

Trapping is an excellent way to get hands-on experience with some of the Natural State's most interesting animals. Here's how to get started.

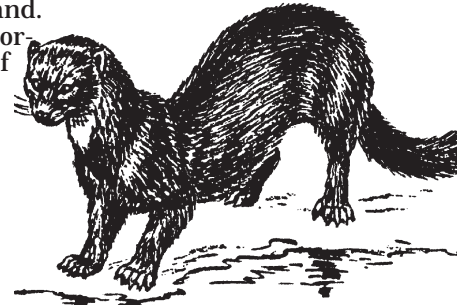
Beginning Trapping

by Jim Spencer



So, you want to become a trapper, do you? It's enjoyable, potentially profitable and a great way to learn firsthand about furbearers and the world they live in. The lure of trapping is strongest in those who enjoy a solitary outdoor experience. It has a noble history, and trappers were the original explorers, pushing westward into new territory in a new land.

It's an important part of Arkansas' heritage. Arkansas' first town, Arkansas Post, was founded because of the



trapping activities that took place there. Unfortunately, many misinformed people are seeking to eliminate the sport.

However, wildlife managers know carefully-regulated trapping is a legitimate management tool, and no species of furbearer in Arkansas is in danger because of trapping. Furbearer populations are not adversely affected by trappers operating within the legal framework of seasons and methods.

Trapping is a one-on-one thing, with the trapper pitting his knowledge and ability against the habits and elusiveness of the animal he's trying to catch. The idea of going head-to-head against a wild animal on its own turf, trying to decipher from the available sign and from your knowledge of that animal's habits what it will do next is intriguing.

As a group, trappers are among the most knowledgeable outdoorsmen. They notice things that usually remain unnoticed by outdoorsmen who don't trap. And the reason they notice these things is because running a string of traps teaches them the value of being observant.

Trapping is an exacting endeavor. In deer hunting, if a hunter can predict within 50 to 75 yards where a deer is likely to travel, he can harvest that animal. A trapper, on the other hand, must locate the precise square inch of ground where his target animal will set its foot. If he can't do that, he won't catch the animal. Simple as that.

Simple, yet incredibly complicated. One of the reasons trapping is a dying art is there are fewer fathers running traplines and passing their knowledge on to their sons and daughters. Experience is always the best teacher, but there are certain things a beginning trapper needs to know, just to get started.

The two main types of trapping are dry-land trapping and water trapping. Land-based Arkansas furbearers include gray foxes, bobcats, coyotes, opossums and raccoons. Water-based furbearers include beavers, otters, mink, muskrats, nutria, as well as opossum and raccoon.

Water Trapping

Water trapping, generally, is easier than land trapping. With rare exceptions, most sets for water-based furbearers are found where water meets land, making it easier to pick effective set locations. Water trapping is also simpler, because a trapper doesn't have to worry as much about foreign odors scaring furbearers away from his sets. A submerged trap can't be detected by scent.

Water-oriented furbearers make trails along lake or stream banks. These trails make excellent set locations, especially where they enter the water to avoid obstructions such as stumps or steep banks. It's easy to scoop out a shallow bed in the muck at the water's edge and lay a suitable-sized trap for the target animal. Trail sets are the most common of all water-set locations, and some trappers use them almost exclusively.

The well-rounded water trapper, though, uses several other set techniques. Some banks don't have well-defined trails, requiring the use of other types of sets. The pocket, or hole set, is a good choice. The hole can be natural or man-made, either at the water line or high and dry on the bank.

Pocket sets are effective for muskrats, mink, coons, opossums and otters. The basic pocket set consists of a hole dug at least 15 inches into the bank, with bait and/or lure placed at the back of the hole and a trap con-

cealed at the entrance. Most trappers make these pockets from four to six inches in diameter, but a larger hole, up to a foot across, is often more attractive to raccoons.

It's sound trapline strategy to make pocket sets both at the waterline with the trap set in one to two inches of water and higher on the bank with the trap covered by dirt or leaves. Such variety tempts unpredictable critters and also guards against your entire trapline being put out of commission by fluctuating water levels.

Logs, whether floating, slanting from the bank into the water, or fallen and spanning narrow streams, also make excellent set locations. Floating logs and slanting logs are used as resting, feeding and toilet areas by muskrats, mink, raccoons and otters, and a trap solidly bedded in a chopped-out place on the log will catch a lot of fur. Logs across streams, of course, are used as bridges by a wide variety of furbearers, and sets can be made either on the log itself or at the ends of the log.

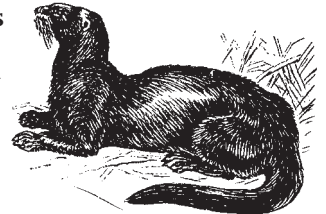
Muskrats, and to lesser extent beavers, commonly make feed beds, either in a sheltered place along the bank or in shallow water where vegetation supports their weight. These beds consist of discarded bits of vegetation and sometimes grow to a yard or more in diameter. Traps concealed directly in the center of these feed beds make very effective set locations.

Other excellent set locations are found around bridges, culverts and drain pipes at the edge of the water. Most water-based furbearers are attracted to these places, and close examination usually reveals a likely place to set a trap. Stumps, logs and trees at the water's edge are also fur magnets.

There are infinite variations on all the above sets, but these basics are enough to get you started and as you gain experience on the trapline, you'll develop your own favorite water sets.

Land Trapping

As in water trapping, the key to land-trapping success is accurately predicting furbearer movements. It's a little harder with land-based animals, because



they're not as restricted.

Still, land animals have definite travel routes. Old roads through the woods, edges of fields and clearcuts, ridgelines, the base of steep bluffs or cliffs, fencerows and ditch banks through farm country—all these and more are likely places to look for sign and make sets.

As with the water sets, there are many types and variations of dry-land sets. But the beginning trapper needs to know only two—the trail set and the dirt-hole set.

The trail set is just what it says. Land animals such as foxes and bobcats sometimes make visible trails through weeds and around the edge of field corners. A trap carefully bedded and covered at ground level in one of these trails is an effective set.

The dirt-hole set is the bread-and-butter set of the upland trapline. Basically, it consists of a small hole dug at a 45-degree angle about eight to 10 inches deep. The trap is solidly bedded and carefully concealed in the dirt in front of the hole. Lure and/or bait is usually placed in the hole as an attractant.

Set location is the key to dirt-hole trapping. Many beginning trappers place too much faith in the power of lure or bait to pull a furbearer off its intended path. Sometimes it will, but you're better off if you set close to the animal's normal route. Ideally, the hole is dug within a few feet of where the animal passes. Good locations for dirt-hole sets are trail intersections, firebreaks, along the inside bend of curves in woods roads, gaps in fencerows and other natural or man-made features that tend to funnel and concentrate the movements of animals passing from one area to another.

A land trapper must pay closer attention to trapline cleanliness. Foxes, coyotes and to a lesser extent bobcats, are keen-nosed animals. They're much more likely to shy away from a trap not properly treated and handled. It's possible to catch these animals in dirty, smelly traps, but it's better to keep traps clean. Boiling, dyeing and waxing traps to rid unwanted odors greatly increases your catch.

Regardless of whether you run a water or dry-land trapline, ethics and consideration of others are of utmost importance. Don't trap private land without permission, and if there's a chance of catching somebody's dog or cat, pass up that set and look elsewhere.

Pelt Care

Once you've caught an animal, what next? There are several options. Some local fur buyers buy animals "in the round," and many trappers sell their catch without skinning it. Not all buyers have the facilities for skinning, though, so some trappers skin their catch, freeze the pelts, then sell them periodically to local buyers.

The traditional process requires the most work but is satisfying in its own right. This involves skinning, fleshing and stretching pelts before selling them. Properly handled pelts afford a trapper many more options. He can sell to a local buyer, or ship the pelts to other markets. He can take the pelts to a fur auction. Or, he can hold the pelts, waiting for more favorable prices.

No matter how you choose to handle your fur, operate your traplines in an efficient manner. Make drowning sets or killer sets at every opportunity, run your lines frequently, dispatching and removing catches quickly. This is the first step in ensuring the best possible return on your furs at the market, and it's humane to the animals you're catching.

Trapping is an art built on experience and attentiveness to the animals you pursue and the environment where they live. The odor of fresh mud on a beaver lodge. The chill of cold water in a back-country muskrat marsh. A heron's protesting cry as it is startled by your presence. Long lines of blackbirds against the winter sky. The comfortable weight of a good day's catch on your back. These are the solitary pleasures of the trapper.



Arkansas Game & Fish Commission

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