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Viewpoint: Trapping is a cruel theft of wildlife

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Trapping, deemed cruel by some, remains legal in Montana despite opposition. (Courtesy photo)

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On Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2026, a golden eagle was caught in one of several snares set along the Canoe Trail, a popular dog walking area north of Seeley Lake. The only reason the eagle survived this traumatic snaring was due to the swift actions of a dog walker who reported the snared eagle to Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and to FWP game warden Garrett Kocab and Jesse Varnado with Wild Skies Raptor Center who raced to the rescue.

Most wild animals caught in traps and snares that litter our lands are not so lucky. They suffer in panic and pain before either dying on their own or being shot, stomped on, drowned, suffocated or bludgeoned to death by the returning trapper. Besides the glaring animal cruelty involved, the snaring of the golden eagle also highlights another issue—trapping as theft from the public. FWP operates under the principle that wildlife belongs to the public.

Yet without public consent, FWP administers recreational trapping whereby trappers pay $28.00 to indiscriminately kill unlimited numbers of publicly owned wild animals, including bobcats, fishers, otters, beavers, swift foxes and wolves. The public has voiced strong majority disapproval of trapping and snaring, but surveys, public comments and testimonies are ignored.

A hunter faces a potential penalty of $5,000 for wanton waste of one animal, however, for every target animal a trapper kills, two more, including deer, elk and songbirds, are killed on average and discarded with no penalty. The death toll from trapping is estimated to be 150,000 animals annually. But the collateral damage of these animal deaths, including dependent offspring and other family members is unknown. The real toll on wildlife goes unexamined, despite their value mitigating the accelerating crises of drought and fire.

Trappers pay a mere $20 to kill up to 15 wolves. One Yellowstone wolf generates $82,000 alive, however, when the wolf leaves the park and gets caught in a trap or snare set right

outside the protective park border, the trapper has paid a mere $1.30 to take that wolf from the public, while profiting from selling the wolf's fur.

Trappers usually pay nothing for killing endangered, threatened species, and raptors protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Yet studies show that hundreds of eagles die in traps and snares. How is this not 'theft'?

Finally, wildlife law in Montana allows all kinds of atrocities, including running over wild animals with snowmobiles and other vehicles, wildlife killing contests and bounties paid for trappers to kill wolves.

Consider the Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, whose SW chapter recently organized a wildlife killing contest at which 80+ carnivores, such as coyotes, were slaughtered. Or, the Foundation for Wildlife Management, which pays executive director and trapper Justin Webb just under $100K/year, and for a small membership fee, pays up to $2000 for killing a wolf. F4WM boasts that they have killed around 3,000 wolves so far, mostly in Idaho and Montana.

Again, these were publicly owned animals, who have been slaughtered and 'removed' from our property without our consent. Just because a Republican-dominated legislature with radical, wolf-hating legislators such as Paul Fielder legalizing and a FWP Commission sanctioning these atrocities, should we not consider this as legalized 'theft'?

Montana's overall lethal wildlife management is wrong – it is unjust and unfair to wildlife and the benign public (those of us who do not hunt or trap and want to protect 'our' animals). Most importantly, Montana's lethal wildlife management system, which was created by historic hunters for hunters (trappers have always been freeloaders of this process) and excludes the benign public, is highly undemocratic.

We have an opportunity to reform the system with our votes. Ask political candidates, whether Republicans or Democrats, what kind of wildlife management they support, one based on science, the public will and compassion, or one that continuously expands recreational opportunities for trappers and thus cruelty to animals.