

Guest Column

People, Pets, and Traps: A Deadly Mix on Public Lands

By K. Stachowski, 3-19-07

Anyone who has lost a canine companion knows a special brand of heartbreak. Our best friends, even when they exit our lives gently, leave us with monumental grief in the wake of their passing.

But not all exits are timely or gentle. The recent death of a border collie-cross in a trap intended for beaver hammers home this point: a casual stroll on public land can have horrific and deadly consequences; traps are nearly anywhere and everywhere on Montana's citizen-owned land. Cupcake's brief life ended along Rock Creek near Valley of the Moon, a popular Forest Service recreation site southeast of Missoula where trails, interpretive signs, and fishing access attract people and their dogs.

There is no consolation in the idea that Cupcake was a "non-target" victim of an illegally-set trap and a fate meant for another sentient, albeit wild, creature. The dog was killed by a Conibear trap (named for its developer), a body-gripping device designed to crush and/or suffocate. When used for beaver, the trap is typically set under water and the animal drowns. The jaws, which spring shut with enormous pressure (90 lbs. per square inch for a beaver trap), are virtually impossible to open with one's hands alone.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), the state agency that regulates trapping, also champions trapping. In "Maintaining a Buckskin Lifestyle in a Polar Fleece World," Tom Dickson, editor of FWP's Montana Outdoors magazine, attempts to borrow cachet for today's trappers with historical and romantic allusions to Native Americans, Lewis and Clark, and mountain man heritage. There's little romance involved, however, for citizens enjoying their public land when a much-loved dog is caught in a snare—a wire noose trap that tightens as the animal struggles—as happened earlier this year at Lee Creek, a heavily-used Forest Service cross-country ski and snowshoe destination 26.5 miles west of Lolo on U.S. 12.

Nor has the Bitterroot been immune to canine trapping tragedies. A Conibear death occurred in the Bitterroot National Forest's Bear Creek drainage when Annie followed the wrong scent. Like Cupcake, she died as her frantic human attempted and failed to wrest open the deadly jaws. In 2005, a trapper shot a companion dog he found caught in his trap in the valley. Elsewhere, in the Ninemile Valley alone, six dogs have been trapped in recent years.

Public outrage over the Conibear death of Buddy (again, on public land) in the Flathead nearly ten years ago forced an improvement in trapping regulations, but after protests from trappers, the FWP Commission now requires that ground snares and traps be set back only 300 feet from trailheads and 50 feet from roads and trails on our public lands.

It's worth noting that even these lax regulations are limited in scope. Only the so-called "furbearers"—beavers, mink, bobcats, etc.—are managed by FWP and require a trapping license. "Also trapped, though with no license requirement," according to Dickson, "are badgers, raccoons, and red foxes (classified as nongame wildlife), as well as coyotes, weasels, and skunks (classified as predators)." Public land setbacks from roads, trails, and trailheads don't apply to this latter, unlicensed group, nor are these trappers required to take trapper education. Montana trappers aren't even required to check their traps within a mandatory timeframe—a "should" rather than a "must" makes it a suggestion only: "Traps should be checked at least once every 48 hours. It is the trapper's responsibility to check his/her traps regularly." (2006 Montana Trapping and Hunting Regulations.)

Fathom this: forty-eight hours—or more—alone in a trap. Terror, pain, thirst, blood-loss, hypothermia. The untold suffering a trapped animal experiences makes instant death seem like mercy. Yet Conibears frequently trap their victims in a manner resulting not in immediate death, but, like a leghold trap, with a period of extended suffering before the animal dies or is dispatched by the trapper. Who would wish this upon a domestic dog...or a wild coyote? Upon a companion cat...or a wild bobcat? Upon bald eagles and owls and other unfortunate "collateral damage"?

Next time you venture out on your vast and spectacular (and taxpayer-funded) federal public land, perhaps you'll find it necessary to leave your peace of mind at home, particularly if a dog accompanies you. You'll remember that traps might lie in wait, baited with enticing meat or hidden beneath the water's surface, and that life and limb are jeopardized by the concealed menaces littering our wild and not-so-wild landscape.

Or maybe you'll just remember Buddy, Annie, and Cupcake, non-target victims who didn't return home alive with their grieving humans. Perhaps a carefree day wandering your public land with your best friend won't seem like such a good idea after all.

Montana FWP trapping regs: <http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/trapping/default.html>

NewWest.Net welcomes guest columns of all kinds. Email submissions to Managing Editor Courtney Lowery at courtney@newwest.net

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Comment By Orca, 3-19-07

Yo, Mr. Hagener....Are you listening to the people of this state that want to recreate on public lands with their pets without fear of them being killed? Or, are you going to continue to "coddle" the trappers, which unlike hunting organizations, contribute absolutely nothing towards promoting conservation and enhancement of land, wildlife and wildlife habitat?

Comment By Nick D, 3-19-07

I also can't help but think about all the wading I do in that exact area while fishing in the summer -- and the fact that I've been doing it for 20+ years there. Grieving a dog is a terrible thing, but I really don't want to ever read the story where someone is grieving a child who drowned after being caught in an illegally placed trap.

Comment By Squirrel, 3-19-07

what a wonderful article!

Since I've learned that traps are pretty much everywhere on our public lands, I don't go recreating anymore during trapping season, which sucks! I just don't want to put my dogs in danger! This is simply unfair since I pay for public lands with my tax \$\$!! Trappers should not be allowed to use our lands for their cruel "sport"!

Comment By Rob, 3-19-07

If six "non-target" dogs were killed by hunters in the Ninemile Valley, or any other valley for that matter, people would be outraged. Trappers on the other hand, get away without even a public slap on the wrist. This is unjust, unequal treatment under the law. We need to bring trapping regulations back up to date with the 21st century.

Comment By B.K., 3-19-07

I don't own an animal but believe that everyone should be made aware of the horrific death an animal, whether "target" or "non-target", suffers in these traps. In this day and age, I can see no reason whatsoever for trapping. What will it take to stop this pain and suffering? A small child being trapped?

Comment By Taz Alago, 3-19-07

Here in NE Oregon we have the same problem and have experienced the same patronizing response from the Department of Fish and Wildlife. The trappers' "rights" trump the public's rights. The trappers themselves are unwilling to make any compromises in the interest of the public and have told me personally that I should keep my dog leashed at all times when on public land, and that, in response to a suggestion that they post an area, that I would know there were traps there "when my dog was trapped." The ODFW tells me that trapping is "a long-standing legal activity" in Oregon, but I believe walking a dog is also a "long-standing legal activity," and I'm damned sure there are more dog walkers than

trappers! Historically, attempts to regulate trapping through the legislature has failed, and the Fish and Wildlife people will never willingly restrict trapping significantly. The only way is through a ballot initiative. So Montanans, get it on the ballot in '08!

Comment By Nancy Larson, 3-19-07

Is trapping really necessary for one's livelihood? Not likely, not in the 21st century. This is merely another cruel "sport." Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) said and I quote "The time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men." Centuries later we are still waiting for that time.

Comment By Jane Stachowski, 3-19-07

Ditto to Nancy Larson's comment. I cannot understand how anyone could set these traps when they know how an innocent animal will suffer. When i was a small child, there was a man in the neighborhood that would set kittens on top of a wood burning stove and burn their paws, and that man was burned and died in a house fire. 'What goes round, comes round'

Comment By Hal Herring, 3-19-07

Dear K.,

I'm not a trapper, and agree with you that a lot of suffering is entailed in the business of trapping. But it is kind of a fact of life in the West that some people do trap, and make a little extra money in that way. It's incomprehensible to animal lovers, and it is one of the truly divisive activities in the modern world.

I have two of my dogs caught in traps, on public land, and yes, I raised some hell, -- not until my dogs got caught--I figured that the trapper was engaged in a legal activity and I had no right to interfere until they caught my dogs. I have a suggestion.

One of my dogs was caught in a cam lock snare--and this is, toome, an infernal device--which was strung at head level in a thicket with a dead rabbit hanging in front of it as bait. My dog had her mouth open while running and got caught through the jaws and around her head, rather than around her neck, which would have killed her. I looked for her for about two hours--it was dark, she could only make some weird gagging noises when I called for her--and I was able to cut the snare off with my leatherman tool, then cut the wire, flesh and all--it was buried deep by this time, and her head looked like a soccer ball--with some wirecutters i had in my truck.

That was a close call and she still has the wire scar. The other times, were just single or double spring leg hold traps, and they are easy enough to learn how to release, by standing on the springs. They don't hurt the dog too badly if you get there before they fight the trap. People with pets should learn how they work. A drowning set for beaver killed, horribly, a black lab of a family I know--the dog ran

out on a log, stepped into the trap, and the concrete block to which it was chained then slipped off the log, as it was meant to do, and the dog drowned within sight of the family--now, there was no way to release the trap, with no way to stand on it (it was on the dog's foot, six feet underwater), but if they had known how, they could have jumped in, grabbed the chain, and unhooked it from the block. Tough but possible. Learn how these things work, so that you save your animals from them if they get caught.

Also, in the case of snares or coyote "getters" that shoot a cyanide pellet into their mouths, you just have to learn whether they are in use, and if so, keep your dogs away--then comes the good argument about whether anybody has the right to keep you from using the lands.

Hal

Comment By TZ, 3-19-07

Why do trappers have to be so close to popular trails and trailheads?

Comment By jb, 3-19-07

This excellent article prompted me to check out the Montana Trappers Assn. website.

It appears that they try very hard to align themselves with hunters when it comes to wildlife management and conservation. That is nothing but a distortion of facts. Under the title, "Practicing Conservationists", Scott Hartman, president of the National Trappers Association states..."The public needs to know that there is no trapping of endangered species".

This is an NOT true. All one has to do is check on the USFWS Northern Gray Wolf website under "weekly reports" and note the number of wolves(endangered species) that have been killed or maimed in coyote traps. Add eagles and lynx to the list and you'll realize the absurdity of his statement.

In fact, there are court cases pending in Maine and Minnesota against their departments of wildlife for allowing trapping in areas frequented by endangered species.

One last point....trapping occurs year-round with even less regulations than during regular trapping season. Coyote, fox, skunks, etc can be trapped at any time and there are no set back requirements adjacent to trails, roads, streams or trailheads.

Comment By Kerry, 3-19-07

Thank you Kathleen for writing such a moving letter about the reality of traps on our public lands and the tragedies that occur to our companion animals and wildlife who suffer such incredible pain when caught in a trap. How can using devices that knowingly torture animals be permitted our society?

Our public lands are not public when a small population of trappers control them and make them unsafe for all. Trapping is not part of our heritage that anyone

should be proud of...it's time to end this barbaric activity. Fish, Wildlife & Parks it's time to step into the 21st century.

Comment By Dana, 3-20-07

Great piece. There's no justification for setting these cruel traps to catch animals for the commercial fur trade. Much of the fur from these animals is being exported to Russia and Asia. I don't think a rich Russian businessman's wife's access to a fur coat is worth the harm that comes to our wildlife and pets. It's time to stop the use of leghold traps, conibear traps and snares in Montana.

Comment By Dingo, 3-20-07

Bottom line, if you wish to recreate with a canine companion during trapping season on public lands... keep it on a leash. I know that this is not a popular choice but if you want a guaranteed way to recreate safely with your pet during trapping season, it is the only way. Remember, most trappers have been trapping long before recent newcomers have arrived in the state. The trappers once had these lands to themselves during these winter months and now recreationists are taking to the field in larger numbers during these historically low-use periods. Educate yourself on how to release traps if your pets are accidentally caught. Brochures on how to release different kinds of traps can be found at FWP offices. Until anti-trappers push for legislation to outlaw trapping, we must all learn how to share the public land and recreate safely and responsibly on it.

Comment By Jim Davis, 3-20-07

Trapping is an anachronism-it should be outlawed-lawbreakers should be forced to step in their own trap just to see how it feels, and then drowned. Can I get an "AMEN??

Comment By Nancy, 3-20-07

This is the very same tragedy that recently befell a dog that was enjoying a beautiful day, romping within sight of its owner out on Long Island (NY) - on a nature conservancy, no less! Thankfully, our legislature responded quickly when they learned that the law somehow still allowed for trapping on public lands at that point, and the initiative to put an end to this sadistic couch potato's "sport" was well received. Agreed, legislation is the way. My heartfelt condolences to all who have struggled in vain as a companion was tricked into a heinous, untimely death by such primitive enemies of life and nature. I'm not impressed by the length of their "tradition" - rape and murder have been around for a long time, too. I hope you folks in MT (and everywhere) continue to gather around this cause and bring the decibel level up until the enlightenment happens! Peace from the east.

Comment By jib, 3-20-07

Dingo... for your info, trapping takes place year round, not just in the winter. The difference is that the species trapped changes(coyotes, foxes, etc) and the

regulations are basically non-existent for "predators". Traps can be set anywhere.

This "blame it on the pet owners" is getting old.

Comment By Pronghorn, 3-20-07

"we must all learn how to share the public land and recreate safely and responsibly on it."

I couldn't agree more. Setting traps, which amount to concealed weapons, on public land belonging to all citizens, is neither safe nor responsible.

Comment By Micheal, 3-20-07

I do not trap nor have any desire to. I am a multiple dog owner and recognize the hazards that come with taking them into the field. My opinion is that trapping, in many cases, is a necessary evil in order to manage wildlife populations. That is the why the FWP authorizes and manages it. I feel terrible for "cupcake" and all the other pets that have been caught in traps. I also feel bad for my neighbors dog that was eaten by a mountain lion. I guess we need to get rid of all the lions too.

On stupid trapper setting traps illegally obviously is getting all the attention and I guess we do need to get stricter on trapping regulations. Better signage I think could help to make people aware that there are dangers near by. I guess we just need to realize, trapping is a necessary evil and improve the regulations.

Comment By av, 3-20-07

Thanks for writing such an important and informative article, Kathleen. It's time for FWP to listen to the masses and put an end to such a cruel and archaic "sport." Cupcake's story is heartbreaking. Why is an activity that benefits so few--at such a high cost to others--allowed in this day and age? We should feel safe in using the public lands set aside for our recreational use. Instead we now know we're actually putting our dogs lives at risk in doing so. Enough's enough.

Comment By Jim Davis, 3-20-07

If I may be indulged a second post, as a multiple Dog owner myself who gets out quite a bit, I feel very strongly that the dangers are sufficient both to wildlife and to Dogs to say to other Dog owners that if your Dog is at large ANYWHERE, in town or on so called "public land" You are being irresponsible and you love neither your Dog nor wildlife enough. On-leash is the only safe way for all. Save yourself the heartbreak and leash 'em up.

Comment By Pronghorn, 3-20-07

Michael--if it's evil (you called it, bro), it isn't necessary. I hadn't noticed that we were ever overrun with wolverines, so that makes me wonder why they need such evil management? I don't buy the self-serving claim from trappers & FWP that it's a necessary management tool. Just cuz they say it don't make it so.

Comment By jb, 3-20-07

Michael..Trapping is not a necessary evil. Arizona, Washington, Colorado, California and the other states that have banned trapping are doing an excellent job of wildlife management without this archaic practice.

I can accept losing a dog to a cougar, wolf, bear etc..I'm in their territory.

Comment By Dingo, 3-21-07

jb...acutally, although trapping for non-game wildlife and predators can occur year long, that does not mean that it is a popular practice. Trappers mainly trap for fur. In order to receive top dollar for their fur, the vast majority only trap during the time of year when furs are at their highest quality (winter months). To trap during portions of the year when animal pelts are not at their prime is foolish. Hence, trapping during any other time of the year just doesn't happen. Sure, it is allowed but it is extremely rare. Secondly, anyone who feels that both trappers and pet owners do not each share a responsibility in ensuring the safety of domestic animals is being close minded. Each of the respective parties have to do their part in order to prevent such tragedies. Trappers must follow the laws (which in this case they weren't) and pet owners must keep their pets under control (which in this case didn't happen). To dismiss either side from their responsibility and blame the other is wrong. No, jb, I never said 'blame it on the pet owners'. I am just advocating equal responsibility. In fact, by the sound of all of these posts, "blame in on the trapper" seems to be the most popular opinion. And for those of you who have said, "Yo Mr. Hagener, are you listening to the people of this state" and "listen to the masses". I ask you, have you attended public comment hearings regarding trapping regulations? Have you written to your representatives asking for them to put forth legislation banning trapping? Have you organized a citizen's initiative to achieve the aforementioned? If not, I don't see what the problem is. If everyone on here who posted arguing for the banning of trapping really cared they would have done all of these things already. If you have, then I comend you. Please keep in mind I am not a trapper or a trapping advocate but I do believe in personal responsibility, action, and looking at all aspects of the situation.

Comment By mike, 3-21-07

I don't like pet owners who let their pets run loose. It's disgusting and irresponsible. Cats are very hard on small wildlife and, once a few dogs get to running together, they can be as bad or worse on livestock than the biggest wolf pack or the worst coyote family out there. In fact, I believe that at least a few livestock kills attributed to wolves are actually dogs, especially in rural areas where trailerbilly meth users have moved in and started using pitbulls around their labs. On the other hand, let's be honest. What kind of messed up waste of skin is still out there acting out their childish emotional issues with traps? Can you say "pedophile cruising the woods in an old white econoline van missing its license plates?" I mean, come on... Unemployment is so low that anything that can keep from soiling its own pants can get a real job and those that can't can avail themselves of a decent range of educational opportunities or even the

military under today's standards. There is no excuse for anybody, anybody, anybody, and I mean anybody to be out there ripping the skins off weasels and rodents when there is so much productive work to be done. Really, come on and grow up!!!

Comment By Peaceldy, 3-21-07

Traps of any kind should be abolished. They are cruel and indiscriminate with not only dogs but kids too. They should not be allowed on public lands for public safety reasons.

Comment By steve, 3-21-07

Interesting article! It makes me better realize, after going to Yellowstone Park in the winter, and seeing the rich diversity of mammals that exist there, where many of the "non-Park" mammals must end up. I've hiked back-country Montana for decades, and have rarely, or never seen many of the animals these trappers seem to be intent to eliminate. Makes me suspicious about how much they are really impacting/eliminating the rich diversity of animal life this Great State had at one time.

You think it could've stopped after we eliminated 99.5% of the native bison herds, with single marksmen shooting up to 300 a day, and pissing on the barrels of their muzzle-loaders to keep the barrel from getting too hot while they continued to "drop em"

I can understand the culture, tradition, and heritage of the trapping community, where it came from, and how it really worked with the once abundant furbearers that blanketed the West, but like many things that just don't work anymore, like placer mining whole streams for gold, and slaughtering whole bison herds because we could, doesn't mean we can continue to remove and pressure these species just because they happen to be fur-bearers. Certainly stricter controls, safety, limits, and restoration of both habitat, diversity, and numbers could also be part of our stewardship responsibilities to this Great State

Comment By Michael Andrews, 3-22-07

Two things here, neither of which are right. First, irresponsible pet owners who let their pets wander are as guilty for their pet's deaths as those cretins who set traps. There are legitimate reasons for dogs to be running loose in the woods though when they are with their owners. This brings me to the second point. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a legitimate reason to trap animals for fun and profit. The morons who still do this are throwbacks to the dark ages. Even worse are the clueless legislators who don't have the guts to outlaw the barbaric and unnecessary practice of trapping. Many states have already banned trapping, its time for Montana to follow suit.

Comment By weasel, 3-22-07

Dingo,

as a dog "owner", I have the responsibility to prevent my dogs from injuring or killing other dogs, wildlife or people – I do leash my dogs when I feel they could

get in or cause trouble - THIS is my responsibility! It is NOT my responsibility to leash my dogs (and prevent them from having a good time sniffing and running around in the woods!) just because trappers, a small interest group, want to rip off the skin of innocent wild animals and sell them for a few bucks. The least of the trapping community's responsibilities is to prevent my and other dogs from getting injured and/or killed in their traps, which pose a threat to everyone.

Comment By Squirrel, 3-22-07

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Comment By karma king, 3-22-07

Montana, Fish, Wildlife & Parks doesn't have enough time or money or personnel to go after all the poachers in Montana, so it isn't any surprise they can't adequately monitor trapping activities.

Government agencies need to be responsible for the consequences of their wildlife management decisions; when it comes to the torture and killing of animals, there's plenty of bad karma to go around.

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