

WADING

IN

A Modern Perspective on Trapping

by Jeff Traynor

I ARRIVED

early to meet with a new client on a remote piece of their property, and was pleasantly surprised when my truck's GPS system brought me to the designated rendezvous point. It was a relief to see the landowner arriving down the same access road over which I had just passed, and as I waited for her to pull into the clearing alongside the stream I began to survey my surroundings – and the situation. I didn't need to venture far from my truck to determine that beavers were newly present in the environment.

The line of trees crudely wrapped in chicken wire and the dammed-up culvert system told me that the landowner had made previous attempts to co-exist with her new buck-toothed neighbors. The pile of removed sticks and debris, along with a metal rake snapped in half, suggested frustrations had mounted, and that the beavers had gotten the better of the situation. After an enthusiastic introduction, and a description of how dramatically the land had changed since the beaver's arrival, I started to scout the surroundings and assess the habitat, with my client observing from a distance.

Waders donned, I sloshed into the water, hip deep in congealed layers of mud and sediment. The now-slow water current twisted through the wood line and made its way under the access road. Since the beavers had moved in, the inconspicuous stream had become a full-fledged swamp threatening to wash out the road and flow-pipe system. I used my boot heel to

identify and navigate the submerged maze of beaver-made runs and channels, seeking out a good spot to place a trap. I observed an area along the waterlogged creek bank dotted with freshly chewed poplar shoots and mounds of piled mud, scented with a gamey vanilla aroma. These mud piles are known as "castor mounds," a scent marker used by beavers to establish boundaries between competing territories. Each muddy mound is spritzed with a gland secretion from the beaver's backside and can be found around the shores of inhabited areas. These subtle clues and details would determine whether I was successful in trapping the crafty subaquatic rodents which had now taken up residence in an inconvenient part of the stream system.

My new client was relieved to hear that I was available to start trapping immediately, and even more relieved to hear that there was no charge for the service—except of course for her signature on a state-mandated trapping permit. During the fall and winter months, many trappers waive their off-season nuisance control trapping fees to access ideal properties for fur pelts, beaver gland extract, and edible protein. Yes, that's right—beaver is edible when properly handled and makes fine table fare for stews, chili, and dried jerky. Fur pelts may not be paying a king's ransom in 2019, but few fibers are comparable to a thick beaver fur hat, especially during New Hampshire's frigid winters. Beaver fur naturally repels water, insulates against cold temperatures, and has been a staple of commerce and trade since our nation's inception.

Trial and Error

I recall my first nuisance beaver trapping job over a decade ago. Beaver trappers were in demand, and it wasn't long before I was waist deep in a man-made fire pond tucked away on a rural New Hampshire road. One lone beaver had felled trees across the roadway, which increased the size of the pond, consequently affecting three unhappy property owners. I tracked that beaver for weeks in a precarious game of trial and error. Every move I made the beaver anticipated, and I did my best to adapt and correct mistakes in trap placement. I can tell you with certainty, it's never a good feeling being outsmarted by a rodent.

As winter began to set in, I finally caught my quarry, much to the relief of the otherwise frustrated property owners. I made a promise to myself before getting into the "trapping business" that I'd try to use every part of every creature I trapped, and that first 60-pound beaver would be no exception. The involvement doesn't end at simply catching an animal in a trap. Much like a deer hunter field dressing their game, a furbearing animal needs to be packed out and skinned quickly. Edible meat needs to be butchered and processed and valuable scent glands removed. The hide then needs to be placed across a wooden board and remnants of fat or tissue removed to eliminate spoilage. Once completed, the pelt needs to be stretched and dried for selling to a local fur buyer or tanned to preserve the hide for personal use. Other traps out on the landscape must be checked daily, which typically leaves the aforementioned

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process to be performed late at night, or in the wee hours of the morning. For anyone who thinks trapping is a lazy-man's game, I can assure you it takes more time, knowledge, and dedication than one would think. Extensive preseason scouting, coupled with the daunting yearly task of preparing traps for successful use in the field, tends to weed out some prospective newcomers.

Benefits of Trapping

Trapping has the reputation of being a financially driven activity. While pelt value is certainly a component of trapping, it isn't the sole reason many decide to engage in the activity. State biologists and agencies across the country rely heavily on licensed trappers for monitoring and reporting of population health, abundance, and density. The relationship between a trapper wading through muck and cold snow and the state-appointed wildlife managers tasked with safeguarding these natural resources is a driving force in my outspoken support for trapping today. Massachusetts heavily restricted the practice of beaver trapping in 1996 amid protests by animal protectionist groups. Following these ballot-driven restrictions, the state's beaver population dramatically expanded from 18,000 to

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almost 55,000 in a mere two years.

Massachusetts has since reduced some restrictions after increased property damage, complaints, and reports of residents taking beaver issues "into their own hands." In 2018, over 50% of beavers trapped in New Hampshire were taken directly due to nuisance conflict situations. Last year, beavers were surpassed only by the skunk and the opossum as top state-wide "public complaint" furbearing species that were handled by licensed trappers. Furbearers include beavers, raccoons, skunks, and coyotes, among other species. It's interesting to note that seasonal control of some of these furbearing species also helps to encourage the reestablishment and productivity of endangered wildlife, including Blanding's turtles, which are often prey of raccoons and skunks, and

the American marten which continues to rebound in New Hampshire as a result of coyote and fisher control.

Who Are Trappers?

Trappers are a diverse group among New Hampshire's outdoor enthusiasts. We tend to have an unparalleled eye for natural surroundings and an intimate level of understanding for wildlife behavior. These skills and observances are key to successful trapping and are invaluable to those in the biology and ecology professions. New Hampshire's trappers are usually the first line of eyes and ears for potential issues, especially with furbearers. Trapping works to keep these furbearer populations at healthy levels, preventing overpopulation, which can significantly increase the risk of density-dependent diseases such as rabies



Beaver dams are a marvel of animal engineering, but they can cause flooding and property damage where the lines between humans and beavers are crossed. New Hampshire's trappers are an essential part of resolving these issues as well as keeping furbearer populations at healthy levels. Modern traps are more humane and refined to avoid unintended capture of other animals.



The science-based ethical standards that trappers adhere to are a key component in the effort to conserve and maintain the resource.



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and canine distemper.

Because of these specialized skills and training, trappers are vital to maintaining a balance between conservation and wildlife-human conflict. The benefit of regulated trapping over mere “damage control” is that “problem” wildlife are fully utilized and cherished, rather than regarded as mere pests.

The perception of modern trapping still faces some challenges, both politically and publicly. As New Hampshire’s human population increases, wildlife management will be needed more than ever to curtail the impact we have on animal populations, as well as the impact wildlife has on us and other species. Now, and in the future, state agencies, trappers, and other stakeholders in the conservation community need to work together to properly convey the immense importance of this historic activity.

If you’re interested in joining the ranks of the state’s skilled trapper base, there are a few things to bear in mind. A Trapper Education class is mandatory. Upon completion, you’ll need to purchase a license, file written landowner permission with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, adhere to science-based regulations and harvest limits, check your traps daily, and, most importantly, report

your catch to Fish and Game along with each season’s efforts. Consider modern developments to humane trapping standards. *Best Management Practices for Trapping in the United States* are a set of standards written by the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies. These standards seek to ensure that a scientifically humane element of take remains a cornerstone of modern trapping.

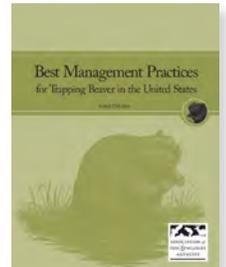
In place of the stereotypical “mountain man” gruffness, synonymous with fur trappers, now stands a diverse cross-section of the state’s citizenry, which includes doctors, police officers, school teachers, firefighters, and biologists. These citizens, like me, traverse the woods and waters of the Granite State every fall and winter, with sustainability in mind, to help conserve our wild resources for future generations to enjoy.



Jeff Traynor is a licensed Wildlife Control Operator and lifelong New Hampshire native. He is the recipient of the NH Fish and Game Commission's 2017 Communication Award of Excellence, in which he was recognized for his heavily researched e-columns focusing on wildlife management.

BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Best Management Practices for Trapping in the United States was written by the Furbearer Conservation



Technical Work Group of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in 2006. The publication cover practices, equipment, and techniques that will continue to ensure the welfare of trapped animals, avoid unintended captures of other animals, improve public confidence in trappers and wildlife managers, and maintain public support for trapping and wildlife management. To learn more about these best management practices, visit www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-inspires/furbearer-management.

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