

I first discovered trapping while backpacking during February of 1973. Leaving the road end on the Salmon River in Idaho, I headed downstream along the trail with a Newfoundland dog named Sophie. There wasn't any snow, so the going was easy and I soon came to Killum Point, about two miles downstream. Here the trail is blasted out of a cliff high above the water.

I was startled to see a skinned animal, which I later realized was a coyote, hanging by a wire on the cliff face. A moment later, Sophie stepped into a trap right on the trail and let out a yelp. Being a large dog, Sophie pulled hard and was able to extricate herself from the trap after a few moments of panic. Still wearing my pack, I went up to the trap and crouched down to examine it. I lost my balance and put my hand down to steady myself, placing it right in another leghold trap. I frantically pulled on the trap, never having seen one before, and was able to remove my hand, skinning my knuckles in the process. I was furious by that point, and further searching revealed a total of five leghold traps at that spot, all connected to one anchoring cable. I couldn't believe someone would put all these traps right in the trail, which was narrow on the side of a rocky bluff.

I continued down the trail to Horse Creek Bar, my planned campsite. Once there, I gingerly checked around the river bar and found several more traps set right in and around the campsite. One had a skinned bobcat lying next to it, another a coyote. To protect Sophie, I snapped the three traps for the night. Needless to say, my trip was ruined due to the unpleasant experiences with traps and the anxiety that I would find more.

As winters passed, it seemed wherever I went, I discovered traps and snares. In the Bitterroot Valley, I ran into traps in Lost Horse Creek, Big Creek, Kootenai Creek, and Eight Mile Creek. Along the Lochsa over Lolo Pass I found traps at Russian Creek, Mocus Point pack bridge, and Glade Creek. Snowmobiling with my dad near Lolo Pass, marten traps were set along the roads we cruised. Elk Summit Road out of Powell Ranger Station, the Nez Perce Road into the upper Selway - there were traps seemingly everywhere.

Finally, late one winter day, I was coming back down the Kootenai Creek Trail west of Stevensville. I had several dogs with me, including Jack, a small black lab. As darkness approached, I was still about three miles up the creek. A couple of the dogs ran a little ahead of me and I was startled by a sudden "snarling" sound. My first impression was that it sounded like what I thought was a bobcat. I sprinted around the corner of the trail and saw Jack struggling in some sort of wire contraption. Jack was making a horrid gagging sound as he flopped around in the snow, defecating in his panic. This was my first encounter with a large conibear, but I saw the springs on each side of the trap. I was able to compress the two springs down, but I didn't know at the time one could depress one spring, hook it on it's retaining hook, and then the other. I never even saw the hooks in the dim light. When I compressed the springs, both my hands were in use, and I needed a third to pull the dog out. Jack was going limp and I remember looking up at the sky and praying for help. Coincidence maybe, but one of the retaining hooks caught by itself and I suddenly had the extra hand I needed, and Jack was free.

Luckily for Jack, the conibear closed along the sides of his neck, rather than his windpipe, or maybe he twisted in it. Anyway, while gasping, Jack simply shook his head and we continued back to the trailhead.

That incident gave me nightmares for some time, and even during the day, the experience kept coming back to me. I couldn't help but relive it over and over. It got so I pretty much quit even hiking in the winter for years after. It angered me that trappers had locked me out of the woods for several months every winter. The fear of getting a dog caught and the possibility of encountering a trapped wild animal, alive, bothered me tremendously.

Late last winter, again on Idaho's Salmon River, my wife and I saw where a coyote had been trapped on the river trail, chewing up all of the brush within reach in it's desperation to escape. A few miles farther, we made the horrid discovery of a river otter's front paw left in a trap. We tried to imagine the fear and pain the otter suffered in order to escape, probably to die of infection or starvation as a result of losing it's foot.

This winter, I have been out hiking in areas that are heavily used by hikers, which I thought would be trap free. I was wrong. After several hikes, I bumped into traps again, ruining another experience. I have hated trapping for it's cruelty and for how it has ruined my winters. All this by less than one-half of one percent of Montanans.

My wife and I have joined Footloose Montana, realizing that the only way to end this nightmare on our public lands is to make trapping illegal and end it, once and for all.

Mike