

Muskrat Medley
Article from May - June 2007 Buckeye Trapper
by Matt Robison

With last season's prices and the unusually warm weather we've had so far this year, muskrats have gotten a lot more attention this season from old and new trappers alike. As I'm writing this, we're coming into January. The muskrats are looking very good, and as we move into the mating season they'll really begin moving.

Easy Muskrat Attractors

Many trappers rely mainly on blind sets for muskrats, but in deeper creeks or ponds where dens and trails can be harder to find, it's often easier to use lure or bait. It will also help attract those muskrats that are just passing through during the breeding season. Of course, here in Ohio, using bait or lure gets a little trickier after January 31st, since we have to take care to avoid catching raccoons.

There are some time-tested muskrat lures out there, but you really don't have to go any further than your kitchen cupboard or the dollar store to find effective attractors.

It's no news to anyone that apple slices will catch the attention of a passing 'rat. But they'll work even better if you store them in a plastic bag with some anise oil. And adding anise oil to fish oil makes it even more attractive to both muskrats and raccoons. Cherry syrup, the kind used with ice cream or snow cones, is effective when used alone or mixed with fish oil. You can buy it pretty inexpensively from bulk food stores. Spearmint or peppermint toothpaste works too, and you can get it for a buck a tube at your local dollar store. The mint scent holds up well and the white color also provides visual appeal as well. Just squeeze out a couple of inches onto a root or a stick positioned over your trap and smear it around a little so it'll stay there.

Muskrats will often check out anything white to see if it's food. Slices of apple, turnip, potato, or parsnip will bring them over, but often so will a piece of Styrofoam or PVC. I haven't been successful yet in using white rubber grub tails for mink, but they have helped me catch muskrats when the traps are set so the grub tails are wiggling in clear, flowing water.

Easy Mud Bank Set

In places with deeper water and vertical mud banks, it can be tough to find dens or slides. One easy way to set these places is to use your shovel or the side of your boot to mash down a platform from the mud bank. It only has to be big enough for a muskrat to land on. It should be at the water line or just below it. Just bed a #1 or #1.5 foothold trap firmly on the platform and place your attractor above it. If the water is deep, just stake the trap in the mud below the landing. Otherwise, use a stop-loss or other guard trap, or use a drowning wire or tangle stake. This simple set will take rats in many places that are hard to set and it's quicker than digging pockets. And if you mash down a longer platform, angling upward from just below the surface, you can move the trap up and down when the water level fluctuates.

Finding Active Bank Dens

In the daylight, surface glare can make it pretty tough to spot bank dens. A pair of sunglasses can really help cut through the glare and reveal them, and it can actually be easier to spot holes after dark using a flashlight or headlamp than in the daylight.

Have you ever trapped a pond that is peppered with muskrat holes but only ends up producing a few muskrats? Ducks and geese or wind and wave action during the day can keep the bottom stirred up so that you may not be able to see the mud trails or shiny gravel that are telltale signs of muskrat activity. You can waste a lot

of time setting traps in inactive holes in a place like that. However, checking those areas at night when the ducks and geese are asleep may allow you to see fresh muskrat activity.

A skim of clear ice really helps preserve muskrat mud trails and other signs of muskrat activity. And of course the bubble trails that form under the ice along runs with a lot of muskrat traffic are about the best roadmaps anyone could draw for you.

Setting Muskrat Lodges

In marshes and some ponds, muskrats may build huts out in the water out of cattails and grasses. These domed structures are usually easy to spot, but deeper water and soft, muddy bottoms can sometimes make setting them challenging. A hut can have several entrances down near the bottom. In deeper water, the easiest way to find them can be to feel for them with the toe of your boot as you move around the lodge. Once you've found an entrance, it's often easier to drop a colony trap in front of it than it is to try to reach down to position a body gripper or footholds. A trap hook made from a broom or shovel handle with a hook screwed into one end can be handy for placing and retrieving colony traps in deeper water. Shoving a strip of wood lathe or construction stake down through the mesh of the colony trap will help stabilize it and also make it easier to find without tripping over it. Position the lathe toward the middle of the trap, lengthwise, and along one side so it doesn't block the doors, or block muskrats that enter the trap. If trap theft is a potential problem, make sure the top end of the lathe is just below the surface. You'll be able to spot it when you're out there, but it won't be as likely to attract unwanted attention from the shore.

Also look for the spots where muskrats climb up onto huts to eat, and set foothold traps there too. You can put bait or lure on top of the lodge, but it's not usually necessary. Raccoons and mink will often swim out to check the huts too, so fasten your traps solidly. Again, in shallow water, use drowning setups or stop loss traps.

I've never had much luck with floats or platforms positioned near huts, but I have caught muskrats by stacking baited 110 body grippers on a long construction stake, and pushing the stake into the bottom very close to the outside of a hut. Rats easily find the traps as they swim around the hut, and you can make multiple catches. There are several ways to attach the traps to the stake. Some people insert the stake through the coil at the end of the trap spring and then slide a wooden wedge up between the coil and the stake to secure the trap there. If you do this, tie or wire the wedge to the stake or trap. Or you can slide the stake between the arms, closer to the jaws, and wire one spring arm firmly to the stake. Bait the traps by pushing chunks of apple or potato onto the trigger wires.

Don't forget to check the banks for holes too. It's not unusual to find some muskrats digging bank dens in the same ponds where others are building lodges.

Muskrats in the Movies

Last year, an independent filmmaker named Amy Nicholson made a documentary called *Muskrat Lovely*, which delves, among many other things, into muskrat trapping in Dorchester County, Maryland. I was a little apprehensive about how trapping and the folks who do it might be portrayed in the film, but I was pleasantly surprised.

It tells the story of an annual event that takes place in a community that most trappers will easily relate to. And along the way the documentary does a pretty nice job of showing the place that muskrat trapping holds in the area's history and culture. It also shows how muskrats are caught and used there today and why trapping is allowed in the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge there. Here's a synopsis from the film's web site:

"Every year in the town of Golden Hill, contestants gather for two important competitions in the National

Outdoor Show. Local high school girls compete to become “Miss Outdoors,” queen of the show and its representative for the coming year. On the very same stage, the world’s best muskrat skimmers compete to see who can skin the fastest.

“MUSKRAT LOVELY is a documentary that follows the events leading to the 50th crowning of “Miss Outdoors.” It’s an ironic and tender look at the yearly event of a close-knit community in a remote area of the Chesapeake Bay. A place where men still make their living off the water, and the opportunities for glamour are few.”

The film is humorous without stereotyping the people of Golden Hill. The demonstrations of trapping, skinning, and preparing muskrats for eating by local residents are pretty matter of fact. One of the girls who enters the beauty contest skins a muskrat herself during the talent portion of the show, and she looks just as comfortable doing that as she does in the more typical parts of the contest. She explains that she always washes and blow-dries them first, taking obvious pride in how her pelts look.

Muskrat Lovely was featured at several film festivals since it was released in 2005. It has also been aired on PBS stations. You can read more about the film and even buy it on DVD (the cost is \$20, which includes shipping) at the film’s web site: <http://muskratlovely.com>.

Nicholson doesn’t seem to have any agenda other than to tell a story about people for whom trapping happens to be part of their lives. She told me that the documentary has drawn some heat from antis (so I guess you could take that as a recommendation). I read reviews of it from a variety of publications, again expecting the worst, but they were generally positive.

A lot of people are working very hard to protect our right to trap. And without those efforts we would surely have lost it by now. A lot of great literature and multimedia information has been developed to educate the public about the value of trapping too. As I watched Muskrat Lovely, I was thinking about how trapping can also benefit from non-partisan exposure like this too. Some people who aren’t likely to be exposed to factual information about trapping anywhere else are going to see this film, which was made by someone who is neither a trapper nor an anti (like most of the public). And when they watch it, they’ll see trapping shown as a part of the lives of real people living today, rather than described by someone who is either attacking or defending it. And a little humor goes a long way too. We need all the help we can get! ###Matt Robison, 3100 Shroyer Rd., Kettering, Ohio 45429, (“Creekwalker” on the OSTA forum)