TRAPPING -- AN AMERICAN HERITAGE

EARLY NORTH AMERICA

North American natives used furbearers and other mammals for their survival since before documented history.

The date of human inhabitance steps back in time with each new archeological discovery made.

RECORDED EXPLORATION OF NORTH AMERICA

Approximately 874 A.D.

Started with the recorded settlement of Norsemen (Vikings) in the northern fringes of North America.

1000 A.D.

Exploration and settlement along eastern seaboard by Vikings.

1400's A.D.

Exploration started in earnest by Europeans.

1500's A.D.

French explorer Cartier called the lands he found as New France. He returned home with a full ship load of valuable furs. Cartier thought he'd found the Northwest Passage to the Orient, but it was in fact the St. Lawrence River. After his voyage, others came to New France and discovered what was known as The Land Of Furs.

Spanish explorations in South America, Mexico and Southern North America were in earnest at this time. Spain found wealth in precious metals. Discoveries to the north resulted in the animal species such as buffalo, antelope, and grizzly bear

British expeditions to the east coast from Newfoundland down to the Carolina's resulted in discoveries of wealth in furs, hides and timber

1600's A.D.

Important to the developing fur trade came with De Champlain's explorations into Cartier's New France. In 1608 he founded the City of Quebec. His exploration of the lands around the St. Lawrence River system built up the North American fur trade which made France a wealthy nation. At his urging, his countrymen came and settled in this paradise of fur.

The following year of 1609 Henry Hudson accomplished the same on the Hudson River where New Amsterdam (N.Y.C.) was founded to support the Dutch fur trade.
In 1610 Henry Hudson returned, still seeking the Northwest Passage. He found his way into Hudson Bay. This immense, abundant trapping region of Northern Canada was claimed by the British due to Hudson's exploration.

Another French explorer, LaSalle, went down the Mississippi River from Canada all the way to the Gulf of Mexico claiming lands along his route for France.

THE FRONTIER

The territories that the Europeans settled were filled with danger. They suffered many hardships in just getting their basic needs. They faced dangers from weather, animals, hostile Indians and even from their fellow Europeans whose countries claimed ownership over the same regions. England & France were in constant dispute over land ownership in Northern America. As their lands were rich in furs, these disputes resulted in battles with each other and with certain tribes of Indians. Fur companies employed groups of trappers and hunters to open up new territories, where they built forts for trading. These eventually grew into settlements. The fur companies depended on the Indians to supply the bulk of furs (mainly beaver). For these furs they traded guns, tools, jewelry and liquor. The most successful fur company was Hudson Bay Company, whose headquarters was in London. It changed many times with financial ups & downs and ownership between England & France during its long history. Despite this it still exists today.

After the European countries ended their disputes over land areas, North America became a somewhat safer place to live. Trapping, farming and hunting continued to be very important and necessary occupations for the settlers.

Not long after we won independence from England and we bought the Louisiana Purchase, exploration of the interior or the North American continent started.
In 1804, President Jefferson sent out the Lewis & Clark expedition, seeking an overland route to the Pacific. Their 8000 mile overland excursion opened up the west for hundreds of adventurers who were to seek the rich hunting and trapping fields reported by the expedition. This started the era of THE MOUNTAIN MEN.

History has written down the bold, exciting, dangerous ventures of these brave, daring men who broke and blazed the trails of opportunity and expansion of the North American Frontier with hard work, sacrifice, hardships and bloodshed. Their exploits are recorded in our history books, movies and in song. They are the heritage of North American trapping. These were the pioneers of our continent whose love of adventure, fearlessness and undying persistence set them apart from all others in our history.

The trapping trade and furs brought about the expansion & growth of the United States and Canada.

The trapping industry of these two great nations today still amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars in the international markets of our modern world.

TRAPS, USES, and OTHER THINGS

The species of animal that are targeted by the trapper is what causes a trapper to select certain traps to "best" do the job. It is true that most animals can be taken in about any size trap, but size and type selection will increase the efficient and humane taking of a species under most conditions. An example would be the use of a number two coil spring for muskrats. It can easily break the leg bone and allow the rat to wring out and escape which is not humane nor desirable as it brings no value to the trapper. On the other hand it could also ensure a quick drowning for the rat which is a good thing.

So the answer would be the use of a normal size trap for muskrats which would be a size one or one in a half foothold, and the use of a "stop loss' trap of that size would be warranted where drowning is not ensured due to water depth and or location of the set. A 110 size killer trap would be another good or better and more humane choice in many locations such as a feed bed where drowning is not possible.

The same applies to mink, as they are best caught under most circumstances with the same size traps and in like situations. One thing different, but very effective for mink is the use of older number two traps in blind sets where a mink would be entering or leaving deep water with minimum debris which would ensure drowning . Under this scenario it would be a very efficient trap to use. So this is still confusing to the inexperienced trapper to be sure. Only experience will provide you with appropriate exception to the use of the normal size and type of trap to use under certain situations.

So what is the recommended size trap to use for muskrat and mink under normal situations? The following are applicable:

Size 1 or 1 ½ foot hold traps that may be a long spring, coil spring, or a jump type of trap. The long spring or jump trap may or may not be of a stop loss configuration. Also the 110 or 120 size or the newer 155 killer type of trap is of the correct size. These size traps are also correct for marten.

The size 1 ½ and 2 coil spring traps along with double long spring number 2 traps, and the older no longer made size number 2 and 21 jump traps are good for fox, coon, fisher and similar size animals.

The size number 2 and 3 traps in a coil spring or double long spring are appropriate for coyote and bobcat size animals. Most traps used for these two animals are best served by several possible modifications to the type of trap coming straight out of the box. These may include modifications such as night latching, four coiling, base plate re-enforcement, bottom center swiveling, shortening the chain and additional swivels. These modifications enhance the performance of the trap. Some coil springs can be purchased with some of these modifications already done at additional cost over the plain basic version. Bobcats may also be taken in size 220 and up killer type traps in some types of sets.

The size number 3, 4, and 5 size coil spring and double long spring traps, along with number 3, 4, and 14 jump traps are appropriate for otter and beaver along with size 270 and 330 killer type traps. The 220 is also used for otter under some situations.

There are other size and configurations of traps manufactured, and most all of the manufacturer's recommend what is appropriate size for different animals.

The plain old wood based rat trap is also a fine trap used to take weasel (ermine).

Snares are used in many states to take many different furbearers, while here in Maine we are restricted to their use for only beaver underwater.

Weather conditions, soil type, and location will also dictate what particular trap is best suited for a targeted animal species. Only experience can teach you these things. Time spent talking to more experienced trappers is well worth the effort to get them talking to you. Some groups of trappers such as our own, The Carrabassett Valley Trappers and the Maine Trappers Association put on demonstrations periodically on trapping techniques for specific species. Also, a few experienced trappers will take on an in-experienced individual as an apprentice for a trap preparation and modifications, and fur handling and selling of furs. There are many good books and DVD's on the market today about trapping specific species.

TRAP PREPARATION BASICS

New traps are received from the manufacturers with oil on them.

This must be removed and is normally accomplished by boiling the traps; some take them to a car wash and remove it by blasting with hot soapy water & then rinsed.
Used traps are treated the same way to remove dirt & scent left on the traps from previous use. Any rust would be removed by a wire bush.

Used traps are then ready for re-dying, while new traps need to be allowed to get a light coat of rust on them so that they will take dye well.

Before dyeing, new & used traps are inspected to ensure that they are in good condition, then adjusted or modified as needed for the intended application (animal species). Trap identification tags should be attached at this time.

Dyeing is accomplished to help preserve the trap (metal), reduce odor contamination, and to also make them easier to conceal. Dyeing can be accomplished by several methods.
Trap dye solutions or compounds are available through trapping supply houses. Some of these can be applied cold, while others require boiling water.
Some trappers prefer to use available natural dyes such as maple bark, hemlock twigs, sumac berries, walnut hulls or bark, or sweet fern.
These are all used in boiling water and the use of cloth sacks to put the natural materials in for boiling will help keep debris from attaching to the traps. Other natural dyes are used in other parts of the country.
Properly dyed traps can be packed away and stored for use later. Dyed traps are odorless and should be stowed to keep them that way.

Some foothold traps are treated further by waxing them. Waxing should be done carefully as it can result in severe burns and will also splatter if moisture gets in the hot wax. The young trapper should not do this without an adult present. This is normally done for traps to be used in water or for winter use as it helps to reduce rusting, and many believe it speeds up the traps firing time.
Body grip traps should never be waxed as it makes them difficult to set and can be dangerous to the trapper in the larger sizes.

OTHER USES AND VALUES OF FURBEARERS

Some furbearers such as beaver, muskrat, raccoon and bobcat are edible. In some parts of the country there is a commercial market for the meat.

Glands of many species have value.

Animal skulls, claws, teeth have value.

Taxidermists are always in the market for unusual animals of a species or for displays for museum or commercial establishments.

TRAPPER SAFETY & HEALTH

Trappers usually work alone or at best with a partner. Because of this, they need to keep alert, avoid risky undertakings, be knowledgeable of first aid, be proficient at navigation in the woods, and avoid dangerous situations. They are subject to dangers such as accidents resulting in broken bones or loss of blood, freezing temperatures, hypothermia, drowning, diseases from animals, attacks from animals and poisonous snakes. Sharp tools such as axes & knives, improper clothing, firearms, poisonous plants, illegal activities by others, and a multitude of other things are all potential dangers. A trapper must be able to help himself when confronted with a dire situation because help is normally not available. If he cannot, the end results may not be good.

MAINE FURBEARERS TRAPPED

Beaver, Muskrat, Red Fox, Raccoon, Marten, Fisher, Otter, Bobcat, Mink, Weasel, Skunk, Black Bear, Coyote, Gray Fox, and Opossum. Canada Lynx are protected.

Prepared by: David Miller
September 26, 2012