

Animal trapping methods

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Traps used to catch fur bearing animals are tailored to the species and habitat of the animal. The trapper must consider the types of bait, the size of trap to be used, the placement of the trap and where the fur-bearing animal is most likely to be caught. The success of which is often due to the trapper's personal experience, familiarity with the habits of the animal, and the terrain. Conscientious and experienced trappers also take care that the trap is not in such place that it will be sprung by a non-target animal, nor will it attract the attention of people. A responsible trapper will check his traps at least once a day, and will be ready to quickly despatch a trapped animal if it is still alive.

Although there are a variety of traps used for different purposes, this article focuses on the trapping of fur-bearing animals, and thus relies on foothold traps and conibear traps, though the utility of other types of traps will be discussed.

Contents

- 1 History
- 2 Preparation for trapping
- 3 Fur-bearing animals
 - 3.1 Bears
 - 3.2 Beaver
 - 3.3 Coyote
 - 3.4 Fox
 - 3.5 Lynx
 - 3.6 Martens and fisher
 - 3.7 Mink
 - 3.8 Muskrats
 - 3.9 Nutria
 - 3.10 Mice
 - 3.11 Rats
 - 3.12 Otter
 - 3.13 Rabbits
 - 3.14 Raccoons
 - 3.15 Sable
 - 3.16 Skunks and Opossums
 - 3.17 Squirrels
 - 3.18 Tigers
 - 3.19 Weasels
 - 3.20 Wolverines
 - 3.21 Wolves
- 4 Snares
- 5 Deadfalls
- 6 Box or cage traps
- 7 Birds

- 8 Skinning animals
- 9 Occupational Risks
- 10 See also
- 11 References
- 12 External links

History

In North America and in other parts of the world with cold climates such as northern Europe or Siberia, there is a long history of trapping. Small to large sized fur-bearing animals such as beaver, otter, raccoons, coyotes, muskrats, rabbits, fox, opossums, skunks, weasels, wolves, bears and mink have been trapped for centuries. Animals have been trapped for their furs to make clothing as well as for food.

Trapping evolved from when early man realized that he could catch animals that were difficult to hunt. In that animals that came out at night or were in thick brush could not be hunted successfully. Therefore, trapping methods began to be used such as deadfalls, pits, and snares to catch animals that roamed at night or in the thick brush.

Native Americans have employed a variety of traps that were made of natural materials. deadfalls, snares, nets, trapping pits, and fish weirs were made of natural materials such as stone, logs or twine.

In the early 17th century steel leg hold traps were made by blacksmiths from iron. In the early 19th century blacksmiths made animal leg hold traps for mountain men. Soon after, commercially available factory-made animal traps became available.

Trappers traditionally operate alone or with a partner.

Preparation for trapping

When preparing new traps, some trappers prefer to allow them be exposed to the elements for several weeks. They allow the traps to rust before dyeing and waxing them. Used traps are prepared before the start of the trapping season. The traps are prepared by divesting them as much as possible of all scents associated with humans. The main method is to boil the traps along with walnut bark or walnut hulls. The natural tannins of the walnut wood destroy or mask all adherent scents. After an hour of boiling traps in a large pot, beeswax may be added to the pot, and shortly after this the traps can be removed. The traps will be lightly coated with the beeswax, which covers the scent of the metal. The beeswax is also effective at preventing corrosion. The beeswax treatment is not used with conibear traps.

Among other equipment, the trapper will also have an axe, knife, wooden stakes, metal stakes, a pack basket or backpack, rubber gloves, boots, warm clothes as well as jars or bottles of animal scents (these are commercially available in specialty stores and many stores with a sporting goods department). An axe or hatchet is used to fashion wooden stakes or to chop through ice. The wooden stakes are to secure a trap; most traps come with a length of chain and a steel ring. Staking them down prevents the animal from fleeing with the trap. Metal "drags" are also often used. These are usually large treble hooks shaped from metal bars, 1/4 inch in diameter. These drag-hooks are attached to a metal chain four to five feet long and placed under the trap.

Transportation depends on climate, the topography the trapper is in, and what is available to the trapper. While

some trappers may walk great distances, some use automobiles, bicycles, four wheel off the road vehicles, or motorcycles. In northern climates, trappers use snowmobiles. Boats or canoes are popular and utilitarian choices when trapping along rivers or streams. In the past, travelling by horse was common.



Trapper's cabin, Alaska (2009).

Before the trapping season, and when a trapper chooses to trap an area far from home, that daily commutes are prohibitive, some trappers will build a trap line cabins. Cabins are traditionally built of logs or lumber in wilderness areas usually near water. This can be a stream or a lake. Trappers typically spend the summer off-season building or maintaining their cabins. If the area has a lot of trees, trappers will cut down trees with a chain saw and build a cabin usually with the help of someone else. A cabin can take 3 weeks or more to build, depending on the number of builders. Should the area have few trees, wood is brought in with four wheel off the road vehicles or snow mobiles. These cabins can range in size from three meters to six meters each way. Cabins are near water to allow for water for cooking, washing, and for drinking. Inside is a wood stove so the cabin

can be warmed. The cabins are stocked with dried and canned food, oil lamps, kerosene, cooking utensils, medical supplies, sleeping bags, wood, kindling, traps, fur stretchers, knives, axes, and other supplies for survival or personal comfort. The cabin usually has one or two windows for light.

Trappers search for signs of fur-bearing animals early in the autumn; such signs include fresh scat, foot prints, worn trails, or chewed bark. Once the animals range has been identified, the trapper now knows where to trap. Signs of active muskrats are usually found along streams, rivers, or in swamps. Signs of fox, raccoon, or opossums are typically found along the edge of fields, orchards, and along streams. Beaver ponds are located and if there is fresh beaver cuttings along the pond, then beavers are there.

Trappers will make rock or log cubbies before the season. This allows them to make a trap set without wasting time making these cubby sets during the season. Trappers will also make wooden stakes before the season.

Trappers will also plan on which routes to take during the season. He may travel certain routes during the early season, and other routes during the later season.

Fur-bearing animals

Bears

Bears are large mammals that can weigh from 200 to over 1000 pounds (90.72-453.6 kilograms). In the late sixteenth century bear trapping began with the advent of the leg hold trap. Bear traps are large with a jaw spread from ten to sixteen inches (25.4-40.64 centimeters). Since a human foot is about twelve inches (30.48 cm) (or less), a trapper could be caught in his own trap. Extreme caution was used when setting these traps. The smaller traps weighed 30 lb (13.6 kg) and the larger traps weighed about 50 lb (22.68 kg). Some traps had teeth with rounded edges. These teeth were about one inch (2.54 cm) long, and helped hold the bear in the trap. Due to the weight of the trap, trappers may only have set one or two of these traps. Traps were set where bears were



Black bear droppings.

known to be and bait was suspended near the trap. The bear was more likely to step in the trap when its attention was diverted upward, toward the bait. A drag was used, usually a very large log that weighed several hundred pounds, and was tied to the trap with rope or wire. Bear trapping has been outlawed in nearly every US state but Maine. Maine allows the trapping of bears with a cage trap or a leg hold snare. Only one trap can be set.

Beaver

The beaver is a large rodent that weighs from 20 to 70 lb (9.1–30 kg). They have a reddish-brown fur, a light-brown fur or dark-brown fur. They build dams which cause flowing water to form small ponds or oxbows where the flow of water is significantly slower. In these ponds, rivers, or streams, they make lodges of sticks and small logs. Lodges can be four to six feet tall. Entrances are underwater. If beavers do not build a dam, they will dig underwater tunnels in the river bank, burrowing in and then up, to hollow out a lair. Beaver eat the bark off of poplar, aspen, and maple trees. This is one of the larger fur-bearing animal to be commonly caught, and so large traps are required.

Traps that are typically used are conibear traps (size 330), leg hold trap (size 3 or 4), a jump trap or double-long-springs. Traps are set where there are signs of beaver traffic. They can be set near dams or lodges, if laws allow. They can also be set near shore in two to three inches of water, covered with leaves. Scented lure is applied above the trap. The lure is usually taken from the glands located near a beaver's tail. This substance is called "castor", which is the taxonomic genus of the beaver (not to be confused with castor oil which is made from castor beans). Traps are secured with stakes that should be two to three inches thick; the trap should also be tethered to a small tree with 12-gauge wire. Conibear traps are considered best, as it is difficult or impossible for a beaver to escape once caught. After the conibear is staked down along a trail or at the mouth of a burrow, additional stakes are used as a funnel, to encourage the beaver to take a path leading to the trap.

When the water surrounding beaver lodge and dams is frozen over, an underwater conibear can be used, or alternately, a jump trap (similar to a foothold trap) can be used. In this case, a platform is nailed to a log about four to six inches wide; the trap is secured to platform and the log is placed at a thirty degree angle, and about 18 inches below the ice, with the pole above the ice. Poplar sticks (bait) are wired above the platform. When the beaver attempts to take the poplar sticks, the trap will be sprung, and the beaver usually drowns.

Trappers use chain saws or axes to cut through the ice to get to their traps.

Coyote

Coyote is a member of the dog family usually weigh 30 to 40 lb (13.61-18.14 kg), though there are some examples up to 75 pounds.



Beaver pelt



British hat fashions in the 18th century fueled high demand for beaver skins.

coyotes are south of wolf populations. Foothold or jump traps (size 3) are used. Since coyote are canines, the same trap sets that are used for fox can be used for coyotes. Traps are set at the edges and corners of fields with meat placed near the trap. Metal drags are used as well as staking the trap.

Fox

The red and gray fox are canines that inhabit mixed forest and field areas. They eat various foods such as mice, rabbits, birds and fruit. They are a challenging animal to trap as they have a highly developed sense of smell. Leg hold traps are used to catch fox, although snares can also be used. A jump trap (size 2) is typically used, and traps are set at the edges of fields. There are three popular sets used to catch fox.

- **The dirt hole set:** Developed by Adirondak trapper E.J. Dailey, a hole is dug at a forty five degree angle and a shallow depression is scooped out in front of the hole, big enough to fit the trap. The stake is under the trap. The trap is covered with finely sifted dirt. Some leaves or a small sponge is placed under the trap pan so that dirt does not settle under the pan and prevent it from being sprung. Lure or bait is placed in the hole. This set-up should be placed near the corner of fields or in the forest along ridges or rock walls.
- **Urinating post set:** A wooden post is located at the edge of a field, and the trap is placed by the post, with the stake under the trap. Sifted dirt is applied over the trap and then some leaves or grass. Fox urine is applied to the post. When the fox smells the urine it will approach and spring the trap.
- **The mound set:** A trap is set on a small mound and bait placed below the mound. The fox will spring the trap during routine investigation of the mound.

If the specific location where a foxes crawls under a fence is known, a snare or conibear trap can be used. The snare or conibear is wired to the fence or a stake. Lure can be applied near the set.

The Arctic fox is trapped in Alaska and Canada. They inhabit the tundra and edge of the boreal forests. Trapping takes place under very cold and snow conditions. Traps are places an inch under the snow using a metal fish hook drag. Any type of meat is used along with a liquid lure. Meat is placed near the trap.

Lynx

Lynx are medium-sized members of the cat family that weigh between 20 and 70 lb (9.1-31.75 kg). Lynx live in Canada, the United States, and Eurasia. They feed mostly on rodents and lagomorphs, though birds and deer are also taken. Trappers use size 3 jump traps and set these traps as cubby sets and on logs that cross streams. The lynx prefer to use logs to cross streams to avoid getting wet.

This type of arrangement takes advantage of the lynx's proclivity for climbing, and the dangling lynx will be at a disadvantage when the trapper must despatch it. Traps are also set on logs going over rivers or streams, as the bobcats will use these crossings. A notch is cut in the log with the trap placed in the notch, then covered with moss or leaves. Bait is placed on both sides of the trap, with the trap being wired to the log.

Some type of meat is used as bait, such as rabbit or bird. Scent is applied near the trap to attract a lynx.

A "cubby set" is an alternative arrangement. A small "cave" or an artificial lair is constructed of logs, stones, and branches and bait is placed inside with a foothold trap at the entrance. The trap is covered with leaves and the stake is under the trap.

Martens and fisher

Martens, which include fishers, are small to medium mammals that are members of *Mustelidae*, or the weasel family. They inhabit southern Canada to south Alaska. Fishers can also be found in the northern Appalachian Mountains. Martens inhabit the boreal forests of Canada and Alaska. Trapping them is considered a major investment of time and resources due to that they tend to inhabit remote wilderness areas.

However, fisher fur commands a medium price on the open market. Size 1.5 jump traps are used, and are set on logs angling upward with meat wired or tied to the log. Traps are about 4 feet off the ground or a little over 1 meter. Cubby sets made of rocks and logs are also used.

Martens are trapped in the same way but with size 1 jump traps.

Mink

Mink are members of the weasel family. They inhabit areas near fresh water streams and lakes. They are thin with brown fur weighing two to three pounds. They eat fish, frogs, mice and other small animals. Traps used to catch mink are leg hold traps (size 1) of the jump, long spring varieties, or 110 conibear. Traps are set in very shallow water (about one inch deep) and covered with wet leaves, so the mink does not smell the trap. The trap is staked. Bait used is fish or some type of meat. Cubby sets are used as well as funnel sets.

Muskrats

Muskrats are rodents that live in freshwater swamps, streams, ponds, lakes and brackish tidal waters. They are rodents weighing 2 to 3.5 lb (0.91-1.36 kg), with a long black hairless tail, which is somewhat flattened vertically to propel them through the water. Muskrats have brown fur in freshwater and black fur in brackish water. They live in bank dens or small lodges made of weeds. Lodges can be up to three feet high. Muskrats follow trails in the streams or swamps where they live, thus they can be fairly easy to catch. Traps are placed on a muskrat trail or in front of den entrances. Conibear traps (size 110), jump traps, or long springs (size 1 or 1.5) are used. Cage traps are also used.

Leg hold traps are covered with wet leaves and bait or lure is applied above the trap. Muskrats favor apple slices as bait, or apple extract, cherry extract or muskrat gland as lure. Traps are set in very shallow water and are wired to a small tree growing nearby. When a muskrat is caught, it typically panics and attempts to swim for deeper water, whereupon it drowns due to the weight of the trap.

Conibear traps are set in an upright position with a stake placed through the trap spring ring and into the mud at a forty five degree angle. Sticks are placed on either side of the trap to guide the muskrat into the trap (as detailed with beavers, above). Conibears can be set in deep or shallow water. Conibears can be also set under the ice. Muskrat trails under ice can be identified by the bubbles that form beneath the surface of the ice where the muskrat is in the habit of swimming. Bubbles can be seen when the ice is one centimeter to eight centimeters thick.

Nutria

Nutria were introduced into the United States in the 1930s from South America. They weigh up to 20 lb (9.1 kg) and live in river banks like muskrats. They eat foliage and roots. They live in the southern United States near the Gulf Coast. Traps used are size 1.5 to 2 jump or long spring. Conibear traps size 220 are also used and placed near their dens or runways.

Mice

Mice are small rodents that are very abundant and widespread, trapping them is done with many varieties of mousetrap. Mice are the most common furbearer to be trapped, the main reason is for pest control, other reasons are for food and research.

Rats

Rats are medium-sized rodents that are larger than mice, trapping them is done with rat trap, the reasons are same with mice.

Otter

Otters are animals that weigh up to 30 lb (13.61 kg) that habitually travel in streams, rivers, and ponds in search of fish and frogs. They make slides in river banks and are considered playful animals. Their fur is highly prized as it is the most durable of all fur. It is very short and brown in color. Jump or long spring traps (size 3) are set along streams or rivers where otters are known to be. Traps are staked in deep water. Conibear traps (size 330) are also used. Traps are placed in streams where otters will swim through the trap. Lure and bait, usually fish is placed near the trap.

Rabbits

Rabbits eat vegetation and can weigh up to 6 lb (2.72 kg). Various species of rabbits are found throughout the world. Rabbits are caught with snares, box traps or with one to 1.5 jump traps or long springs. Traps are set where there are rabbit signs or trails. Apples are used for bait. Traps are staked.

Raccoons

Raccoons are nocturnal animals that weigh 12 to 20 lb (5.44-9.1 kg). They travel near streams, ponds, rivers and along fields or swamps. Jump traps (size 1.5 or 2) are typically used by placing them in a shallow pit. and covered with leaves or grass. The trap is either staked down or secured to a log, referred to as a "drag". The log should weigh at least ten pounds, so that as the animal struggles, there is some leeway for movement; not so much that it can make an escape, but not complete resistance.

Bait can be fish, meat or apples. Trail sets and cubby sets (see "Bobcat", above) are used. Trails sets are made near ponds, streams or rivers where the raccoon travels.

Sable

Sable is an animal similar to a marten found in the forests of Siberia. Its range is from the Ural Mountains to Asia. The sable weigh 2 to 4 lb (0.91-1.81 kg). They inhabit the coniferous forests of Russia. They eat rabbits, mice and birds. Trappers use leghold traps baited with meat near the trap. Traps are covered with leaves or needles from coniferous trees. Traps are staked.

Skunks and Opossums

Skunks are weasels and opossums are marsupials. They can weigh from 5 to 10 pounds. They are animals that prefer a variety in their diet. They travel in upland areas around barns and farm areas. They like mice, berries, fruits, apples, carrion, insects, eggs, birds, and dead animals. Farmers usually do not mind skunks as they eat mice. Long spring or jump traps (size 1 or 1.5) are typically used. Traps are staked or wired to a drag such as a



Spring-loaded mousetrap

log weighing three to six pounds. Bait used can be fruit such as apples or meat. Skunks and opossums are often accidental catches.

Squirrels

Peanut butter is very effective as bait, since squirrels are attracted to its odor. The cage trap should be secured in place, if there is any chance that a vigorously agitated squirrel may overturn it from inside.

Tigers

In parts of India and Southeast Asia, tigers were traditionally trapped using a tiger pit. A pit would be dug, deep enough to contain the tiger (about two meters), along a trail the tiger was known to use. Sharpened stakes were then planted in the floor of the pit, and it was then covered with easily broken branches and camouflaged. Bait, in the form of some piece of meat, was suspended above the pit to draw the tiger's attention upward. Because the stakes would impale the tiger at multiple point, the pelt would be heavily damaged by this trapping method. Thus, it was used in cases of a persistent man-eater.

Weasels

The term "weasel" covers a broad number of species and sub-species. Weasels have a large range of size, from 1.5 lb (0.68 kg) least weasel to 33 lb (15 kg) wolverines. In North America, the term "weasel" usually refers to the long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*). Their fur is usually brown, though among some sub-species of more northern latitudes, the fur can turn white in the winter. The short-tailed weasel (*M. erminea*), also known as an ermine or stoat, inhabits many of the same areas as its cousin, the long-tailed weasel. They can be distinguished at a glance by the black tip at the end of an ermine's tail; the long-tailed weasel, whether brown or white, lacks the black tip. Both animals are prized for their snow-white pelts, which are commonly referred to as "ermine" regardless of the actual animal. Weasels live in farm areas around barns and rock walls along the edges of fields, and eat mice, birds, and various berries.

Long spring or jump traps (size zero) are used. Because traps are usually set near rock walls, cubby sets are often prepared.

Wolverines

Wolverines are the largest member of the weasel family. They travel a large area in search of food, up to 300 square miles. They can weigh up from 20 to 40 pounds. Males are 30% bigger than females. They search for food such as small game and large game but also can eat domestic animals. They basically eat meat.

Wolverines live in Canada, Alaska, and Eurasia. Trappers use size four jump traps or double long springs.

Wolverines have been known to follow trappers tracks and destroy traps set for other animals. Drags are attached to the trap to prevent the wolverine from escaping the trap. Trappers use any kind of meat that is available for bait.

Wolves

Wolves are large canines that can weigh over 80 lb (36.29 kg), though some subspecies are smaller. They live in the northern part of the continental United States, Canada, Alaska, and Eurasia. Traps are set in locations where wolves are known to run. Leg hold traps size 4 are used. The same type of sets used for fox are used for wolves. However most wolf traps have drags with logs attached to the trap chain or three prong metal drag.. The reason for this is that wolves are very powerful, thus a trapper will most likely lose a wolf with a staked

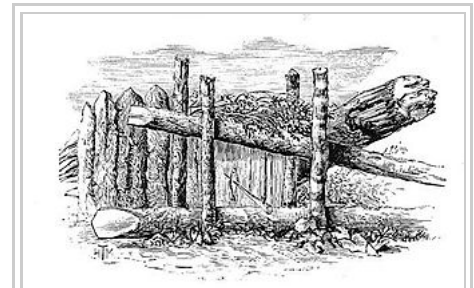
trap. The drag prevents the wolf from pulling its leg out of the trap.

Snares

Snares were originally made with small vines. Later rope or twine was used. Snares are now made of wire or cable, usually 2mm to 8 mm. The snares are placed in the trails or runways of animals. The loop of the snare is several inches above the ground depending on the size of the animal. The snare is wired to a small tree. Bait is placed near the snare so that as the animal moves forward, it places its head through the snare. As the animal moves forward the wire snare tightens, choking the animal. Snares are also made using a small sapling about ten feet high. The tree is bent over with a string or wire being tied to the tree and to a stick. The stick is placed under another stick in the ground. This stick is attached to the snare loop. When the animal goes through the snare loop and pulls, the stick becomes dislodged and the animal is hoisted into the air, four to five feet above the ground. Most predators can not reach the rabbit in the air.

Deadfalls

Deadfalls are a primitive type of trap where one uses a rock or a log to catch an animal. Deadfalls have a long history among Native Americans. The flat rock or log must weigh five times more than the target animal. The rock or log is elevated with a lever type of action, using sticks. Sometimes string or wire is used with the lever. The rock or log was elevated 1 to 3 feet above the ground. There are several methods for making a trigger, which is placed under the deadfall. When the animal approaches the bait and touches the trigger, the rock or log falls, crushing the animal. These traps cost nothing to make but are time consuming to construct. These type of traps can be made before the season but just not set. When steel traps were invented in the late 1600s, trappers were able to make sets faster without having to construct deadfalls or snares.



An 1892 illustration of a deadfall for beavers.

Box or cage traps

Cage-type traps made of wood or metal wire, galvanized, or combination of both are used to trap animals. These traps may have one or two doors which are open, and when the animal steps on a pan or hits a trigger type of device the doors go downward and the animal is caught. There are also cage traps with two doors at 45-degree angles. When a muskrat swims along a trail, the muskrat pushes the door open, swims through the trap and reaches the other door, which can not open, and thus the muskrat drowns. These traps are set under water in muskrat trails.

Various baits are used depending on the target animal. These traps can be from one foot to four feet long. The width and height can vary, but are usually about one foot by one foot in height and width or less. They can be made at home or commercially bought.

Some box traps allow the animal to be caught alive, and the animal can be released in another place or harvested.

Birds

To catch a bird, a thin rope, a sandy place, and some bait, such as corn, are needed. To trap a dove, a thin rope is knotted in a loop, placed in the sand, and lightly covered. Bait is placed in the middle of the trap. The trapper sits a distance away, concealed and waits. The trapper waits until the bird has landed to eat the bait, and the rope is then pulled lightly to tighten around the bird's legs, then snapped quickly to prevent the bird from flying away.

Skinning animals

Animals are usually skinned within two days of being caught. Animals are typically hung by the hind limbs and the skin around the circumference of the ankles. A cut is then made from the leg to the tail. Cuts are shallow so that fat is not dislodged, which could get into the fur. Cutting continues to the front legs. Cuts are made around the lower joints of the forelimbs so that the legs can be pulled through. Cutting continues until the ears are reached. Cuts are made through the ears and then the eyes and finally the skin is cut off the nose. The skin with fur (or "pelt") can then be slipped off the body (or "carcass") like a sleeve. This process is called "case skinning".

Once the pelt is removed from the carcass of a small animal, it is then typically pulled over a board with rounded corners. All fat is scraped from the inner surface of the hide. The pelt is then pulled over a simple A-shaped frame made of wood or wire, called a "fur stretcher", "pelt stretcher", or simply "stretcher". The pelt and stretcher are then hung up to dry in a cool, dry place. After about two weeks, the pelt is ready to be sold.

Beavers are skinned open with a slice up the center of the beaver from the tail to the mouth. The beaver pelt is placed on a board and nailed so that it is round in shape.

In northern North America, furs are considered prime from the beginning of December through March. In the southern United States, fur primes in January. Furs are considered prime when the skin is very light tan rather than black after drying. This "prime" condition indicates that the fur is in its thickest state.

Occupational Risks

As in some occupations, there are dangers involved. The trapping season spans the cold months and is usually in areas where there are low human populations, wilderness areas. The most common hazards are frostbite and hypothermia due to cold weather. Preparation is paramount to survival, though in some cases, such as a sudden temperature drop from a cold front, a rapid-onset blizzard, or an avalanche can elevate the severity of the situation. While wearing the proper clothing, carrying the right equipment is of top importance, it is important for trappers to have intimate knowledge of the terrain and weather conditions of that day. Conditions can become aggravated by accidents, such as falling though ice and becoming submerged in frigid water, having a canoe or boat capsize, falling down a hill, having a snowmobile turn over, getting a hand caught in a trap, or injuries suffered while handling a chainsaw, knife, or axe. Therefore, it is also imperative that trappers be extremely careful and have some knowledge first-aid and possess medical supplies. Trapping without the proper equipment or knowledge can lead to serious injury or death. Trappers are usually in wilderness areas, in which there may be no medical help or help from anyone else. This is why trappers must be self-sufficient in dealing with problems and injuries.

Other environmental hazards include the risk of attack by animals. In North America, the primary threats are from bears, mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes. For this reason, many trappers carry a firearm or other weapons such as knives or axes. They must be familiar with use of these weapons in a high tension situation.

See also

- Animal trapping
- Bird trapping
- Bottle trap
- Cannon netting
- Fish trap
- Game Warden
- Hunter-gatherer
- Hunting
- Insect collecting
- Malaise trap
- Mouse trap
- Pitfall trap
- Rocket net
- Skinning
- Trapping pit
- Wildlife

References

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Alaskan Fish and Game

External links

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