'FREE TRAPPERS' BY CHARLES M. RUSSELL COURTESY MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, HELENA

Maintaining a Buckskin Lifestyle in a Polarfleece® World

BY TOM DICKSON

Montana trappers try to keep their historic traditions alive in the face of increasing scrutiny from the state's nontrapping majority.

As a young man, Jim Williams spent many winter mornings with his father trapping muskrats and raccoons on his grandparents' Iowa farm. Learning how animals behaved and where they lived instilled in him an interest in wildlife that eventually led to a masters degree in wildlife management from Montana State University. Today the 45-year-old northwest region wildlife manager for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) continues his trapping tradition, cross-country skiing with his wife and two children high into the mountains north of their home in Kalispell to trap martens and weasels.

"My daughter is probably the only kid in her class who has ever prepared the fur of a marten and held one up close," he says.

Like Williams, many of Montana's other licensed trappers say that trapping satisfies a strong need to participate in a traditional activity that takes them deep into the woods to puzzle out the mysterious workings of wildlife.

"Trapping doesn't appeal to everyone, and it never has," says Paul Schmidt, president of the 600-plus-member Montana Trappers Association (MTA). "But it definitely calls to some of us—people who value their independence and like to get out in nature, in the quiet places, and really understand animals and their habits."

That private pastime has been under public scrutiny in Montana recently due to national anti-trapping campaigns and several highly publicized incidents of pet dogs killed in traps. A 1998 FWP survey found that most Montanans (55 percent) support legal, regulated trapping. But trapping in several other western states has been greatly curtailed in recent years. To prevent that from happening in Montana, the FWP Commission has imposed stricter regulations to reduce accidental trapping of dogs and other "nontarget" animals. FWP also wants to make safety and education training mandatory for first-time trappers.

"This department strongly supports trapping," says Don Childress, chief of FWP's Wildlife Division. "And the best way to ensure it continues is by having new trappers learn effective ways to trap and understand public concerns regarding animal welfare and ethical behavior."

Long, rich history

Controversy over trapping is a relatively recent phenomenon considering that people have been capturing animals for meat and clothing for thousands of years. Great Plains Indians trapped foxes, coyotes, and beavers for clothing and, later, to trade with explorers arriving from Europe. Canadian and American fur traders were the first whites to explore much of North America, and trading posts such as Fort Owen near Stevensville (now a Montana state park) were often the first permanent structures built in the West.

When Lewis and Clark ventured across today's Montana, they found a landscape rich in furbearers. "The beaver of this part of the Missouri are larger, fatter, more abundant and better clad with fur than those of any other part of the country that I have yet seen," wrote Lewis in spring of 1805. Expedition member John Colter was twice lured back to the upper Yellowstone River by beavers—and was chased off both times by Blackfeet Indians. By the 1830s, the fur era had all but ended, doomed by unregulated trapping of the easily caught beavers and a European fashion market shifting away from beaver felt hats to those made of silk.

RON BOGGS

MODERN-DAY MOUNTAIN MAN
Following a tradition that stretches back hundreds of years, a trapper studies a beaver dam to locate the best place to catch one of its fur-clad inhabitants.

Contemporary trapping

These days, roughly 3,500 licensed Montana trappers follow in the moccasin footsteps of Colter and other mountain men. Though most trappers only hope to make enough from pelt sales to cover expenses, some people trap commercially—making their living by selling furs or removing predators and nuisance wildlife. Due to higher fur prices and the state's abundant and diverse furbearer populations, licensed trapper numbers have risen in recent years after bottoming out at 1,700 in 1990 following a fur price decline.

Most trappers are after beavers, mink, bobcats, and other furbearers, which requires a license. Also trapped, though with no license requirement, are badgers, raccoons, and red foxes (classified as nongame wildlife), as well as coyotes, weasels, and skunks (classified as predators). Some trapping controls overabundant coyotes and beavers, but most is done to obtain fur, valued for its beauty, warmth, and durability.

Three devices are commonly used by trappers. A snare is a wire noose set along trails, usually for coyotes or foxes, to catch the animal around its neck. Foothold traps,

used for most furbearers, have jaws that shut on an animal's paw, holding the animal until it can be killed or released by the trapper. Body-gripping traps (also called Conibears after a popular brand) are similar to large mousetraps and are used to catch beavers, mink, muskrats, raccoons, and martens.

Except for those who trap only predators such as coyotes and foxes (see "Reaching the less regulated," page 30), trappers must be licensed and abide by seasons, quotas, and limits. The state also requires all traps to be tagged with the owner's name and address or identification number.

FWP biologists keep close tabs on furbearer populations and restrict seasons if numbers dip too low (usually due to habitat loss or a lack of prey). Most trapped species are thriving, however. Trappers harvest roughly 13,000 muskrats, 10,000 coyotes, and 10,000 beavers each year. Wildlife biologists say Montana populations of all three species are healthy.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Because martens, fishers, and other secretive furbearers are difficult to study, wildlife managers rely on trappers for biological information. The pelts of most species must be tagged and registered with FWP biologists. The department also requires trappers to turn in carcasses of fishers and wolverines, which biologists examine to determine age, sex, and diet and better understand population dynamics.

"Most of what we know about fishers, martens, bobcats, and wolverines is from the information we get from trappers," says Brian Giddings, who coordinates FWP's Furbearer Program and is also a trapper.

Because regulated trapping, like hunting, doesn't harm wildlife populations, FWP considers it a compatible part of its wildlife management program.

"As long as it's done responsibly and humanely and doesn't threaten wildlife populations, there's no biological argument against trapping," Childress says.

What is "responsible ?"

Disagreements over what is responsible and humane have been at the heart of the trapping controversy. Recognizing that their equipment could be more humane, trappers now use plastic-laminated foothold traps that put less pressure on an animal's captured limb and usually allow nontarget species to be released unharmed. Foothold traps are commonly used by wildlife biologists to capture wolves, lynx, and other animals for study or relocation.

Schmidt says he and some other trappers carry a long aluminum rod called a release pole that allows them to safely remove animals they don't want in their foothold traps.

The Conibear trap is another matter. Though a humane device for killing furbearers quickly, the trap can also kill nontarget animals, such as dogs, before the animals can be freed.

"The big issue for trapping is dogs out with cross-country skiers," says Giddings. "Most trapping is in winter, when wildlife

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NO PAIN TO POPULATIONS Trappers maintain they engage in an age-old pastime that harvests a renewable resource without harming populations of red foxes, martens, beavers, and other wildlife. Wildlife biologists agree, noting that regulated trapping, like hunting, is biologically sustainable and justifiable. The ethical justification, however, remains a contentious issue among some Montanans.

furs are prime. In the past, trappers had the drainages all to themselves. Now more people are using unplowed national forest roads with their dogs, and that's where many trappers set their traps."

In December 1997, a dog owned by a Kalispell couple skiing along a snow-covered road in the Flathead National Forest was killed in a Conibear trap. Public outcry over the incident led the state to establish a citizen's trapping advisory committee and conduct statewide public meetings. Subsequently, the FWP Commission created stricter trapping regulations, backed by the MTA, to reduce the incidental capture of dogs.

The public spotlight again turned on trapping in the winter of 2005 after a dog was caught in a trap in the Bitterroot Valley and shot by the trapper. Responding to local concern over the incident, state representative Gail Gutsche of Missoula introduced a bill in the 2006 legislative session that would have required mandatory education certification before any trapper could get a license. (The bill died in committee due to other provisions, which would have greatly restricted trapping opportunities.)

Recently, the FWP Commission further tightened regulations, requiring ground snares and traps to be set back at least 300 feet from a trailhead and at least 50 feet from roads and trails on public lands.

As the owner of a golden retriever, Giddings is sympathetic to the concerns of dog owners. But he points out that many traps are placed where dogs don't go, such as underwater for beavers or in trees for martens. "And dogs accidentally caught in foothold traps usually can be freed," Giddings says.

Nevertheless, FWP officials acknowledge that dogs are killed in traps each year, and they recognize the likely ramifications of highly publicized pet deaths.

"If dogs are caught in Conibears, that, along with other anti-trapping sentiment, could result in legislation or a ballot initiative that ends certain types of traps or trapping," says Jeff Hagener, FWP director.

Just like bowhunter education

To help reduce conflicts between trappers and other people recreating outdoors, FWP will introduce legislation in the 2007 legislative session to require mandatory education certification for any first-time general trapping license buyer. The education and safety course requirement is modeled after the one the department applies to bowhunters.

"In many respects, trapping is similar to big game hunting in that the public expects the safe use of equipment, appropriate harvest practices, and ethical behavior to create a safe environment," says Hagener. "We've seen increasing conflicts between trappers and the growing number of other people out recreating. The state should require that trappers have a reasonable level of knowledge before they can obtain a state license to harvest furbearers—just like we require for firearm hunters and bowhunters."

The MTA supports the FWP proposal, says Bob Sheppard, a vice president for the group and head of its education committee.

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PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

PUBLIC CONCERNS Responding to Montanans worried about pet safety on public lands, FWP has tightened restrictions to require trapping setbacks along trails, roads, and campgrounds. In Montana and nationwide, ad campaigns by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and other animal rights groups in the 1980s and '90s attacked trapping and the fur fashion industry.

"Mandatory education will be good for trapping. It will put trappers in the field with more knowledge and experience and a better sense of ethics."

Sheppard points out that the MTA has been conducting its own voluntary trapper education program since 1993 and has teamed up with 4-H and FWP to sponsor classes statewide. For the past seven years, the three organizations also have jointly conducted an annual youth trapper camp in Beaver Creek Park south of Havre. The 2006 camp, which Hagener and several other FWP officials attended, drew more than 100 young participants, including Nate Fusselman.

"I learned about wildlife habitats, wildlife diseases, trapping regulations, safety, outdoors ethics, and skinning animals," says the West Yellowstone 12-year-old, who hopes to someday be a nature photographer.

To ensure that future Nate Fusselmans have an opportunity to trap, Hagener says today's trappers must demonstrate they understand larger public concerns and be willing to examine their behavior and techniques.

"Trapping nationwide is in the sights of the animal rights folks," says Hagener. He points to the 1996 ballot initiative in Colorado that resulted in a statewide ban of snares, Conibears, and foothold traps.

"If an anti-trapping ballot initiative could pass in another western state like Colorado, it could happen here," Hagener says. "I'm convinced that better-educated trappers would help take the steam out of the anti-trapping movement."

Like many Montanans, trappers bristle at the suggestion that national trends and values can restrict their personal freedoms. "Trappers just want to be left alone to do what we think is right," says Sheppard.

Such liberties may have been possible back in 1911 when Charlie Russell painted "The Free Trappers" and all Montanans had plenty of elbow room. But in a growing state where more and more people—and their dogs—recreate outdoors, and where the vast majority of residents don't trap, public scrutiny of trapping will in all likelihood continue to grow.

MONTANA FWP

FUR EDUCATION A recent FWP program gave students a chance to learn about traps and furbearer biology.

FWP provides information on trapping regulations and ethics, furbearer management, and how to release dogs and other animals from traps and snares at its website: fwp.mt.gov. Click on "Hunting" and then "Trapping."

IS FUR REBOUNDING?

BLACKGLAMA

Growing worldwide fur sales are boosting pelt prices in Montana.

The American fur industry has seen major changes in the past several decades. Fur became controversial in the 1980s and '90s, as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and other animal rights organizations mounted successful ad campaigns denouncing fur. To resuscitate the flagging industry, a North American mink ranching cooperative launched major ad campaigns of its own, hiring Elle MacPherson and other supermodels to wear mink and counter the "Fur Is Dead" slogan. Meanwhile, Jennifer Lopez and other celebrities began donning mink coats as a counter-culture statement of prestige and style. Booming markets in Korea, China, and Russia have also boosted fur sales.

Coats sold in Bejing can affect fur sales in the United States. The price paid for a marten in Montana has doubled over the past six years to $45. And the pelt price for bobcats—increasingly valued by the fashion industry because spotted cats such as leopards and cheetahs are illegal to sell under an international endangered species treaty—has more than tripled to $345.

Brian Giddings, FWP Furbearer Program coordinator, says fluctuating fur prices affect the number of trappers in Montana, though not substantially. "Most trappers are in it for personal fulfillment and trap no matter what the market is," he says. "But we definitely see a bounce in license sales when fur prices go up, and numbers decline when prices fall."

Reaching the less regulated

NELSON KENTER

Coyote and fox trappers don't need a license.

In Montana, setbacks from roads and trails on public lands don't apply to trappers who pursue only coyotes, foxes, and other predators and nongame animals. Because those species are not protected, those trappers don't need a license, and mandatory trapper education would not be required. Nevertheless, FWP Wildlife Division chief Don Childress says trapper education would still reach many coyote and fox trappers.

"If we can't reduce conflicts with regulation, we'll try to do it with education," Childress says. "Many people who trap coyotes also trap furbearers, which requires a license. By requiring certification, we can teach ethical trapping techniques and behavior to many of the trappers we don't reach with regulations."