of areas in the U.S.

A lot of animals like it and will come after a properly presented honey bait. I found this out by accident quite a number of years ago when I spilled a few scraps of comb honey in a dying campfire. By morning, the critters had just about carried my whole firebox away.

The rule when using bait is either a whole lot or very, very little. A dead steer or horse, for instance, makes a wonderful bait for coyotes. However, ten handfuls of grouse feathers will just make them suspicious. It's best, in my opinion, to have the critter either search around for the bait or lose all fear because the bait is so overwhelming.

Bait won't make up for an otherwise sloppy set. If you don't know how to set a trap without leaving a scent or leaving the ground looking like you found it, the best bait in the world won't help.

Don't overlook the attraction of live bait. The Africans I worked with in Kenya and Somalia tied out goats to attract leopards. That worked OK, but a live dog worked far better. It was almost as if the leopard was in heat, it simply could not leave the dog alone.

In North America, I have used a live mouse—explained elsewhere in this book—a live chicken, and a live quail as bait. I have baited a trap by tying the bird's foot with a piece of string.

The set will attract critters easily enough, but getting them to put their foot in the trap is something else. Often they will come to the set, grab the bird, and make off with it without getting near the trap. Sometimes the bird has even gotten in my trap.

Down South, I have seen numerous otter and mink caught around live fish boxes. In the Midwest, a farmer's chicken house will eventually attract every weasel in the area even if the hens have been gone for years.

My success with scents has been mixed. This is true, I guess, because the relationship between attracting the critter and the scent is tenuous. One never really knows if that's why the critter showed up, or if it was for some other reason.

Besides that, it's tough to put the scent out without leaving human scent, thus undoing what you are trying to accom-

plish. I used to use an eye dropper, but most scent is too lumpy. Dipping a stick in the bottle leaves human smell from your fingers on the stick and isn't a viable alternative. The best, but not good, bet is to pour the scent on the set. It will not be properly mixed and you will use too much, but it's the only alternative.

I have had only limited success using artificial devices to attract furbearers. The one bad example that comes to mind is setting out a shiny piece of tinfoil in the hope that a curious coon will come over and step in the trap. I tried this set on and off for years and years and never caught a single coon.

Another idea that really has me puzzled is the wing-on-a-string gambit for bobcats. The idea is to hang a bird wing on a string from a tree limb so that passing cats will come over to inspect it and step in the trap. I have never got this idea to work, not even once. My brother has tried it in Canada and has had similar success.

Sometimes some pretty weird baits will work. In the western U.S. where I live now, coyotes are absolute suckers for house cats. I set them out live or dead with pretty similar results. Old tomcats especially will eventually attract every coyote in the region.

Still, my advice to the novice trapper is not to try and shortcut the procedure. Carefully look around to see what the carnivores are eating out in the wild. If possible, help a fellow trapper skin his catch. Check out the stomach contents to see what information you can pick up. Most of the time the critter's stomach will be empty. Now and then, however, you will hit pay dirt and pick up a valuable bit of information.

Another way of checking diets is to carefully look at animal droppings. Sometimes they will yield some good clues. Most trappers are probably like me, however; I have a hell of a time telling mouse hair from rabbit fur in coyote droppings.

Beyond these tricks, it's back to assessing the bird and mouse populations as well as looking for seasonal fruits, vegetables, and nuts.

2. Drain Tile Set

Farmers are replacing the old, traditional clay drain tiles that for so many years carried excess water off their fields with new plastic drain field pipes. Friends in the business who are shrewd about such things tell me that the switch makes economic sense and is probably the wave of the future.

Perhaps I am wrong, but I have never been able to catch the wide variety of animals at the entrance to a plastic drain that I can catch in the mouth of an old-fashioned clay type. It concerns me that the few farm boys who are left are going to be deprived of yet another opportunity to participate in what is a rapidly disappearing culture.

Through the years, I have caught a truly awesome array of different critters in the mouths of field drains. If the drain is running a bit of water into a creek or flowing ditch, usually you can find the traditional "Big Three": muskrat, mink, and coons. Yet I have managed to catch skunks, gray fox, opossums, nutria, barn rats, and even woodchucks and armadillos in wet tile sets.

Dry sets aren't as productive as tiles with some water flowing in them, but under some circumstances it is possible to catch most of the water critters as well as weasels, opossums, rabbits, squirrels, an occasional red fox, cats if there are any around, and even badgers.

Fox, raccoons, and muskrats, among others, are attracted to old drain tiles. Trappers can take advantage of this characteristic and really stack up on the pelts.

One of the best sets for badger I ever used was a variation of the drain tile set. We were running a line in north central Nevada into the Owyhee Mountains. This was only a few years back when prime Nevada coyote hides hit $110 and badger hides were $35. Mostly we ran a car line in the desert and the foothills. I kept it for about a month and a half till the snow got too heavy and I agreed to take another overseas job.

The badgers hadn't been trapped in that area for dozens of years, if ever. It was a good money-making plan while it lasted.

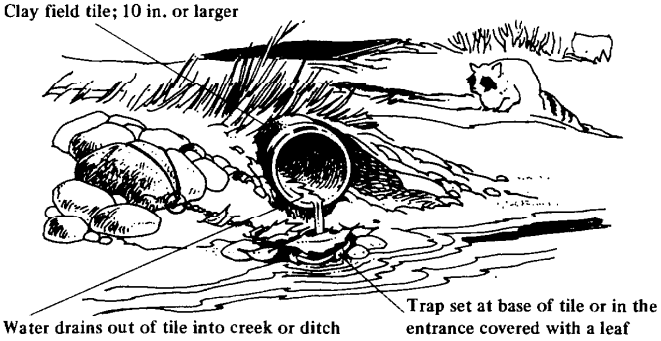
Readers who have run a line for badgers know that it isn't particularly difficult to get one to put its foot in a trap if they haven't gone into hibernation. The tough part is keeping them there. A badger can dig out forty fence posts in one night, if it sets its mind to it.

We solved part of the problem by putting a Number 3 jump trap in every road culvert we could find along our line. Instead of staking the trap, which I always think is a bad idea anyway, we used fairly large (75 cm. or so) chunks of angle or channel iron for drags. Most tile sets don't work a whole lot better with bait; road culverts in this situation were the exception. We baited with small handfuls of hashed-up jackrabbit and/or prairie chicken feathers and guts.

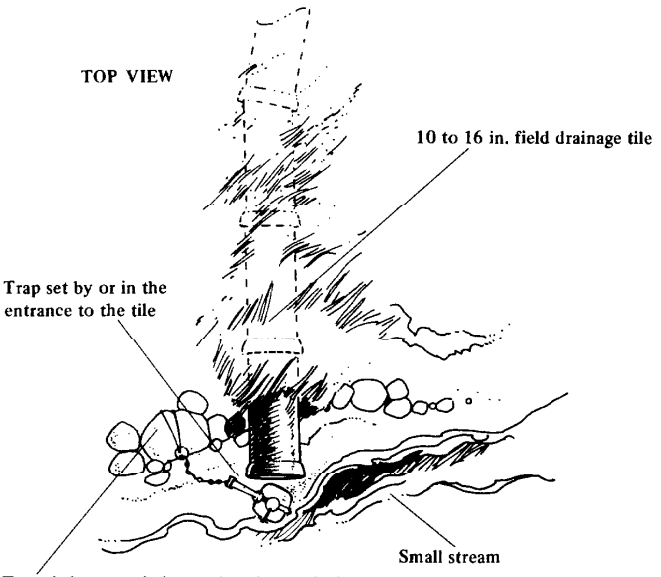
The results were dynamite. Every badger in the area seemed to want to stand in line to put its foot in our traps. The badgers didn't seem to care about the smell of steel around the metal culverts. Invariably, the trapped badger tried to escape into the culvert, but of course it couldn't dig through the pipe. Only one in five took off across the desert and even these guys didn't get far.

All of the traps were easy to check and rebait from our truck. And using a drag with a covered trap did not attract trap thieves, hawks, or eagles. About the only precaution we took was to check the traps on the more heavily traveled roads early in the morning. I am an early riser by nature, so often we ran the line from 4:00 a.m. till about 10:00 a.m. It was nice to be back at the barn by noon to start skinning the catch.

FRONT VIEW



TOP VIEW



Drain tiles or, for that matter, road tiles work best when they are at least ten inches (25 cm.) or larger. Definitely the best combination is a twelve-inch (30 cm.) tile running back for a kilometer or two with a dribble of water flowing in it during trapping season. Running water kills the scent on the trap and attracts most animals. I realize that skunks, for instance, are not particularly enamored with getting their feet wet, but they will to get into a drain tile.

As kids on the farm, we trapped every tile in the country. One big sixteen-inch tile on the home place ran back four kilometers. One fall, a huge family of muskrats must have moved into the tile. My brothers and I got two per day the first six or eight days of the season. I ran the line the first day and made the original set. The second day I checked the trap, but all there was was a muskrat leg. Muskrats will frequently chew off their front leg–an occupational hazard of trapping muskrats in field tiles.

On a hunch, I checked the trap that afternoon coming in off the main line. There was a muskrat in the trap. My rifle was back at the house so I tried to brain the rat with my axe. That one got away, too. The rest of the week I checked the trap morning and evening, being careful to always have my rifle along. That's how we got so many muskrats in a row. From time to time, we picked up a coon. For that reason, I always used a Number 1 1/2 jump trap and a drag. The drag had to be long enough so the critter couldn't pull it back into the tile.

When setting the trap, be careful not to leave a lot of scent around the tile and also that the critter doesn't have to walk with its bare, sensitive feet across the trap spring and chain to get into the trap itself.

Don't make the set if it is impossible to use a drag and to cover the trap nicely. Drain tiles are only found in populated, well-settled areas. A trap thief who finds one of your sets will fold up your entire line by picking up every trap in every drain tile in the country.

3. Floating Duck Snare

Outside of a limited area in south central Ontario where the floating duck snare is extremely common, no one seems aware of its existence. I've not seen it any place in the eastern or western flyways, nor is it used in Mexico or South America to my knowledge.

Some twenty years ago, my older brother went to Ontario to work. It is frightening to remember how cavalierly we Bensons handled those kind of major relocations. As was the pattern in our family, he arrived on the scene virtually penniless with nothing more than a vague promise of a job. Usually, there wasn't even enough gas money left to move on if the job didn't come through. On the plus side, we all were confident of our ability to work long hours at hard labor and to live off the land on little or nothing if necessary.

Although we were generally pretty shrewd about taking game, it always seemed that wherever we went we learned a couple of often really remarkable new tricks from the local woodsmen.

I remember well going up to Fort Frances to see my brother after he had been there for a couple of months. My purpose was to see how he was doing. All my brother wanted to show me was the interesting trap the people in the area used to catch ducks.

Floating duck snares will work on any water where ducks land to feed. However, sheltered bays or shallow bayous where the snares can be checked in relative privacy are usually best.

This trapper set out several floating duck snares among his decoys. Note the two snared ducks tangled in the brush. The results were excellent.

Since that time I have used the set often. It works wherever grain-eating, aquatic birds sit on the water. I even showed it to some farmers living in northern Thailand. They used it to catch strange-looking chickenlike birds that live in the swamps in the area.

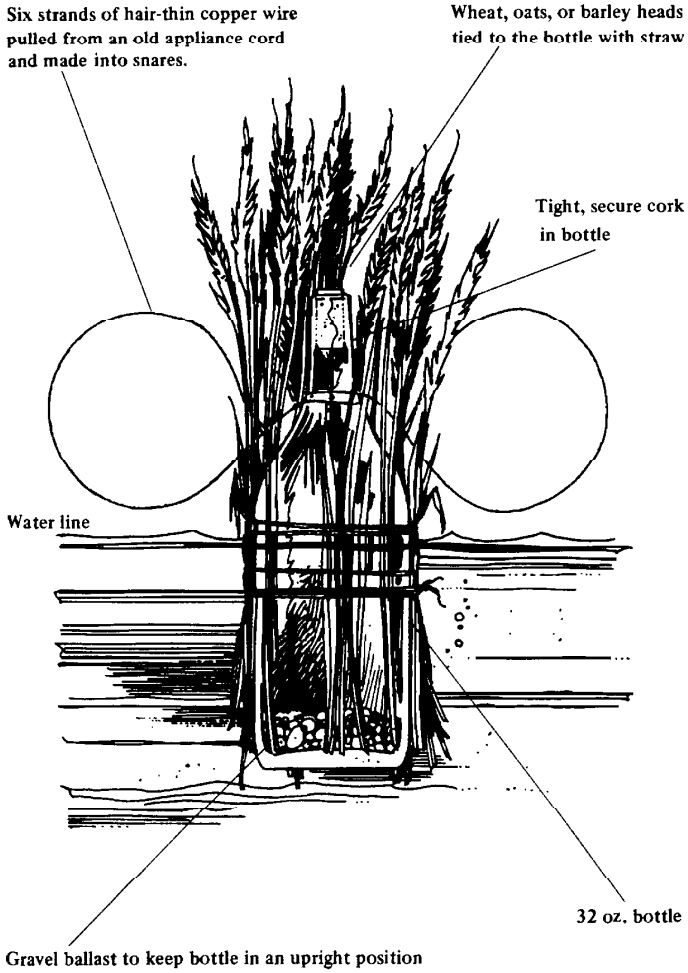
There are a lot of good things about the trap. It is simple, cheap, easily hidden from most people, effective, and will work as long as the water does not freeze. Sometimes, it will even work after the freeze. The principal disadvantage is that the floating traps will sometimes drift away from the trapping area and either become lost or ineffective. I don't like to lose traps of any kind. In the last twenty years, I have lost dozens of floating duck snares. They are not valuable; it's simply the principle involved.

Sometimes the traps can be put out using hip waders. Usually, it is best to figure on having some kind of a small boat with which to check the traps. If a boat is necessary to set the traps, the survivor faces another limitation. A lot of people simply don't have access to a boat.

Another serious defect relates to the fact that on fairly open water, floating snares are as obvious as cheap perfume to anyone who knows what to look for. My brother and I pulled in right behind the warden's truck one time that first summer I visited him. The warden was standing on the water's edge, binoculars in hand, looking for duck snares. We didn't have any out in that particular bay, but it taught us a valuable lesson regarding the proper method of setting the traps.

Floating duck snares can be made with just about anything that will hold up the bait and the snares. We have used old wood planks, wood blocks, and gallon jugs, among other things. All of these floats work. Yet the best and easiest to use is a 32-ounce or larger soda bottle. The modern plastic kind is just great.

Experiment with the bottle to determine how much gravel to put in it so that the bottle will float upright in a stable "seaworthy" position. The trick is to have as much neck as possible exposed out of the water, without allowing the bottle to tip over and float on its side. After ballasting the


Six strands of hair-thin copper wire pulled from an old appliance cord and made into snares.
Wheat, oats, or barley heads tied to the bottle with straw
Tight, secure cork in bottle
Water line
32 oz. bottle
Gravel ballast to keep bottle in an upright position

bottle, seal it up. Take care to do a proper job or the bottle will sink after an hour or two of being dragged around by a thrashing duck. The best method, in my opinion, is to cork the bottle and then cap it as well. Hot paraffin is a good material with which to seal the bottle.

twine. Bakery string or any other string will work just as well. The idea is to tie enough straw and grain on the bottle to make it look like a small floating shock of edible feed grains.

Mounting the snare comes last. Use six or eight strands of thin copper wire pulled from an electrical appliance cord. Each wire should be about 50 cm. long. This is enough to securely tie onto the neck of the bottle and still have sufficient length to fashion a six- to seven-cm. loop.

My brother feels he gets more ducks using three snares per bottle. I don't think it makes a damn bit of difference whether it is two or three. If there are ducks in the area, they will come over, feed on the grain, and get caught.

Depending on how long the duck is in the trap, there will be from 10 percent to 50 percent of them that will thrash around so much they will suffocate. My brother ties a small knot in the snare so that it can't close completely. This seems to help some.

I check my snares the second hour after daylight every day the snares are out. That way I limit the number of dead birds that end up in my bottle snares. Instead of automatically using the dead birds for bait in my fox and coyote sets, I cut their heads off and see how well they bleed. A lot of them are OK.

The best place for floating snares is in the small marshy potholes where the ducks come to feed and drink. I don't think the small amount of bait ever pulls them out of the sky. If, for some other reason, the ducks land within fifty meters of the bottles, they will take the bait. If they take the bait, they will catch themselves. Although the trap will work on all kinds and sizes of ducks, I have never caught a goose or loon in one.

A word of caution. It isn't necessary to set out very many of these little hummers. If the ducks are there, it's not much of a project to get a whole winter's supply in a week.

4.

"Board-Against-a-Chicken-House" Set

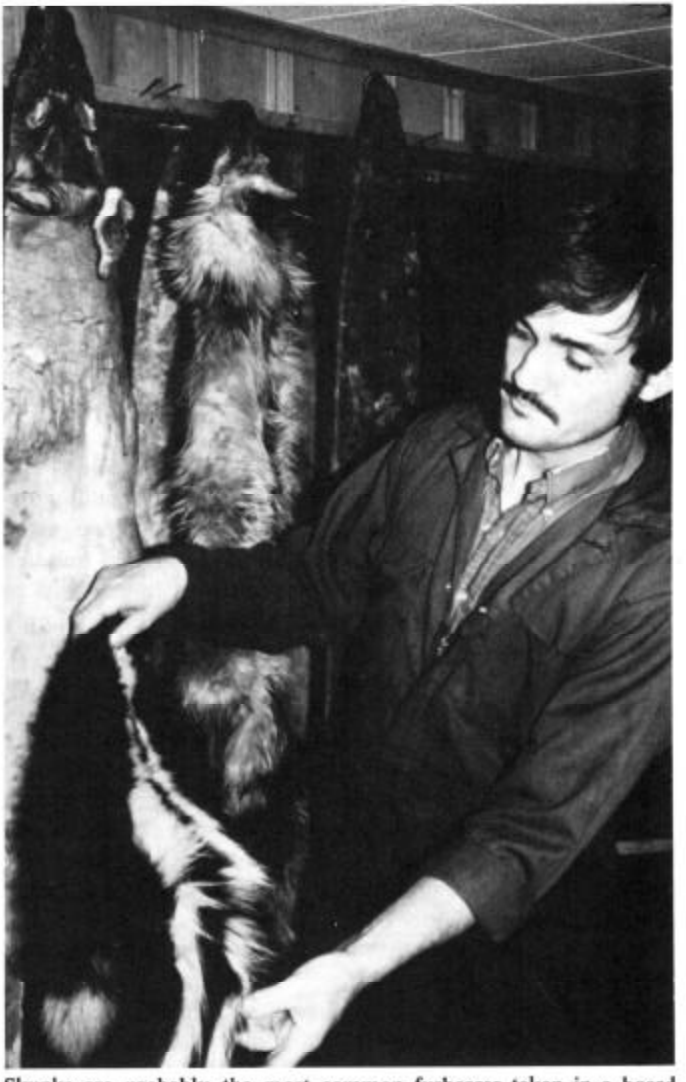
The title of this chapter is a concession to readers who think the names I give to various traps are too colorful and thus obscure. Also, I can't think of a more sexy name for the damn thing, so it's the "board-against-a-chicken-house" set.

However, those of you who don't have a chicken house need not despair. The set works in many different places besides the side of a chicken house. You will, however, need to have a large, long board. On that point I can't compromise.

The set first began its evolution when Dad asked me to trap some rats that were under the board pile. Every working farm has a board pile. It's a place where the odds and ends left from building projects are kept for the day a piece of something or other is needed to make repairs. Ours was on the east side of our big horse barn. I set several traps in the pile but found that I caught the most rats in the trap right next to the barn. I also got a couple of opossums and a weasel!

Not too long after that, Dad decided to do a construction job using the board pile rather than buying new. He took everything except one old plank about 40 cm. wide and 5 meters long. I set the board up against the barn on an angle to form a tunnel and caught a gray fox in it the very same

Sometimes the same barn used to store the traps is a good place to make a set, especially if it houses livestock or is used to store feed. Mice, rats, and sparrows are attracted to grain. Mink, skunks, fox, and coons, among others, come to get the pests and can be caught by the shrewd trapper.



Skunks are probably the most common furbearer taken in a board-against-a-chicken-house set. When we were kids, we tried everything to get the skunk out of the barnyard without creating an environmental wasteland. I can't ever remember being successful.

night. There is nothing like success to reinforce a good idea. In this case, it was an excellent idea that my brothers and I have been using for fifty years now.

Mom, when she saw the gray fox, suggested that I set the trap by the hen house. For several mornings there had been new fox tracks in the snow. She correctly reasoned that it wouldn't be long before the fox would be trying with a whole lot more determination to get in and nab some of her egg machines.

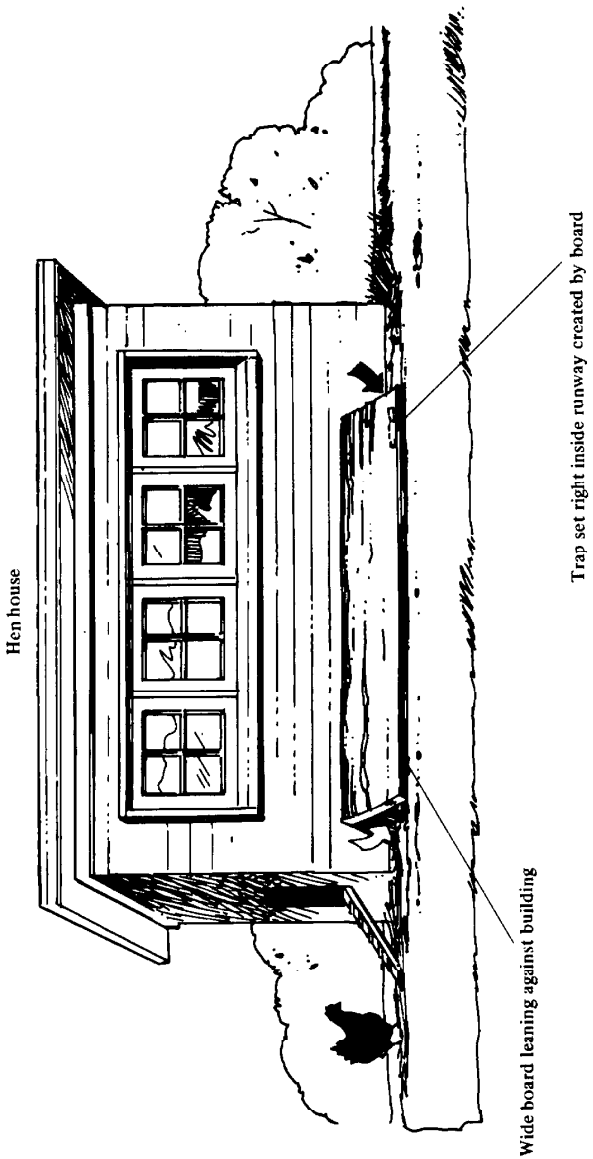
I had to use the tractor and a chain to drag the board over to the chicken house. Long oak planks were mighty heavy back in the good old days. That night I caught a red fox. In those days, a red fox skin brought about eight dollars. Well worth the effort. It wasn't till after World War II that the price of long-hair furs dropped so dramatically.

Apparently, the trap works because wild animals will risk coming into a barnyard or close to a set of outbuildings to get an easy meal. When they do, they will always keep out of sight as much as possible by creeping as near to a building as possible or, if one is available, through a tunnel next to the building. The board leaning up against a wall simply makes things convenient for the critters.

Traps should be set in about half an arm-length on either end of the lean-to. That way the traps are protected from snow and rain, domestic animals, and trap thieves. I don't believe that bait would make the set one bit more effective.

Generally, I use a Number 1 1/2 jump trap with a drag rather than a stake. These sets are excellent for coons and fox, both of which might best be caught with a larger trap. However, larger traps don't work well on weasel and mink, so I compromise with the 1 1/2. Using a drag rather than a stake mitigates the fact that the trap is a bit small. Be sure to cover the set carefully.

The board-against-a-chicken-house set works well in the city and in the really rugged back country. A few years ago, I caught a number of marten around an old cabin high in the mountains west of Libby, Montana. I set a trap behind a board leaning against the cabin wall. The snow got very deep, but under the cabin's eaves, sheltered by the big board, the


Hen house
Wide board leaning against building
Trap set right inside runway created by board

set kept on cranking out fur like a champ all winter long.

The other place the board set really works well is in the city. Using this set, it's possible to catch every rat and tomcat within a thousand meters without the neighbors ever knowing what's going on. A lot of medium-sized midwestern and southern cities have a sizable population of coons, opossums, squirrels, rabbits, and even some skunks. The set isn't real hot for squirrels but does very well on the rest of the list.

Lean the board up against a garage or house in a spot where flower beds or shrubbery can screen the animal's approach. A source of food such as an apple tree or small garden will help attract wild animals into the area.

The most interesting use of the trap that I can remember is the time my wife Kirsten nailed some marauding critters around her pheasant pen. She had about 250 pheasant in an enclosure that we thought was pretty much varmint-proof. It was fall, and the pheasants were a mature six to eight months old. We would put out three or four birds at a time for city dudes who were paying twenty-five dollars a day to hunt on our land.

Something started getting one or two birds a week, but we couldn't figure out what, or how it got in the pen. Since the birds flew, we had the top covered with chicken wire, and we didn't figure it was a chicken hawk or a fox that was jumping the wire.

Kirsten set a trap behind a board laid against the side of the bird pen. Nothing happened for a few days. About the fourth day, I saw her jump in the Jeep and drive over to the pen to feed her pheasants. I was chopping corn stalks in a field north of the pen.

A few minutes later she ran back to the Jeep and raced back to the house. I figured she had a critter and didn't have a gun. By the time I got over to the pen, she was back with a .22 pistol. Another red fox was history.

Two days later, she caught a huge old tomcat, which apparently was the real culprit. Before she could shoot, her Airedale ran over and crunched the cat.

5. Den Trap

Most, if not all, of the really good trapping skills I acquired when I was a kid came from my Uncle Dugan. Uncle Dugan was half Ojibway Indian. He married my mother's youngest sister and, in the total scheme of things, was not much older than I. As I remember, he was about twenty-six when I was nine.

By the time I was sixteen, Uncle Dugan was thirty-three and running one hell of a line of bear traps, among other things. Some of our experiences on that line trapping North America's largest furbearers would make an interesting book in and of itself.

One of the truly remarkable trapping systems that Dugan taught me was the common den trap. Fifty-some years later, having built and set up literally hundreds of them, I am still convinced that this one trap is absolutely the best there is in North America. No other trap comes even halfway close to doing what the den trap can do.

On one memorable occasion, my youngest brother caught five skunks at one time in one. Another time he got four. A few days later he got three raccoons. This says nothing about the huge number of rabbits, squirrels, opossums, muskrat, mink, weasel, red and especially gray fox, and coyotes we have picked up through the years. We have even caught quail, pheasant, and snakes in den traps.

Virtually every animal in North America that lives on land will go into a hole in the ground and can be taken in a den trap. I have from time to time cornered a coyote in my artificial dens, although it is not common because I generally build the entrance to the den too small.

My brother lives in a remote area of Ontario where the right to a trapping territory is assigned by the provincial government. Because these assignments preclude all but an elite few from trapping in the area, my brother has had to resort to other techniques. One of the principal and best tools at his disposal is the den trap.

A den trap will work at all times of the year. It requires no bait and is completely undiscoverable from even the sharpest woodsman. I have never had one of my den traps

Sometimes it is possible to catch two or three critters at once in a den trap. If their pelts are not in demand or the critter is small, the animals can be released unharmed.

discovered, but my brother told me recently of the closest he ever came to having it happen. One of the concession-holders whose territory he traps actually tracked a fox to the den. The guy set a conventional steep trap in the den entrance!

Through the years, my brother has caught an incredibly diverse number of critters in his line of den traps. I have the first fisher he ever caught in a den trap, and incidentally the first fisher I ever saw, hanging on the wall of my den. It's a big, old male that at the time had relatively little value because of its coarse fur.

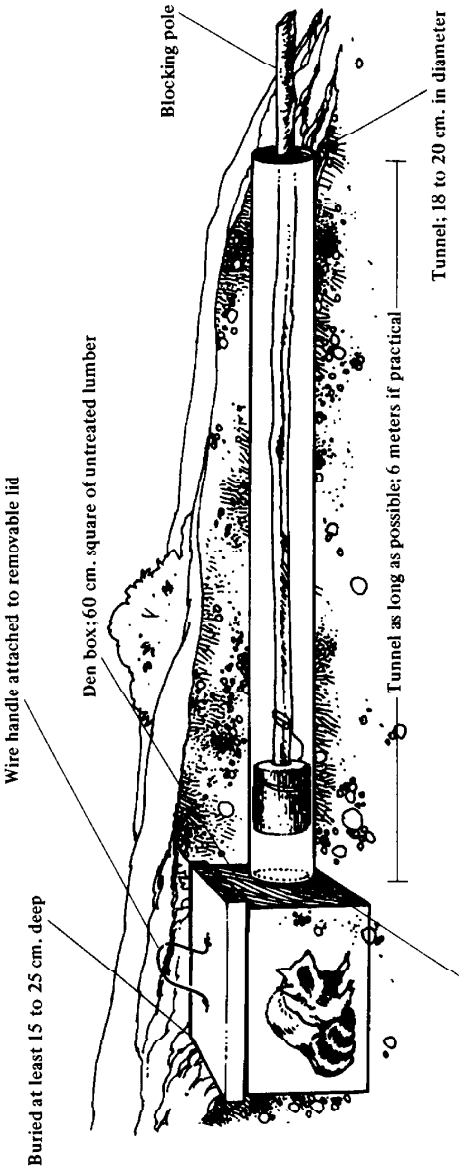
About the only animals we have never caught in a den trap are bobcat, otter, and badger. I set a line out a few years back in northern Florida near the town of Hastings. We got a lot of opossums, coons, and gray fox as well as an occasional armadillo. A close friend later set some den traps in southern Georgia and got a number of nutrias.

Cost for the raw materials to build a den trap is about the same or a little more than the retail price of a Number 3 jump trap. This does not include the initial labor required to build the trap, which can also be significant. After the traps are built, it will take a day of hard labor to set out two under the very best of circumstances. When we were kids, we figured we were doing good to get one out in a very long day. And this was just installing or "setting" the trap. My brothers and I built them in the barn during the winter when nothing much else was happening.

The trap should be located in an area where game travels or lives. Put it on a gentle slope along a game trail, near a spring or creek, or at the corner of a field in a thicket. I have even set them up in the middle of town in a lilac hedge.

By the time I was sixteen, we had one in every woodlot within five miles of our home in the Midwest. It didn't matter if we checked the trap once a week or once a month. The critters were always waiting when we got there, safe and sound, out of harm's way.

The heart of the trap is an artificial den constructed of sound lumber, buried from 25 to 35 cm. under the ground. Make the box out of the best rot-resistant lumber you can find. Cyprus is best, but seldom available anymore. Another


Blocking pole
Wire handle attached to removable lid
Den box; 60 cm. square of untreated lumber
Tunnel; 18 to 20 cm. in diameter
Buried at least 15 to 25 cm. deep
Tunnel as long as possible; 6 meters if practical
Tunnel enters den box a couple of centimeters above the floor.

good material is rough-cut cedar. Oak planking or three-quarter-inch marine plywood also works. The worst material—which I have occasionally used because it was all there was available—is 2.5 cm. pine. Traps built of pine will usually only last a couple of years. Animals will not generally use den traps made of wood that has been painted or treated with wood preservatives.

Construct the den box so that it ends up a 60- to 70-cm. square. Build it as soundly and as tightly as possible. Drilling a few one-cm. holes in the bottom helps if the area is damp. Do not plan to set the den out in a place where it might get flooded. Den traps work well along creeks if the tunnel slopes down to the water's edge and the box is buried in the bank above the waterline.

Leave the top of the box open and construct a tight lid. Put a lip on it so that the lid centers on the box. To be effective, the lid must keep out water and light. Sometimes I put a piece of tar paper or galvanized tin on the top to protect it. A piece of dog chain or Number 9 wire works well as a handle on the box lid.

Next, built or scrounge together material for the tunnel. I have used old iron pipe, secondhand culverts, clay tile, and even four boards nailed together in a square. The tunnel should be 18 to 20 cm. on a side although I have used tunnels as small as 15 cm. Everything but plastic pipe seems to work well as tunnel material. Most wild animals don't seem to like to crawl up plastic pipe. Too bad! It sure is light and easy to carry into the woods.

The length of the tunnel has a dramatic impact on the performance of the trap. Anything less than two meters simply will not work. Six meters is ideal but usually impractical. Usually, the trapper has to carry the trap into the set on foot. The box and lid make one load for sure, and maybe two. Three or four more packs carrying tunnel sections into the trap location are generally a bit too much. I usually settle for four meters, unless I have an old piece of lightweight aluminum culvert or can carry the stuff to the trap site in a truck.

After building or scrounging together the tunnel, cut out the tunnel opening in the lower corner of the den box. Be

sure to put the entrance hole at the lower corner—not in the middle and not up off the bottom. The critters tend to fill the box with trash if the opening is above the floor of the box.

Take special care to cut out the opening slightly smaller than the tunnel. Later, you will push a block up the tunnel with a pole. The block should not end up in the den. You want it to hit on the den box entrance and stop, closing off the entrance.

Bury the box and tunnel at a prescouted, preselected location. Be sure the entrance to the tunnel surfaces at least five centimeters below the ground, and that the tunnel body is nicely covered with earth. The object is to both hide the trap and keep light from entering anywhere but the tunnel entrance.

The entrance must not be obstructed so that the blocking pole can be easily slid up into the tunnel. Nearby trees and brush become a nuisance if the planning phase of this operation is initially weak.

In fall and winter when I am looking at the trap weekly, I will sometimes cover the trap lid with duff. During spring and summer, I bury it with a good, solid layer of dirt. All this depends on the local conditions, how often the trap will be checked, and how much it has to be camouflaged.

A trap buried in spring will attract some critters by winter. Usually it works much better if it has been in place for at least a year. I have had some den traps work well for ten years or more, with little or no repair.

Cut a blocking pole for each set and leave it by the trap, leaning against a tree or lying in the brush. The block itself can be carried along if the tunnels are all about the same size. It's too much work to carry the pole around from trap to trap in the woods.

Drill a hole in the block and whittle one end of the pole down so it is a good pressure fit. I also tie the block to the pole with a piece of wire so it won't loosen in the hole.

About once a week during the trapping season, approach the trap quietly from down tunnel and, using the pole and block, close off the entrance to the den. Pull the lid up and

look inside the den. Even a fierce coon or mink will cower in the den for a few moments, giving you a good chance to get off a shot with a .22.

Except for multiple skunks, I have never had a critter jump out of the trap. In the case of the skunks, I had to momentarily retreat after the first shot, allowing some of them to jump out. They were easy to shoot on the ground around the trap.

Blood and animal scent around the trap does not seem to make a bit of difference. Often I have picked up critters two days in a row.

Like most good traps, the den trap is a model of simplicity. Anyone I know of who has tried one has been more than pleased.

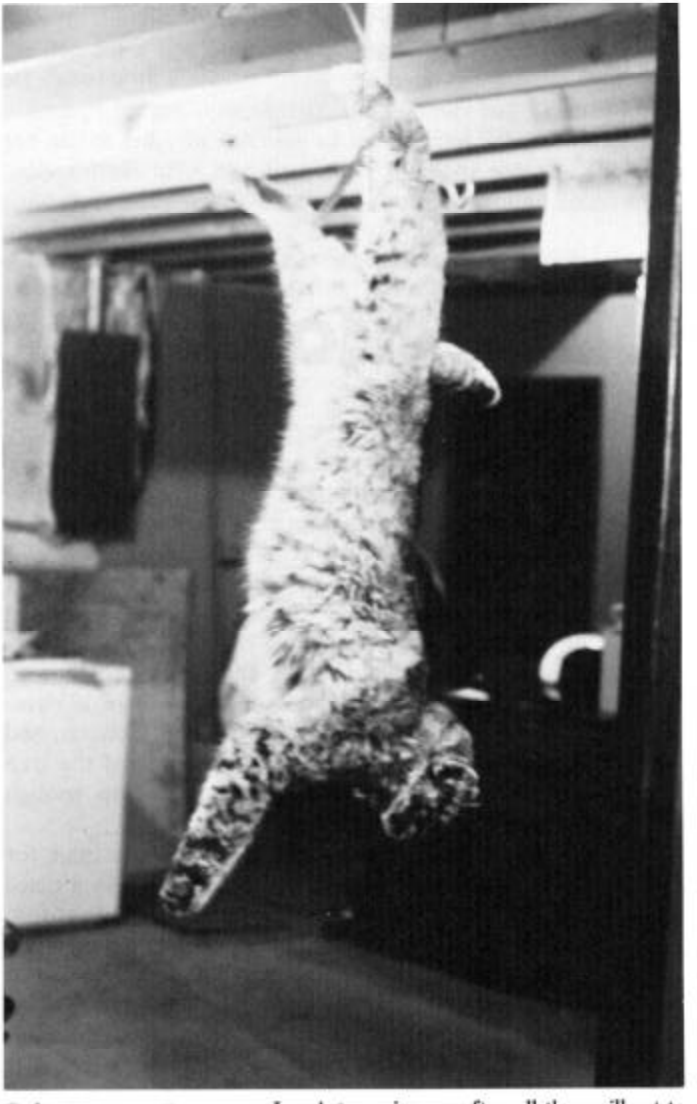
6. Live-Mouse Set

Readers who have a copy of *Live Off the Land* will recognize this trap. It was somewhat the centerpiece of the book—my offering to readers who wanted a dynamite trap that they wouldn't likely hear about except in one of my books. Since this book is about really good, effective traps and at least four of my books allude to trapping, there is bound to be some overlap.

Trappers who have tried the set and taken the time to write to me agree with my assessment that there is virtually no set that will do better on coyotes, fox, bobcats, and badgers. On the down side, readers who have tried the trap for the first time suggest that I haven't gone into enough detail explaining how the trap works.

Basically, the idea is to set out a live mouse as bait for mouse-eating critters. Of course, the set must be in a place where mice are likely to live and where coyote-bobcat-fox-type predators are likely to visit. It also takes a bit of intuition to know how to put in the set so that the animal is not so puzzled it immediately starts looking for the trap.

Given all of this, the toughest part of the operation is often related to catching a live mouse and then keeping it alive. There are several methods of accomplishing this mouse-catching business. It's possible to turn over an old log or board and find a colony of mice. Farmers with granaries can



Bobcats are great mousers. In winter, mice are often all they will get to eat for weeks on end. A good live-mouse set will clean up most bobcats within three to four kilometers over the course of one winter.

Badgers will come to a mouse set. If they are common in your area, use a big enough trap.

catch mice that have fallen inside, or you can set out a trap that catches live mice. Almost any small-town hardware store will have such a trap. They are made out of galvanized sheet metal and hardware cloth, about 12-cm. square, and cost in the eight- to ten-dollar range.

The trap works on a windup principle. It is wound like an alarm clock. The mouse runs down the tunnel looking for the wheat grains, flour, or cheese bait and hits the spring-wound trigger. When tripped, the trap sweeps the live mouse into a holding compartment and resets itself. About eight or nine mice can be caught before the trap has to be rewound.

Live, wild mice are easily traumatized. It is best not to try to handle them or they will almost certainly scare themselves to death. I run the mice into a small cheesecloth butterflylike net to remove them from the trap. From the net, they will usually move right into the holding bottle without too much problem.

Use an old apple-juice bottle to house the mouse. Virtually any bottle having a sound screw lid will work. However, big gallon jugs are tough to dig into the set and hide, and little mayonnaise jars don't provide much living space for the mouse. Before putting the mouse in the jar, fill it half full with leaves, straw, or grass and a couple handfuls of grain. Punch a number of small breathing holes in the lid. It is also helpful to cover the jar with cloth or paper so the mouse doesn't become frightened looking out the glass when you carry it around.

I put the mouse in the bottle and then wait several days to be sure it will live. It isn't uncommon for mice to die after a day or two. Mice, for those who wondered, get enough moisture out of raw grain to live on for several months. It isn't necessary to put water in the bottle.

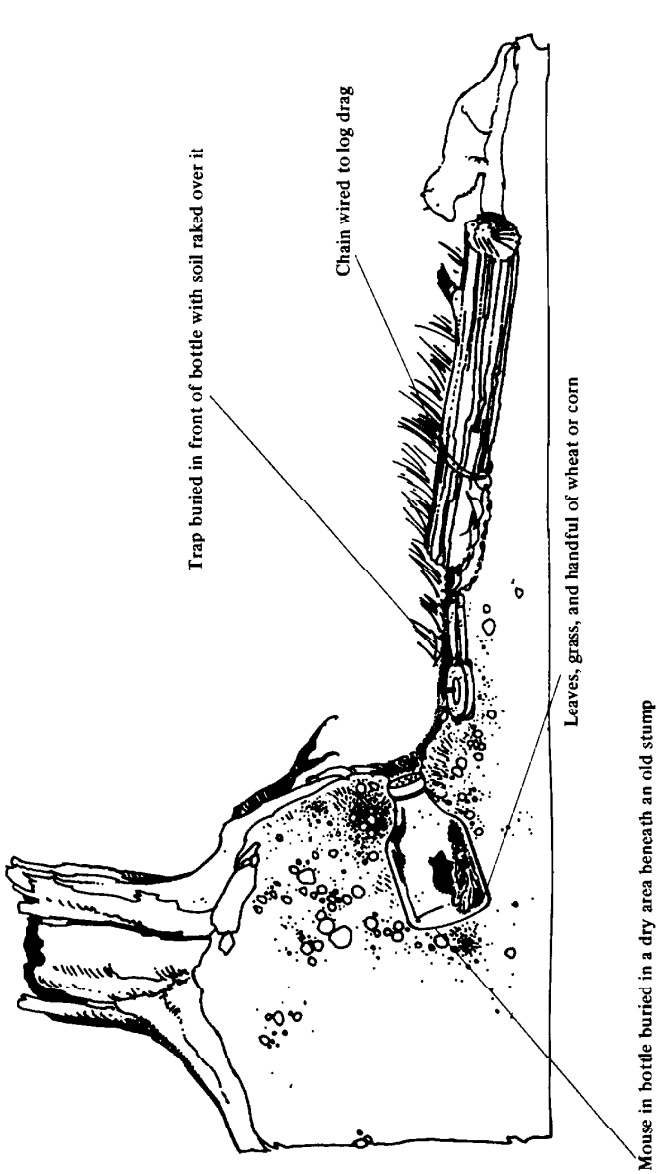
The best location for the set is under an old stump on a slightly sloping hill, facing a grassy patch in fairly extensive woods. Old stumps are where mice hang out naturally. That location is also protected a bit from snow and rain. The dry rotting wood is ideal to cover the trap. Heavy brush surrounding the set will give the animals a sense of security as they approach. The grassy area is a place where predators play around anyway, looking for mice.

Don't locate the bottle in a place where it is so wet, the bottle will freeze in solid. On the other hand, the set works well along small creeks or ditch banks if one gives some thought to the cold, damp conditions that are often present.

Dig the bottle back into the slope or bank, taking care to handle the set the same way you would treat a dirt-hole set. Keep the human scent down as much as possible. Work from an old piece of deer hide or tarp. Carry off the excess dirt and don't smoke or spit.

Put the bottle in far enough so that the entrance can be lightly but thoroughly covered with a mixture of dirt, dry grass, and leaves. Finish the set by leaving a small dug-in looking spot with a light dirt spill over the trap.

Because of the many coyotes where I currently live, I use a Number 2 jump trap. If I were after nothing bigger than a mink, coon, or skunk, I would use a Number 1 1/2 jump


Trap buried in front of bottle with soil raked over it
Chain wired to log drag
Leaves, grass, and handful of wheat or corn
Mouse in bottle buried in a dry area beneath an old stump

better intelligence than any animal, one is dealing with a formidable quarry.

City-born-and-bred humans can't, of course, compete with people living out in the hills when it comes to staying out of traps. On the other hand, people from primitive societies don't do very well in towns. If nothing else, there is a strong propensity for them to get run over by taxis.

In the late Sixties, I was involved in a project that included bringing an incredibly skilled Somali tracker to town for the first time. Gaydu was about fifty years old and had lived in the headwaters region of the Giuba River all his life. He had never even been to one of the modest little towns in the region. Most of the people in his village had never seen a

European, and none of them had ever seen a white woman till my wife came along.

Gaydu was very skilled. He could track a single antelope in a herd of seventy-five for hours on end. I was with him when he followed a small party of humans for three days. I only saw three or four tracks the entire time, but this old bird never got off the trail.

We took him with us to Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, and billeted him in a small house in a residential area. It wasn't residential Denver, but it wasn't grass huts, either. Americans, however, would not have recognized it as a single-family residential neighborhood. The street was unpaved. There was no water and no sewer. Various tropical trees and shrubs grew at random around the place which, as it turned out, was a good thing.

To Gaydu, all of the houses looked the same. Downtown, where the shops and the market were located, was obviously a blur of sameness. This absolutely incredible machine that could march fifty kilometers a day through the flat desert without ever getting lost could not get around the block without losing his way.

I have a vivid mental picture of him walking backward away from the house memorizing every tree along the street in an attempt to keep from getting lost. He was continually backing into a street or crossing anywhere at random, much to the consternation of those driving vehicles in the area.

Allah must have smiled on the old gent because we got him back to the bush safely without destroying his bush skills. He was an excellent example of a man who would be very difficult to trap, unless he came to the city. Then he would have been duck soup.

The principal reason I like the Chinese chopper trap is because it's a mantrap that I personally have set and actually seen work. In fact, a chopper I helped build performed an extraordinary miracle by working twice.

I was staying near the small town of Gatab at about the 1800-meter level on Mount Kulal in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya. During the late Sixties when I was there, Somali Shifta were raiding the region with such impunity

Most of the tribesmen I worked with at Gatab were Turkana, but there were also Rendille and Samburu on Mount Kulal. They were more solitary in nature and worried that my trapping abilities might anger the raiders.

that the district commissioner closed the area.

After Gatab was hit by raiders, we set out several traps along the mountain trails leading into the region as an almost stopgap protective measure. Eventually, the government sent thirteen police, but for the time we were on our own.

Mantraps are not as effective as booby traps, and they almost never have any real impact on the outcome of strictly military operations. They can, however, be built out of virtually nothing, using the most basic tools, and they can have a huge impact on the psyche of small units operating in the area.

Mantraps used against primitive people who are accustomed to observing things around them must be incredibly clever. When it comes to picking just the right spot where the trap is likely to blend naturally into its surroundings, pictures and words are never adequate. Like so many other things in this world, finding a good spot to place a successful mantrap is an art and not a science.

We found one of these locations at a spot about the 1800-meter level on a path that crossed a mountain saddle through

a cedar thicket. Brush partly obscured the path. There were enough large trees to rig to, and the trail skirted along a steep rock canyon at that point. People traveling through the area were naturally funneled to the set.

We put the trap in, hoping we could catch some of the Somalis that we knew were in the area. Eventually, we did get two Rendille warriors. Through the grapevine, we also learned that at least one Somali had jumped off the cliff to avoid the trap but, remarkably, was not badly hurt. The Somalis are incredibly more alert than any of the Bantu, but to be able to jump off the trail down a very steep bank at night was beyond my comprehension.

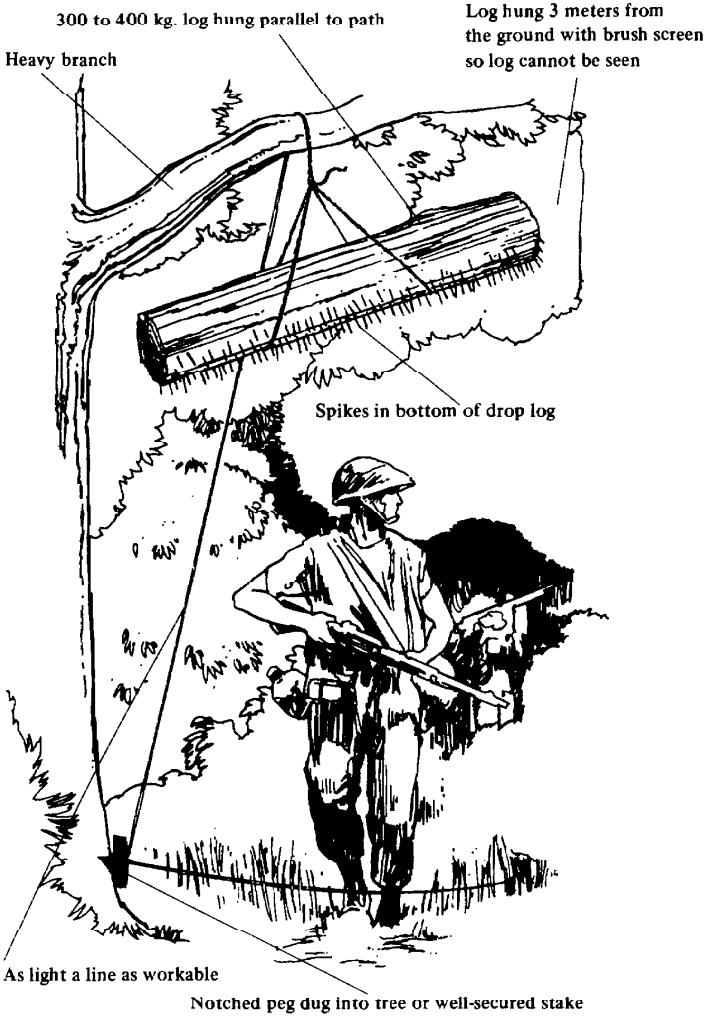
The killing part of this trap is a piece of log about 2.5 to 3.5 meters long. A longer log is better if it doesn't become clumsy and if the density can be maintained. As a practical matter, it's tough to hoist, hold, and trigger a weight much more than 400 kg. An alternative is to hang a lighter log higher in a tree. That situation is tougher to find in the field. Also, a log dropping from six meters is easier to see and dodge than one dropping from four meters.

A good compromise is to cover one-half of a dry, light log--if that's all that is available--with twenty penny nails or even ten-cm. wooden pegs. The log from below should look like a prickly earth packer.

Start installing the trap by bringing the drop log to the trap site and suspending it from the tree limb a couple of centimeters off the ground. Position the rope so that the log hangs exactly parallel to the ground. Most places out in the field are not flat. Thus, the log will be tipped a bit one way or another to maintain its parallel position relative to the ground. After setting the balance, hoist the log up to its set position.

Sometimes the most difficult problem is screening the log from view. Unless it is really dark, people are just not going to walk under a big log covered with spikes hanging by a rope. The screen of brush or whatever can't be too thick. It seems incredible but small brush will sometimes partially deflect a huge, heavy log.

Triggers are tough for this kind of trap. The best is a trip


300 to 400 kg. log hung parallel to path
Heavy branch
Log hung 3 meters from the ground with brush screen so log cannot be seen
Spikes in bottom of drop log
As light a line as workable
Notched peg dug into tree or well-secured stake

peg. They can be made to take the weight and can be hidden. It is advisable to use a small live tree cut off about 25 cm. high and notched. If a tree is not available, drive a long and stout stake into the ground. One that is knarled or has stubs or branches on it, driven in backward, will best resist pulling.

No matter which trigger is used, it must be as short and light as possible. Otherwise it will be too slow and noisy to catch wily bush people

There are other good mantraps, but this one should do for those who have an urge to dabble with such things.

8. Rock Weir Fish Trap

In my opinion, the best place to look for a meal when in a suddenly traumatic survival context is any stream, river, or lake close at hand. Of course, bodies of water are not always the most logical source of food, even if one lives near the ocean. But the general concept continues to be a damn good rule of thumb with which to operate.

Bodies of water attract ducks and geese that come from great distances as well as aquatic animals such as muskrats that will make a pond their permanent home. Bodies of water are also likely to contain crayfish, cattails, and lily pads, all of which are not only edible, but are a delicacy.

Survivors, however, usually have the best luck going after fish. That's one of the reasons most survival packages contain a few fish hooks and some line. Catching fish with a hook and line is OK, yet not all that good, either. Waiting around to catch a few is often a hopeless waste of precious time.

There are a lot of traps that do a good job of catching fish. Few do as well or better than the rock weir trap. The good part about a rock weir is that it can be set in almost any creek or small river without tools and without any previously collected survival supplies. If you are in a light plane crash in the mountains, for instance, a rock or log weir can be put together with nothing more than human energy and initiative.

An ideal stream for a rock weir has lots of movable, large rocks close to a broad, open stretch of water from 25 to 35 cm. deep.

These trout and Kokanee were caught in the fall in a small rock weir upstream about three kilometers from a large Montana reservoir. The trout appeared to have gotten into the trap going downstream while the Kokanee were migrating upstream. Apparently, the trout jumped the last wall upstream to get in the trap.

The trap is truly a trap. Once built, no one has to sit and watch it, or otherwise tend to it. No bait is required, although baited weirs sometimes work better.

The most difficult part of operating a rock weir, assuming one has the energy to build the trap, is getting the fish out of the holding pens once they get inside. Sometimes the trapped fish swim around at unbelievable speeds and jump fairly high rock barriers when they know they are cornered. I have a couple of suggestions that will minimize this problem as well.

The best, most productive rock weir I ever put in was outside of Rapid City, South Dakota, downstream a kilometer or so from a state fish hatchery. I got the idea for the trap while working in Alaska during the early Sixties. Native fishermen used the devices to catch migrating salmon. They worked well, after a bit of modification, for smaller grayling as well.

The trap in the Dakotas took two of us two days to put in. The stream was about mid-calf deep at the place where we built the trap and perhaps twenty-five meters wide. We carefully planned the trap to make use of a number of large natural rocks and an island. Even so, the water was so deep,

we soon ran out of nearby portable rocks. The only thing that saved us was the fact that several bunches of tourists and picnickers thought our project looked like fun. About twelve or fifteen of them put in about three hours each carrying rocks!

Eventually we got some really huge trout in the trap. The last pen was mostly very shallow, but some of these lunkers still managed to jump the rocks and escape.

Before starting, it is important to survey the creek or stream on which you intend to build the weir. Put the trap in where it will naturally fit with the least amount of work.

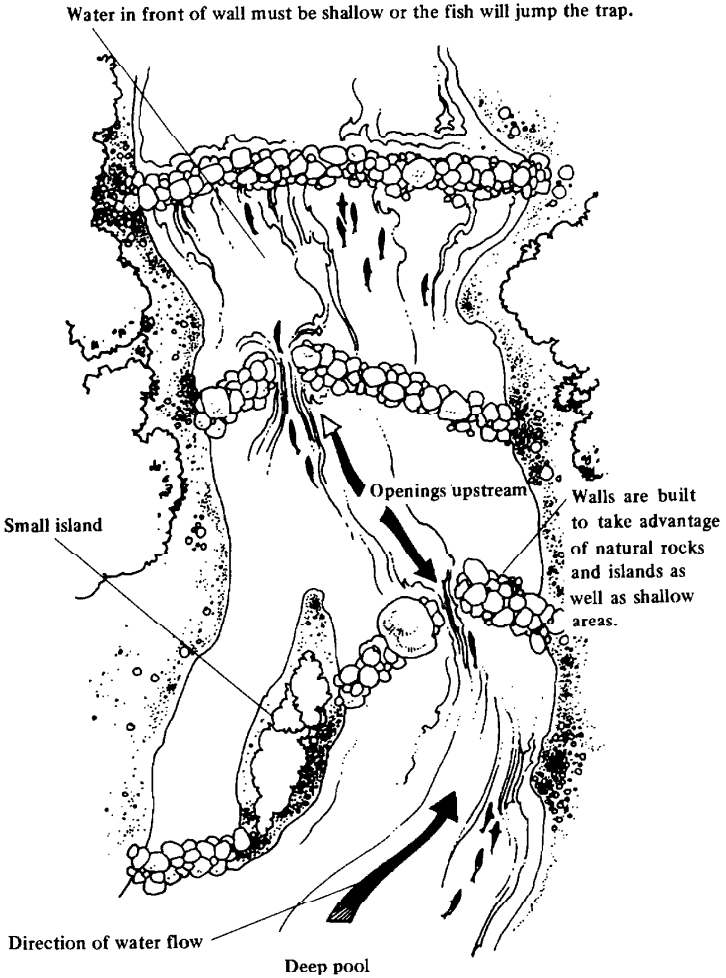
The general concept is to construct a barrier with small openings through which the fish can swim, either rock walls or, in mud-bottom rivers, a stake fence. As a general rule, these traps will produce more fish if they are located upstream from a large deep hole.

Lay out the walls so that they form a slight V-shape going upstream. The openings should be at the top of the V. Usually even nonmigratory fish such as catfish and carp will enter more easily going upstream. A slight V-shape makes it tougher for the fish to find their way back out of the trap when you go out to make the daily collection.

The openings should be on alternate sides of the creek if at all possible. They have to be located in a place where at least a small current flows so that the water is deep enough for the fish to swim. It isn't always possible to set the openings so the fish have to zigzag from one side of the creek to the other to get in the trap, but it certainly is desirable.

Try to avoid the situation where the trapped fish will have enough deep water in the last pen to get up a head of steam and race straight back through two or three openings out to freedom.

The last rock wall is just that. A rock wall, solid with no openings. Water must, of course, be able to run through the spaces between the rocks but there should be no openings large enough for fish. This last wall is the final barrier for the fish coming upstream into the trap. It is what holds them till the survivor arrives on the scene. The barrier wall is also what determines the size of the fish the trap will catch.



Wood stakes can substitute for rocks if rocks are not available or the creek bottom is muddy.

Very small fish will slip through the space between the rocks and continue upstream. There is little that can be done about this as long as the stream is flowing at all. A tight rock wall will become a dam. Trapped fish will simply find a low spot in the dam and slither over it upstream.

A spear is handy for getting fish out of the trap. In a survival situation, use a forked stick and either pin the fish or flip them out of the water.

Another method is to use a pair of pants as a kind of purse seine over the entrance to the last pool. Tie the pant legs off at the bottom and simply cover the opening in the rocks with the waist. If no one is standing at the opening, the fish will race right into the pants where they can be caught. A T-shirt will also work as a purse seine if the fish are not too large.

One of the best uses of the trap is to walk upstream and chase the fish ahead into the weir. Another method is to leave the trap overnight when the fish are migrating.

A variation of this trap works very, very well in tidal flats in the ocean. The number of fish that can be caught in one of these traps, set where a small stream runs into the ocean or in a shallow estuary, can be truly phenomenal—far more than one could eat. The fish come in with high tide, but can't leave when the water does.

It may also improve the trap to put some bait in the last pool. A couple of cans of dog food punched a few times will work. Deer guts are also OK. The best scheme for trout is to hang a large dead animal such as a porcupine over the creek. After a few days, the maggots will hatch and fall off into the water, attracting huge numbers of fish.

Lots of quick, easy food is available for the survivor who masters the use of this trap. All it takes is the will to make it work.

9. "Havahart" Traps

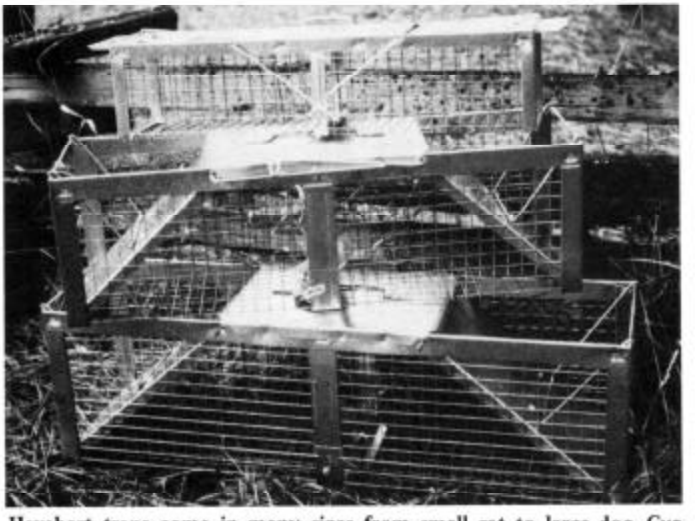
Recently, the first Havahart trap I ever bought bit the dust. I set it for a critter that I suspect was a big old coon, out under the deck in back of the house. Some animal had been coming in and getting the dogs' food, and making a mess out of our garbage can. Whatever it was got in my poor old worn out Havahart trap and just tore the hell out of it.

I originally bought the trap in the fall of 1954 to use to catch gray and fox squirrels. As I remember, it cost about $7.50 including shipping. In those days that was a lot of money, but the outfit has been worth the price many times over.

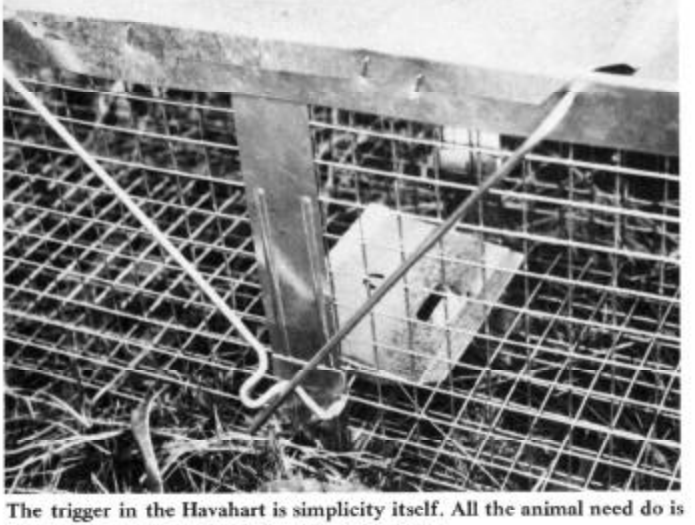
I estimate I have caught a minimum of 350 squirrels as well as innumerable coons, opossums, cats, muskrats, woodchucks, skunks, and even a few mink and fox in the trap. It worked so well because the trap is very simple, well designed, and extremely well made.

Animals entering a box trap like to be able to look out the other end, rather than seeing a blank wall. I believe that under the right circumstances they are even attracted to a trap that looks like a tunnel. Havahart traps open on both ends. However, the doors are controlled by a very sensitive, simple pan in the middle of the trap. All an animal need do is smell the pan and bang, the doors fall down and lock.

I have used Havahart traps for well over thirty years. Shortly before I finished this book, the original trap I bought for $7.50 in 1954 bit the dust.



Havahart traps come in many sizes from small rat to large dog. Currently, I use three different sizes, but for years I got along nicely with the size shown in the middle of the stack.



The trigger in the Havahart is simplicity itself. All the animal need do is touch the central pan and the ends drop down.

Camouflage of Havahart traps is more difficult than most traps but obviously not impossible as this picture of a set trap demonstrates. The winter brush is sparse, but the trap is not immediately obvious.

Havahart traps are set with both ends open. Animals are not nearly as suspicious when they can see through an enclosure. When the hinged doors drop, the wire locks are set in place.

The problem with my old trap was that through the years, various critters had weakened the door hinges until finally an especially big and powerful animal simply ripped the whole thing apart. That old war horse didn't owe me a thing. I was truly sorry to see it go.

Woodstream Corporation in Lititz, Pennsylvania, still makes Havahart traps. I don't think they are too popular because no hardware stores in my neck of the woods carry them. That's a shame because that trap is a damn good one. I called the company and it sent out a replacement. Prices are up considerably, but the same good construction prevails throughout. There are even some improvements like a carrying handle and an easier-to-use bait pan.

Havahart traps are box-type live traps, made of heavy gauge galvanized tin and hardware cloth. They come in a number of sizes from little rat or mink traps to ones that

might catch a dog or coyote. There are two ways to set them, depending on the nature of the animals in the area and on the season. The trap can either be baited, set in a board pile, or set in a run alongside a barn at the entrance to a den.

When the critter hits the pan, the ends fall down and are locked by a couple of sliding bars. If you are interested in trapping live critters, the Havahart is your trap. I suspect that the various fish and game departments use lots of them.

Wild animals left for any length of time in a Havahart will start to beat themselves up and bloody their mouths chewing on the wire. In that regard, the trap does not catch them completely unharmed. Domestic animals just sit in the trap and wait.

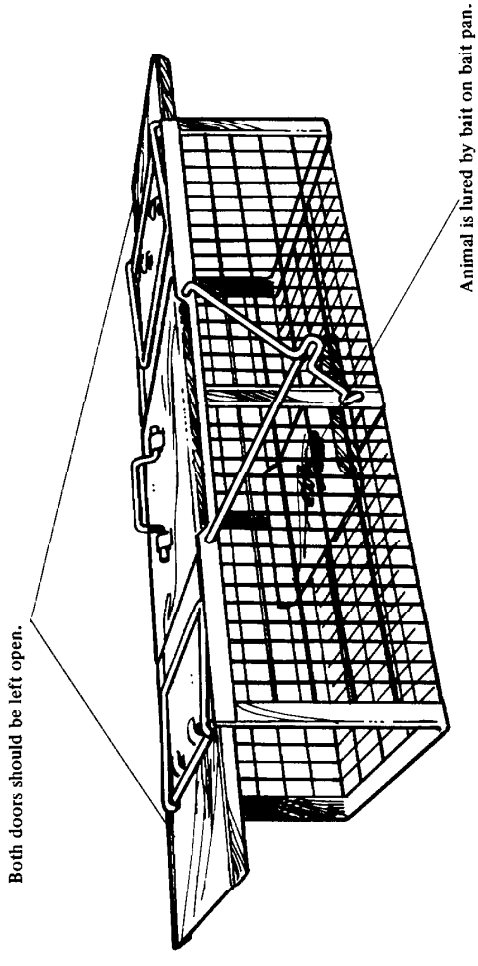
There are a couple of minor problems with Havahart traps. For one, it's pretty tough to afford enough traps to set out a line, and second, it's virtually impossible to carry the traps around to get out a line. They're just too big and heavy. I won't even put out a valuable Havahart away from the house in the woods where someone could nab it.

Another problem relates to the noise the critters make slamming around in the trap when they get caught. Even normally laid-back animals like skunks and opossums run around hammering the pan, and making all kinds of racket that will attract attention.

People who have not used Havahart traps generally perceive a third problem that generally does not occur. Havahart traps are not all that difficult to camouflage and hide. Set along the side of a building in a run under a bush, they are generally quite obscured. I have used my trap many, many times in the center of the city to pick up visiting animals without them ever being noticed.

Setting the larger traps can be a pain. The traps are so long that even a person with very long arms can't reach in and set the bait on the pan. It would be helpful if the maker put a small door in the center of the trap, but this is only a minor criticism.

The only other suggestion is that sometimes it helps to put a small amount of weight on the ends of the doors to make them fall faster. I use some medium-sized stones that roll


Both doors should be left open.
Animal is lured by bait on bait pan.

off when the trigger operates. So far, I haven't had a miss with this technique.

Animals in towns or built-up rural areas don't seem to mind the smell or look of the steel-galvanized trap. I have caught an animal a night for weeks on end several times during the life of that good old trap.

10. Campfire Set

Here's a good easy-to-make set that capitalizes on the fact that coyotes and most fox, bobcats, etc., are pretty damn smart when it comes to getting along around humans. In this case, the trapper is actually beating these critters at their own game, making use of a situation that smart carnivores have found nonthreatening.

The basis, or heart of the set, is a dying campfire. It's important that the fire be smallish and pretty well dead. A hot, cheery coal fire will take all the temper out of an expensive trap, so it's important that care be taken on this point.

I originally got the idea for the set when I noticed that skunks, coons, and coyotes were working our campfires for bits and pieces of food. At the time, I had a fall job wrangling horses and mules for an outfitter working the lower Uintas in Utah.

It was good elk area. The guy's customers were consistently filling about 60 percent of their tags. When they dropped an elk or deer, my job was to take some of the stock and retrieve the meat.

In that capacity, I got around on almost a rotational basis to all of the temporary camps several times each fall. Breaking camp always followed a set pattern. We got up early, saddled and loaded the stock, ate breakfast, stowed the coffeepot and skillet, and took off. Since we were always in

Smart, old trapwise critters can often be caught in a campfire set. The bait seems natural and apparently can be smelled at great distance by carnivores. Human smells are either masked, killed, or occur in a context that does not frighten the animal.

a hurry and moving out to a main camp, any scraps of food or other leftovers went into the fire.

Later when I did come back, I noticed that the campfire was almost always scattered around and dug up. Animals aren't any more afraid of fire than humans are. As soon as the coals cooled, they checked it out.

My first attempt to make a set out of the situation really wet my whistle. There is nothing like the magic of success to keep a trapper's interest revved up. I took a good, new Number 3 jump trap and scooped a hole just big enough to hold the trap in the center of the still-hot smoldering fire. Then I dug down three more scoopsful with the military trenching tool we kept around camp so that I had a place to hide the drag. For a drag, I used a head-size granite rock.

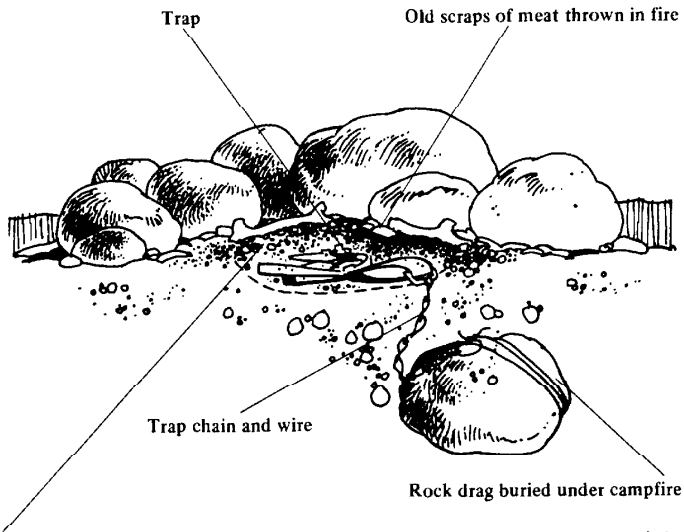
The reason for choosing a Number 3 jump trap was that that was all we had around. Looking back at what happened to that set, it's good to make that point clear.

I scooped the dying coals back around the trap and threw the remains of some pancakes and chili we had for breakfast into the fire. By 7:30 a.m. we were on the trail.

A few days later, we changed hunters. I hauled the party that was leaving along with their meat and gear down out of the hills, and picked up the new group heading out to start their hunt.

The new guys were from Salt Lake and had hunted in the area with my boss a number of times before. About two-thirds of the way back to camp I left them and cut over a little saddle to the east to look at the trap. It was about 11:30 in the morning and only an hour's ride at most out of the way.

The Number 3 jump trap in the campfire was gone. Something had come in and stirred the fire up, but it looked to



me as though the burnt food was taken after the trap had been removed. It was something of a mystery. I knew a coon couldn't get past the edge of the clearing with that big trap hooked to a rock on its foot. Even a big, old coyote shouldn't have gotten very far.

I started tracking the drag marks. In some places they were pretty damn faint. It was slow going. Before I knew it, my watch said 1:45 and I still didn't know what I had.

I followed the track down a small powdery trail till it passed a wet spot. Most of the year, a little spring ran through at that point. During the dry time in the fall, the ground was just a little swampy, especially where the horses churned everything up when they went through. There were two or three perfect prints in the muck. It was obvious I had nabbed a small yearling bear.

Slowly, steadily I worked the track. Another hour went by. I wasn't really worried because I was still less than a mile from the horses. The track wasn't looking much fresher. Here and there a rotten log was scattered, some ferns were raked over, or there was a skitch mark in the piney underlayer.

By 4:00 I was worried. By 5:00 I was no longer worried. I was resigned. At twilight, I broke off the chase and hoofed it back to the horses. They were more anxious to get back to camp than I. In forty-five minutes I was drinking hot coffee and eating biscuits.

We never did find that bear. By the time I got back, the drag marks were all gone. After the snow came, I looked around but never found a single bear track, big or little.

Later in the winter after we shut the hunting camp down, I put out a couple of campfire sets around my cabin. They worked quite well for coyotes.

Apparently the critters think that the human smells around camp are perfectly natural and nonthreatening. Any iron smell from the trap is either killed by the heat or is of no concern to even very smart coyotes. They, as well as skunks, fox, marten, opossums, and even the occasional mink come right in and start digging around.

I have used just about everything as bait in the fire. The

best is definitely meat scraps of some sort. Chicken wings are OK. Another good one is cracklings or bacon fat. I have even thrown grouse guts in the fire and they worked fine. Vegetables like potatoes, corn, rice, and beans don't by themselves seem to do much.

About the biggest problem in the West and Southwest is that magpies often get in the set before the critters get a chance to get there. Otherwise, the set is a good idea that I have successfully used from Florida to Washington State.

11. Riffle Fish Set

This set is dedicated to people like myself who think that, as a general rule, simplicity is better. The plan is a model of simplicity. As part of its attraction, the riffle fish trap is the best all-weather stream-catching tool I know. Freezing snow can stop it, but not unless there is a hell of a lot of it.

The best user of a riffle fish set is an otter. Not too many people have otters kicking around their trap lines. Second best is pretty good, too; mink really like this set. Coons will get in these traps in early fall, but are not the least bit interested in getting their feet wet later in the year when it is really cold.

Down South and in most southwestern parts of the U.S., having a frost-free set in one's trapping repertoire is not nearly so important as it is in the north. Most southern trappers can keep their conventional sets functioning virtually every day of the year.

Southern coons will come to a riffle fish set readily if it's possible to find a place to put the set in. It has been my experience, however, that most southern creeks are not suitable for this kind of setup.

The riffle fish set is a bait set. It requires that the trapper have access to a number of four- to six-cm. shiner-type fry

fish. These minnows don't have to be fresh, but they have to look fresh.

There are two ways that I get around the fresh-fish requirement. During the winter, I keep my minnow trap set in hopes of picking up an occasional small trout or chub. I also freeze a couple of dozen fish in early fall when it's easier to net or trap them. I have never been able to make a fake fish, or one of those pickled minnows out of a jar, work.

A fish, when put out in the set, has to look like a real fish swimming in the water. Down South where the water in winter is still pretty warm, even a fresh fish will only last about five days. Up North, a frozen fish will stay nicely preserved in the icy water and look good for weeks on end if the critters leave it alone that long.

Basically the idea is to hang a small fish in a fairly fast-flowing, 10- to 15-cm. deep ripple in such a way that it will look like it swam there all by itself. There is a bit of skill involved, but not very much. Obviously the set is made while standing in the water.

Place the fish in water moving fast enough not to freeze in a spot where a fish is generally likely to hang out if it were left to its own devices. I like to place the fish in the lee of a rock or in a depression in a small ripple. Hold the fish in place with a small piece of light monofilament line. Depending on how the water flows, either throw a big loop over a rock or anchor the two ends of the string off to the sides on separate rocks or sticks poked in the creek bed. Don't worry if the fish is a bit deeper than 5 cm. Deeper is better than shallower if the deeper water will stay unfrozen. Of course, the string must be tight and invisible.

Lots of trappers make the mistake of using too big a fish and then anchoring it in shallow, open ripples where they can easily see it themselves. I guess they reason that if they can see the fish, then the mink will be able to see it as well. On the average, I truly believe that mink can spot fish in the ripples ten times better than the most hawk-eyed trapper. Put the minnow where it would logically be and let the mink find it.

The set requires two traps and even then the bait will still

Small streams with riffles are best for this set, but the trapper must plan ahead and store a supply of fish.

Hanging a small fish on a string near a trap in a stream will bring in tough, smart critters like these otters. The riffle fish set is one of the best cold weather water sets I know of.

be taken half the time without either trap being thrown. Put the traps on either side of the fish. If otters travel the stream, place the traps about 12 cm. from the fish. For mink, keep them in a bit closer to the bait.

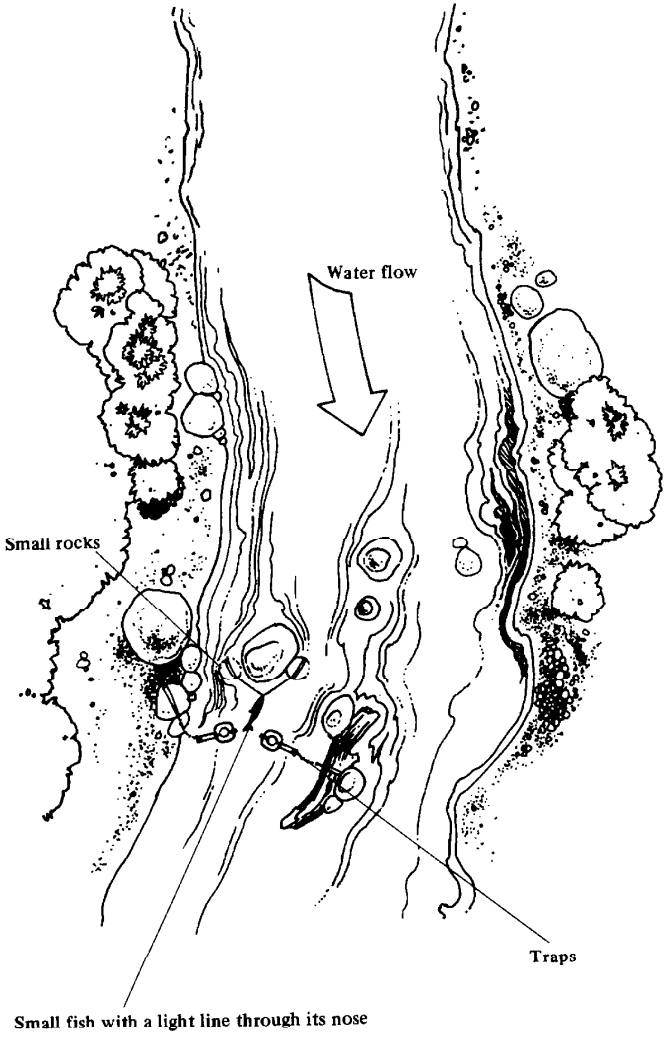
I don't know how to keep the bait from being stolen such a high percentage of the time. Perhaps at times, it simply washes away. If there are readers who are using this set and have figured this last business out, I would be glad to hear from them.

The only way to tie down a ripple fish trap is with a drag. Stakes are much too obvious and often can't be put in because the stream bed is too gravelly or too soft and muddy. The creative use of an old log or snag for a drag is always possible. I have made sets with knarled old branches that have steered a critter right into the trap.

A couple of times I have pinched a big old mink in the dead of winter that has dived under the ice to get away. This occurs when the ice freezes right up to the ripples and leaves just a small spot of open water. Signs in the snow always tell the tale as to what happened.

Retrieving the critter—even knowing where it went—is a different matter. If it gets several meters under snow-covered ice where it can't be seen, it's virtually impossible to know how or where to chop. Through the years I have lost several traps this way. A few turn up in spring. Sometimes they are gone forever.

As I mentioned earlier, the set will work in the South wherever there are fast-moving streams. I found a few places to make sets around Crossville, Tennessee, up on the plateau. Down around Tifton, Georgia, the water moves too slow and the stream bottoms are too muddy. It is similarly hopeless south of Phoenix in the Red Rock and Eloy areas. The Santa Cruz and its tributaries are just too unpredictable. North of there in Idaho, Washington, and Montana, the set is very effective.


Water flow
Small rocks
Traps
Small fish with a light line through its nose

PART 2

A Few Others That Are Damn Good

Almost every land set requires the skills necessary to hide a trap in a dirt-hole set. The set is basic and one that should be mastered by almost every trapper. A few years back, this huge old coyote brought $55.

12. Dirt-Hole Set

Any really useful book on trapping has got to include something about dirt-hole sets. Dirt-hole sets aren't new or unusual, nor, under many circumstances, are they the best type of trap to use. They do, however, have one trait that sets them apart. In concept they are basic–both for a wide range of country and for a large number of different animals. Trappers who learn how to "set a trap into" a dirt hole know how to hide one under virtually any other circumstance.

The same fundamental dirt-hole technique works for fox in Florida, opossums in Tennessee, civets in Texas, and badgers in Oregon. I believe that a variation of the dirt-hole set is even used in Alaska, but never having lived there in fall or winter, I don't know that first-hand.

There is really only one reason the set works as well as it does. And it isn't because dirt-hole sets are easy to make. They are actually quite difficult to put in properly. Nor is it because the sets keep on working when the weather gets cold, snowy, and wet. Tales of trappers who have found fox or coyote tracks over the top of two out of five of their traps the morning after a good solid cold snap are legion.

The only reason a dirt-hole set works is because it duplicates the normal food-gathering habits of North American carnivores and omnivores. The set mimics the food catching and burying techniques used by everything from skunks to

coons, bears, fox, coyotes, and even weasels and mink. Resident furbearers are familiar with what they see and smell when a dirt-hole set turns up in their territory.

Almost certainly the concept of the free meal also comes into play here. Probably, the fox doesn't know or care who stashed the chunk of pheasant guts back along the old wagon road. All he can think about is the free meal he is about to make off with. Hope that that's all he thinks about until the trap is safely in place, providing the trap hasn't frozen up, the critter doesn't get a whiff of human scent, rain hasn't uncovered the trap, or our fox fails to remember he lost three toes in a similar deal about this time last winter.

Marsh and river trappers don't usually use or even need dirt-hole sets. On the other hand, virtually all seasoned upland trappers will agree that dirt-hole sets are important. They will also agree that making them correctly is tough. A lot of attention must be paid to detail.

It isn't my intent in this case to write a book that will be controversial or generate a lot of antagonistic mail. Yet I am going to list step-by-step directions detailing how I make a dirt-hole set, realizing full well that other trappers might do it a bit differently. In that regard, I will be happy to hear from trappers in Texas, Wisconsin, and even Oklahoma. I promise to be impressed with the new wrinkle you have developed if you will be similarly impressed with the fact that I am too old to change very much.

For starters, I like jump traps in my dirt-hole sets. Jump traps are small and easy to hide. They also are a hell of a lot less trouble to pack around than most other traps. That is something to consider when it might be a kilometer between traps and you are planning on walking and/or driving all day to check twelve to fifteen traps.

Traps used in up-country, dry-land sets have got to be treated; otherwise, they smell too much like humans and steel. I boil my traps for three days every spring in a washtub full of water and about three kilos of hashed-up tree bark. The bark should be from local trees, but try to select varieties that have lots of tannic acid so the trap will color nicely. Cedar and willow work nicely in the West. Oak and

This boy learned to make a basic dirt-hole set. It took three or four years of practice before he was catching a fair number of coyotes.

walnut are my choices in the East.

Finish the traps by floating a mixture of one-half beeswax mixed with one-half paraffin on the boiling water and then pulling the hot trap through the wax. In this way, the steel is blued thinly and coated with wax in one operation.

I guess people who don't have barns hang their traps in a tree in the backyard till it's time to use them in the fall. Having almost always had a barn, I don't really know for sure. The important thing is to keep the traps away from gasoline, oil, and common people smells, as much as possible.

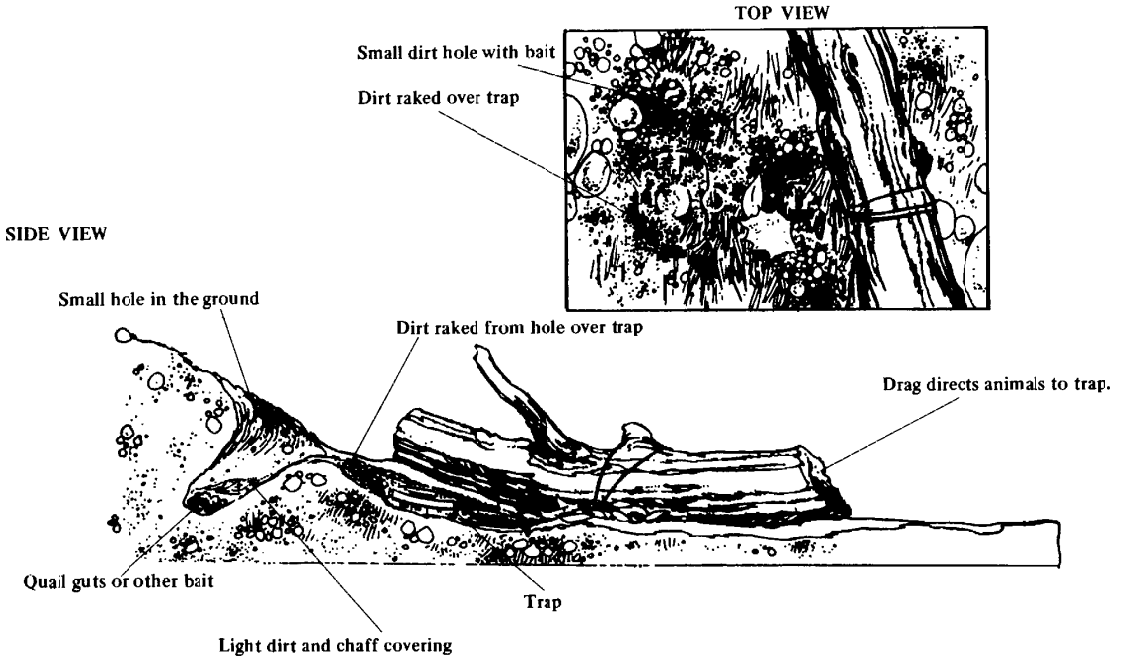
The only pack I have ever found that was worth its salt for trappers is a pack basket. A pack basket carries sharp objects nicely and will stand up on its own, making working out of it much easier than anything else I know of. As with the traps, store the pack basket away from things that will contaminate it when it is not being used.

For tools I use a small steel trowel, three-quarter length ax, pliers, and scraper. The scraper and trowel are standard garden-store issue. Some good trappers also carry along a small mesh hardware cloth sieve. They use it to sift dirt over the trap and "dust" the set. I try to set my traps someplace where it is dry; for example, under a tree or beneath an old stump. As a result, a sieve isn't terribly important. I seldom haul one along anymore. Instead, I sprinkle the dirt off the trowel and make do that way.

Some trappers make dirt-hole sets without a ground cloth. This is, as far as I am concerned, stupid. Some kind of material on which to kneel and work and on which to set the pack basket is absolutely essential. Otherwise, the set will smell so much of humans, it will take weeks before anything will come to it.

The best material for this purpose is a piece of old raw deerskin. I take a whole skin and break the fibers down a bit by pulling it over a log and/or beating it with a maul. Even so, the skin is often stiff and clumsy. Tanned deerskin smells too much like civilization to use as a ground cloth.

Some trappers use a piece of cotton tarpaulin. I think that's a mistake as well. Tarps are impregnated with preserv-


TOP VIEW
Small dirt hole with bait
Dirt raked over trap
SIDE VIEW
Small hole in the ground
Dirt raked from hole over trap
Drag directs animals to trap.
Quail guts or other bait
Trap
Light dirt and chaff covering

ing oils that I am sure the critters can smell even after the cloth is a hundred years old. Sometimes when I get especially disgusted trying to make a piece of deerskin lie down and cooperate, I will switch and use a couple of burlap bags. One is too thin and two are a pain in the neck, but that's the trapping business summarized in a nutshell.

Putting in the trap takes time. My Uncle Dugan used to figure from three to five dirt-hole sets was an awfully good day's work. Wearing rubber boots, walk up to the set location. Pull out the ground cloth. Spread it out, step on it immediately, and put the pack basket on it. Don't move off the cloth until you are ready to leave the set completely. Good trappers don't smoke or spit while making the set.

Dig the hole for the bait down about 20 to 25 cm., pulling the dirt down in a V-shape in front of the hole. Next, dig out a hollow place for the trap about 15 cm. from the hole under the loose dirt. Pile the excess material on the tarp. Set the trap and place it in the hollow. The trap should be set down deep enough so that the pan just clears ground level. I always use a drag rather than a stake to secure the trap. A good solid log or stone that will hold a wire wrap is far superior to a stake, in my opinion.

The wire I like to use is Number 16 black, for those who don't already have a preference. Copper or brass wire is more pliable but is harder to hide because of the color. Always double wrap the wire in such a way that if one strand breaks the other will continue to hold. It is also very important to tie the wire so that both strands take the strain simultaneously.

Use your ax to carefully chop a line down into the dirt, duff, and sand to hide the trap chain and wire. Push the chain in the cleft with your trowel and then close up the cut by thumping it with the hammer side of the ax. In this way, the drag can be kept far enough from the trap as not to interfere with the trap's operation. Ideally, it can be placed to guide or funnel the critter into the trap rather than obstruct it.

There are two methods that I commonly use to cover the trap. In the first, use a large maple or linden leaf to cover the

entire trap. Then sift some fine dirt from the trowel over the trap and then, using the scraper, pull the dirt from the bait hole down over the trap.

The second method entails crumpling up some firm leaves or milkweed seeds and putting them under the pan. A ball of fuzzy, loose material keeps the dirt from packing and, theoretically at least, allows the trap to spring on schedule.

Either way, be sure to cover the trap as lightly as possible and only enough to hide the trap. Don't use plastic bags, newspaper, cotton, or other human-smelling coverings.

Take a small piece of quail guts or rabbit skin and put it in the bottom of the hole. Or, as I suggested in the bait section of this book, use a piece of something that is native to the area and keep the offering small. Cover lightly with a centimeter or two of dirt. If there are many magpies around, it will take a bit more dirt to hide the bait. Rake the dirt from the bait hole down over the trap so it looks like the critter made the dirt pile while stashing the bait.

Sometimes if I have it, I sprinkle a few drops of coyote or fox urine on the set. After all these years, I am still not 100 percent sure it does that much good, especially if there are some mink or coons around that might otherwise stumble into the set.

When all is finished, put the tools back in the basket and sling the pack up. Step off the ground cloth and carry it along with any excess dirt left from the set at least 100 meters away. I usually wait three days before checking the trap and then I only walk close enough to be sure it is still functional.

The success of dirt-hole sets is very much dependent on location. One that I put in an apple orchard a few years back, for instance, caught three coyotes, one each night, three nights in a row! Other times I have had traps out six or eight months that didn't even attract a skunk.

One of the advantages of using a drag to anchor the trap is that the critter will pull the trap away from the set and not tear it up. The set in the apple orchard stayed in good condition, even after the third coyote. But other than one coon, thirty or forty days later at the end of the season, I never

got another critter. Every night, the coyotes came back and very skillfully stole the bait. I tried everything: using blood, digging the bait in deeper, using two traps, etc. I even tried nailing the bait to the apple tree that stood over the set, but it was no use. The coyotes that survived were apparently so smart they wouldn't put their foot in the trap. For a while I even had trouble finding enough bait to keep the trap going, the critters were gobbling it up so fast.

As it worked out, I sold the three coyote skins for $165. The set was way over the hill about two kilometers from our cabin and took an hour to check. I spent dozens of hours walking to the set to rebait it. As it ended up, I didn't even make wages out of it for the season.

white, rolling eyes peering up out of the dust as the four of them frantically crawled to the edge of the strike zone. Later that day, they started to talk about the incident. At night in camp they even laughed about it a bit.

The most incredible part of all this occurred a couple of days later when the trackers and the camp chef made it a point to stop by my tent to ask what in Allah's name I had in mind shooting that guinea. It was just as impossible to explain to my Somali trackers why I shot that guinea as it is to explain to a hard-nosed American sportsman why I snare deer.

But for survivors who are interested in a really good technique for collecting meat, deer snaring is one of the best. The basic concept involves placing a loop of wire across a game trail in such a way that the deer, or even a moose or elk if such inhabit the country, will lasso itself. There isn't a lot of technique involved, but it isn't a piece of cake, either. There are some things you must know before success can be assured.

Virtually any kind of wire can be used for the snare. Obviously, heavy rigging cable won't work, nor will very light-gauge wire. Otherwise, anything in between can be used as a deer snare in an emergency.

Wild Bill Moreland lived for thirteen years in the Idaho wilderness without ever coming out or even talking to anyone. Most of that time he did not have a firearm of any kind. Instead, he relied on snares made from telephone wire he swiped from the Forest Service to catch his meals. The wire, in this case, was Number 9 galvanized. Most people would reckon this sort of line was too heavy and stiff for snare material. Bill Moreland made do nicely, however.

The best wire, in my opinion, is light, flexible 3/32 or 5/32 airplane cable. Brown rubber-coated appliance wire will also work nicely for deer-sized critters. Even when there is snow on the ground, this wire camouflages easily. Other than considering the necessary flexibility and strength, there isn't much else to say about the wire.

The snare can be improved by wrapping or tying it in a lasso, or the survivor can use small cable clamps to loop the

ends. Cable clamps are generally better, but the survivor has to have made up the snares ahead of time, before the actual day of need.

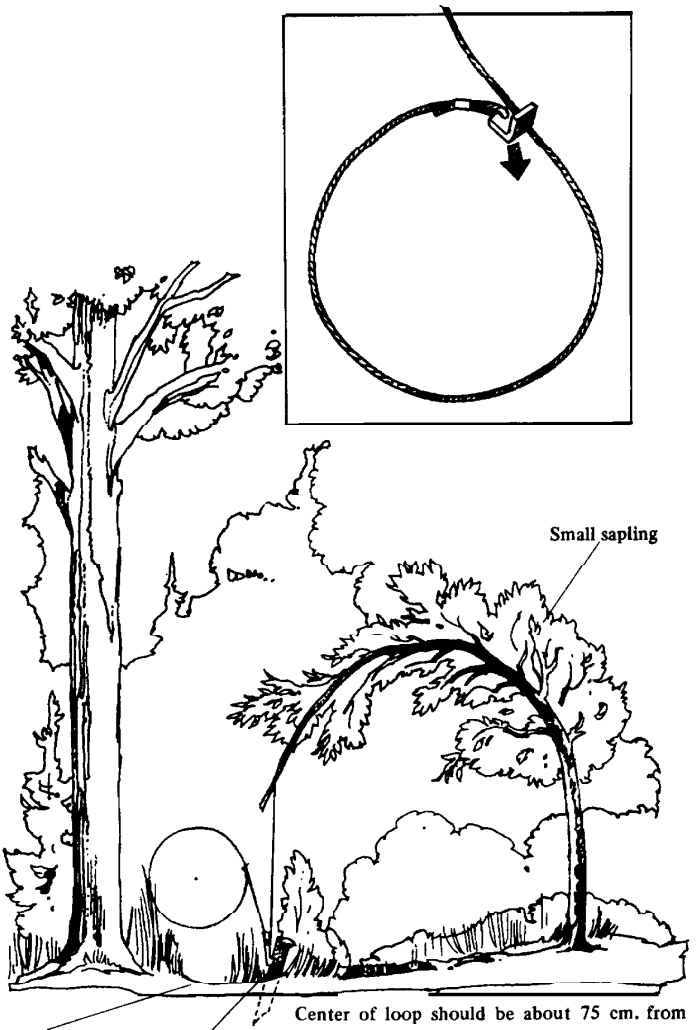
One wrinkle that I think is helpful is to put a clamp or block in the loop line so that the lasso will not close down to less than 20 cm. or so. It is very easy to snare a deer and then have it thrash around so frantically that it will strangle itself. A loop block will help prevent the deer from killing itself.

The cable line can vary in length from about two meters up to six meters or more, depending on how the set is made. I like to "spring load" my snare sets by tying them to a torqued sapling or tree branch. I rig the set so the deer will pull the wire, which is under a light, constant pressure, off a retaining assembly. Take a look at the illustration on page 115 for some ideas on how to set up a snare of this type.

It is fairly common, but probably not necessary, to use a lock on a deer snare. Locks are made from a V-shaped steel angle, with holes slightly larger than the wire diameter drilled through the two arms. Refer again to page 115. Keep in mind that the lock will only work if the V-lock is pointed into the loop.

A snare isn't worth a damn if it's set somewhere a deer will never venture. Finding a good productive location implies at least a basic knowledge of game trails, habits, and movements. Survivors who have time to spend in the brush sharpening their skills will agree that deer invariably leave distinctive, easy-to-read signs of their presence. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of deer live around millions of people without the latter ever being aware of the former's presence. If possible, the first time the neophyte reader uses deer snares should be in the fall or winter when the ground is covered with snow or the trails are muddy and tracks are easy to read.

The snare is set in the game trail at about the high belt-buckle level. Make the loop the size of a bushel basket or in the range of 60 cm. in diameter. Keep in mind that deer walk through the woods in a head-down, nose-leading posture. They customarily push through brushy obstructions along their trails. This characteristic works to the survivor's advan-


Lock; note that the "V" iron is pointed into the loop.
Small sapling
Game trail
Center of loop should be about 75 cm. from ground; approximately 45 cm. in diameter.
Peg in ground trips when pulled, allowing the sapling to put pressure on the snare.

tage. A snare placed in front of a light brush screen will catch the deer as it pushes through the foliage in a head-down posture. By the time the critter realizes it has something more than brush around its neck, it will be too late.

Deer wander around the woods when feeding or if they are spooked off their feeding grounds. Otherwise, they predictably keep to regular trails where they can be nailed with amazing impunity by the astute snare-setter.

17. Quail Recall Pens

Owning and watching a successful quail recall pen is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences an outdoor person can have.

Most, if not all, of the traps I have covered in this book are functional tools needed for a tough, lonely, and often dangerous pursuit. Trapping isn't fun. It has its rewards, but about the best one can say for it is that it is interesting and occasionally fascinating. By contrast, a quail recall pen is fascinating but also a lot of fun.

Strictly speaking, a recall isn't a trap. It is more of a cage or pen. But even these terms aren't accurate because the birds spend most of their time outside of the pen. This is what makes the outfit so interesting.

Apparently, hardcore bird-dog trainers still use recall pens. Friends tell me the pens are sometimes available from commercial dog supply houses, although I have never seen them for sale.

Ted Terrel, one of our hired hands, made the first quail pen I ever owned. We saw a picture of one in the *Farm Journal*, and Ted built it. We set it out on the front lawn at the home place. Every afternoon before she started dinner, my wife would turn the birds loose. Then, for dessert we sat on the porch and watched the quail playing around on the grass.

This young coyote, attracted by the quail in my recall pen, snuck in close enough for me to get a picture. Fortunately, my quail were all safe and sound inside the trap.

Someday, if the need ever arises and people tell me I require psychiatric help, I am simply going to save my money and accelerate my recovery by building another recall pen. I have absolutely no question that I could handle anything just by watching a bunch of friendly, cheerful little quail running around.

Except for a few weeks in spring when they pair up to nest, quail are especially social little critters. They like to get together and hunt bugs, eat grass, or just run around and enjoy life. This is what is meant as a "covey."

Once they are part of a core group, quail will go to great lengths to stay together. That is what makes the pen work. All but a few of the birds are turned loose to run around as they please. Very shortly, the released quail will return to their friends who are stuck in the pen. After a couple of hours of trying to coax them out, they apparently give up and run back into the cage for the night. Rather than run off to freedom, they join the few so that they can all stay together. The pen is a trap, but more than that it is a home for the quail—a place they can come back to night after night.

I have had several recall pens. As I remember, the longest I ever kept a covey was for about two-and-a-half years. This isn't bad for a critter whose life expectancy in the wild is about one year. By the end of two-and-a-half years, two-thirds of my birds had either died or not returned to the trap. In some cases, they probably went off to nest. Most likely, some were killed by cats.

There are three essential parts to a recall pen: a holding pen, a partitionable nesting box, and a return funnel. Using good-quality, 2.5 cm. firring strips, build a chicken-wire box about one meter wide and 75 cm. high. Use the smallest meshed wire you can find. Quail are tiny birds and can slip through awfully small holes.

Build in a service door on top of the wire box. It will be useful to feed your charges and clean their water. Leave an opening about 25 cm. square on one end of the box, and groove the wood to accept a sliding door to cover the opening. This door will be used to close off the holding pen from the nesting box.

Using 2.5 by 15 cm. boards, build a solid nesting box that is about half the size of the holding pen. It also must have a sliding door to close it off from the main pen. Construct the box so that it can be securely fastened to the pen, but is easy to separate as the need arises. As with the pen, the nesting box should be fitted with a lid to facilitate cleaning, etc.

The only part left to build is the entrance funnel. Like a lot of these devices, the funnel will be about as clear as an L.A. fog until you look at the drawing on page 121. The

purpose of the funnel is to allow the quail to get into the trap but not back out again. Build it out of chicken wire with an entrance about 14 cm. across. Extend it into the trap about 25 cm., finishing off the exit end about 4 to 5 cm. in diameter.

The idea is to provide an opening where the quail can walk into the pen and jump down inside. Place some blocks of wood outside the trap near the funnel to help the birds get up and into the funnel. Because the funnel opening is small enough that the quail have to squeeze in and because it is pointed up in the air, it becomes an effective barrier to the critters inside.

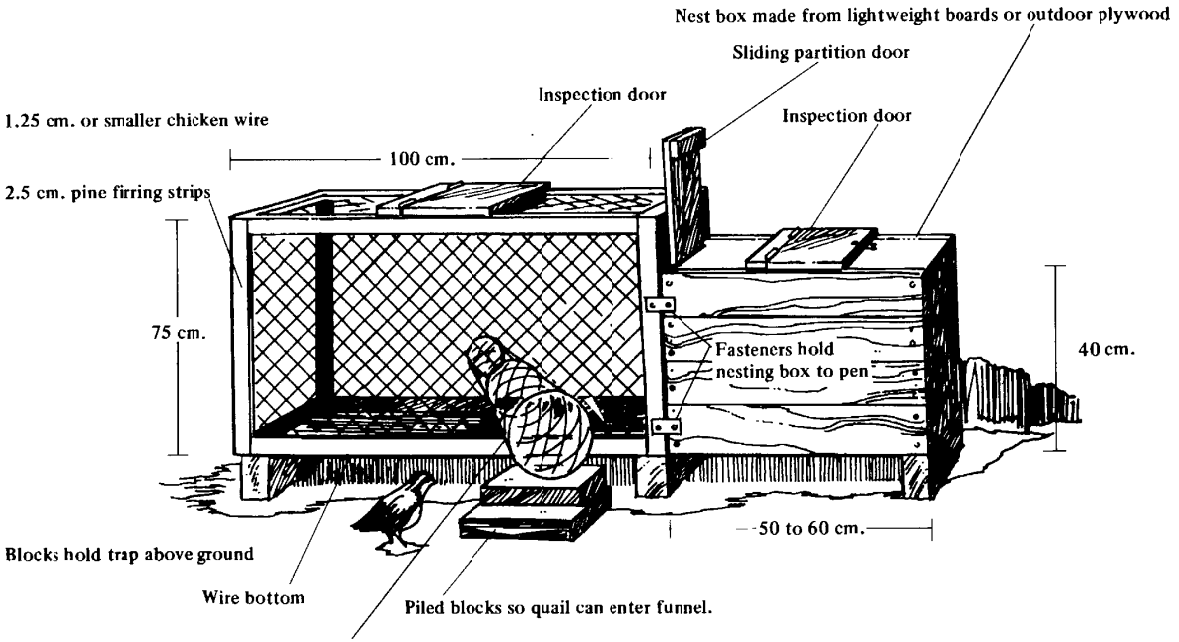
The entire trap should be elevated off the ground about 15 cm. It will keep cleaner that way. Cleanliness is very important to quail. They need fresh, clean food and clean water as well as sparklingly neat living quarters.

Using the pen requires that one have access to a covey of quail. For a pen this size, six to ten quail is about right. I caught my first quail with a net when they came into the corncrib to swipe something to eat. It was a horribly cold, frozen Midwest day, so I don't blame the quail for looking for a handout. I just took advantage of the situation. Most people would find it easier to buy three or four quail from one of the outfits that advertise in the outdoor magazines.

If you use your pen in fall when the birds are moving about, it may even be possible to catch a few additional quail, provided, of course, some sort of quail inhabit your area. Otherwise, it will be necessary to make do with whatever you put in the trap in the first place.

When you approach the pen, you will find that most of your birds will run into the nesting box. Wait till there are only two or three left in the pen and close both doors. Unhook the nesting box from the pen, place it down perhaps 25 meters from the pen, and turn the birds loose.

The birds will fly off about 100 meters and then set down. Dog trainers take advantage of this situation to start their dogs. I just turn the birds loose so they can get some exercise and a good meal. Depending on how wild they are, and how long they have been cooped up together, the released birds


Nest box made from lightweight boards or outdoor plywood
Sliding partition door
Inspection door
Inspection door
1.25 cm. or smaller chicken wire
100 cm.
2.5 cm. pine firring strips
75 cm.
Fasteners hold nesting box to pen
40 cm.
50 to 60 cm.
Blocks hold trap above ground
Wire bottom
Piled blocks so quail can enter funnel.
Funnel extends into cage; large end has about 14 cm. diameter; small end, 4 to 5 cm.

will start whistling to each other in about ten to thirty minutes. Within sixty minutes, the liberated quail will start turning up around the pen. That's when they are interesting to watch. At dusk, they will start running up the funnel into the trap. Sometimes one will stay out overnight. If a cat or fox doesn't get it, it will be back the next day and most likely in the trap by noon.

I found that it was best to position the trap in an open area surrounded by cover. That way you can watch the birds and predators will be less of a problem. However, you will still have to shoot every cat in the neighborhood if you keep the trap very long. A quail pen is like a magnet.

The whole business is loads of fun. I hope more people try recall pens. There is little in life that can compare to sitting on the porch in the evening watching a bunch of happy little quail playing around.

18. What to Avoid: Great Flops

The very first set I ever made in my life was—predictably—a flop! It isn't much of a revelation to admit that the first trap I ever set didn't catch anything. Beginners have to learn. But my first try at trapping was so bad, we still laugh about it today.

One of my brothers had a trap line. He was making some small money from it. I decided to get in the business and trap a few muskrat myself. Old man Reiff told me that muskrat make runs just like common barn rats. Art Gustafson confirmed this when we talked about it at school. Art was in the same grade as I (fifth, I think) but had missed one grade to stay home and help his dad on the farm. Art was, we all admitted, much older and smarter than the rest of us.

That next Saturday after chores, I rummaged around in old man Reiff's barn and found two ancient traps. They were so old and weak I don't think they were even suitable for weasels or barn rats. Of course I should have known better. My brother would have scrounged up any traps worth using.

I went to the creek and looked around. Sure enough, after a bit I found a worn trail down the bank, across the creek, and up the other side. A muskrat run if there ever was one, I told myself. So I set the two traps right out on the open ground where the muskrat could be sure to get in them.

I hardly slept that night. I was so excited. Two muskrat

skins were worth about five dollars. I already had the money spent for a new set of waders. Next morning I ran down to the creek to have a look. My timing was just perfect! I got there just in time to watch 200 shoats running down the bank over my traps and up the other side.

For city people who don't know, shoats are adolescent fattening pigs half of which have been neutered. They are nuttier than hell anyway, and the neutered ones seem to have an even lower I.Q.

My poor traps were trampled so deep in the mud it took me thirty minutes to find them.

Through the years I have tried quite a number of highly regarded sets. Some are regional in nature and just don't work in the areas I was trapping at the time. Others are just plain and simple losers that never have, in my estimation, produced any fur for anybody.

My favorite in this category is the one where the trapper hangs a chicken, grouse, or pheasant wing on a string and puts a trap below it. It's supposed to be dynamite for bobcats, marten, fisher, and fox--the books say. It's an easy set to make, so I tried it often in my early years and, true to form, it was very consistent. I always got nothing!

Perhaps a bad start has prejudiced my judgment, but most run sets fall into this category. Animals usually aren't numerous and consistent enough to run up and down a path often enough to make trapping them there profitable. Unless on the unlikely chance I see quite a lot of tracks and a good natural restriction in the trail, I let that kind of set go.

I have never been able to make a floating-log set work. Baited with sweet corn or carrots, they are supposed to be dynamite for muskrat. I have tried this set in marshes full of muskrat houses, in lakes and bayous, and on rivers in the South. Again the results are consistent. Nothing. To the best of my knowledge, rats don't climb on floating logs, eat carrots or corn, or ever get caught in sets that rely on these traits.

Another set that will usually not work is the one that depends mainly on some kind of weird bait or scent. Don't kid yourself. Turkey gizzards and oil of spearmint are not dynamite on badgers.

Nor have I ever been able to catch coyotes with hamburger and raisins, bobcats and lynx with catnip, or muskrats with cornmeal. One guy even told me he uses old canoe paddles to bait porcupines. Woodsmen who have been around porkies know this last deal at least sounds credible. Only it doesn't work, either!

Generally the more complex a set, the less likely it will work. My rule of thumb is that every part of a set must have a purpose. If everything is reasonable and the set is still complex—my den traps are a good example—count on the set not really working very well for at least six to eight months.

By and large, setting any steel trap in a tree is a mistake. My brother put a Number 1 jump trap in an eighteen-meter buckeye one time. He used an extension ladder to get it right where he wanted it. This is an obviously bad example, but what I am mostly referring to is putting dens in trees. It's hard to hide the trap, and during trapping season the critters don't run up the trees to their dens that often anyway.

Setting a trap at the entrance to a beaver or muskrat den is usually, in my opinion, futile. Often the critter will swim out over the trap, touching it off with its chest. The trap will have some hairs in it, but seldom anything more. If it does snag a critter, it will snag the front leg, inviting a wring off.

Another surefire flop will occur if the trapper puts the bait on the pan of the trap. Perhaps I have been at this business too long, but I can't imagine why anybody would do this. Yet amateur trappers still make sets this way. Perhaps they want to catch the critter by the nose!

Any trapper who has ever just pinched a critter's toe can tell stories about sets that don't work. Undoubtedly, there are more sets that don't work than do. The lesson is to accept the fact that lots of ideas don't produce fur—even if they are simple, well done, and use natural conditions rather than an artificial situation.

My answer has always been to move on to something else. No one ever gets ahead riding losing ponies.

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