

Above Ice Platform Set for Predators
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by Mike Marchewka

First, let me state that I'm envious of states that allow snares to be used on land. Here in Illinois, fur trappers are handcuffed by foolish logic that prevents the use of snares on land because quote, "they'll catch too many non-target animals like hunting dogs and deer". Yet, we can use snares on land after we apply for permit use in A.D.C. situations?!!

Try as we trappers may to show our D.N.R. the modern researched data and methods of snare positioning, relaxing locks, and breakaway locks, they fail to see the light. I suppose it will take an unfortunate incident like what happened in the Eastern state of Massachusetts, where a coyote bit up a young boy who was playing in his backyard, before the public outcry forces a change.

Because we can't snare on land, I'm always searching for new ways to harvest fur when the ground turns to iron and the blowing snow gets too deep to keep traps working. Trappers have recognized that when the creeks, rivers and ponds freeze up they become runways for hunting predators. Tracks of mink, raccoon, opossum, the wild canines and even deer tracks are visible when the snow falls on the hardened water.

It was always frustrating to me and (sometimes still is) to walk by those tracks. In the past, I tried setting traps on the ice and making crude flat sets or dirthole sets utilizing the creek bank for my hole and backing. My luck depended on how cold the weather stayed and which direction the wind blew the snow. Often times the trap would freeze down due to the temperature rising during the day and the colder temps at night, or the wind would gust, drifting snow over my traps; sometimes both occurred. Throw in difficulties with anchoring the trap and the words futile and frustration become evident. Let me make it clear these same difficulties often occur when attempting to trap on frozen ground. Again, that's where a snare shines.

Then something happened to shed some light on setting traps on frozen land and ice. A couple of years ago I talked with Rockford, Illinois trapper, Bruce Quam, about an above ground set he utilized on fox and coyote in frozen, snow covered ground. Bruce used a unique welded rod platform for a 6" coil spring trap. (Editor's Note: Traps set on land in Ohio may not have a jaw spread greater than 5-5/8".) The trap was rigged to ten feet of machine chain and a grapple hook. The unique platform allowed the trap to be positioned off the ground. This prevented the trap from freezing down. The platform also allowed the trap to remain stable in snowdrifts. When the animal became caught it pulled the trap off the platform.

Bruce's main set was a snow hole set in deep fencerow snowdrifts. He would drive the pickup close to a fence line and set up traps utilizing a large shoveled out hole in the snow bank. The drag was thrown out into the drift and the trap and platform positioned in front of the baited hole. Bruce had a lot of success with these sets but has recently passed away. There was a lot of knowledge and information that went with Bruce, but I feel lucky to have talked with him about this set and others. He did mention trying other methods of elevating the trap off the ground before going totally with the welded rod platform. Since I had no idea where to acquire or make the welded rod platform, I tried his other earlier methods.

One tactic was to utilize a simple piece of plywood cut a bit bigger than the trap to be used. Another was a piece of drywall or sheet rock that's commonly used in house construction. Both materials need to have nails or screws anchored around the edge of the trap to help hold it in place. After using both of these for sometime, and a few others like cardboard and waxed paper, I prefer the sheet rock; because it's durable, lightweight and it's white, so it blends in a bit better. Also, the hardness of wood makes anchoring the nails or screws more difficult. The sheet rock is a bit softer in texture too.

So how does this winter set work? It's fairly simple actually. What I do is to have my platforms and traps all

pre-set before I leave to set out traps. That means each platform has a set trap already anchored in place. How does one anchor the trap to the platform? Carefully! Because each trap needs to be set before it can be mounted on the platform, some care is needed.

I like using short, thin headless nails to anchor the trap to the platform, finishing nails about four to five inches long are ideal. However, any type of nail or screw will work. The key is to be sure that the trap has sufficient pan tension. I like about two pounds. Yes, I know that's a bit much for any wandering mink, but I have caught my share even with two pounds; usually by the back feet. Another important point before anchoring the trap in place is to draw an outline of the trap on the platform. This helps to pre-set some of the nails/screws into place. I usually place a nail or screw on the inside of the trap's jaw and another directly on the outside. The nail/screw needs to contact the jaw so the trap does not tip or wobble. Around eight to ten nails to a platform usually is all that is needed to fully stabilize a trap.

I like sliding a block of wood or a piece of foam under each set trap, before loading up the platforms in the back of the truck. This prevents accidental firing that may occur once in the field.

As far as which particular trap make or size; there are a couple considerations. First, use what you have. It makes no sense to buy a special trap to attempt to utilize this set. There are so many factors that Ma' Nature can throw at a trapper to foul up our efforts in the cold, snowy, weather that additional expenses for special traps just doesn't add up. Just be sure the trap is well made with a good base and frame, has strong springs and is clean. A good wax or petroleum based dip doesn't hurt. I've used this set with jump traps, longsprings and obviously coilsprings. They all work! I will say that a large coilspring trap without a bottom j-hook or ones without baseplate with d-rings are easier to stabilize on platforms.

In my area the coyote is the most common predator that frequents the ice, so I use a lot of the old #2 and #3 Montgomery traps on my platforms; because that's what I have. They are strong and they are flat setting traps. Through trial and error you will find a system that works best with the equipment you have. After arriving at my trap location, I grab a bucket and a platform, with the attached chain and grapple hook, out of the back of the truck. In the bucket, I also place a roll of unscented toilet paper and a hammer. My lure, urine or bait is placed in my coat pocket and a lightweight broom is also carried to the set. I like setting up locations that offer a backing. This limits the area the predator has to step around when it checks out my attractor. I don't like to give free sniffs!

The set is basically a flat set or post set, however I have dug out holes in creek banks and made dirt hole sets with success. Features like, clumps of frozen sod, tangles of frozen down branches or, my best producer, little pockets of cattails can all be set up. Simply toss the grapple hook and excess chain behind the backing and sweep off a suitable area for your platform. Next, stabilize the platform on the ice by making sure it doesn't tip or rock. Occasionally there will be a need to chip away small uneven ice, thus the hammer.

I'm not going to get into how far back from the attractor the trap should be placed; each trapper has their own theories and preference. Next, remove the under pan block and place a few sheets of toilet paper over the pan to prevent the snow from getting under the pan. This will prevent the pan from being able to be pushed down and the trap from firing. I like to use a few sheets of toilet paper folded up under the pan to further prevent any obstructions from occurring.

Brush a light layer of snow over the paper, making sure to blend the platform and excess chain. Apply the chosen attractor on a backing near the platform, and then brush out any excess snow towards the platform. Obviously, any signs of your tracks should be erased all the way to the shoreline.

Since the trap is attached to a long chain and hook, use discretion where the set is being made. In my area, setting traps near snowmobile trails is taboo because of the high visibility of a caught animal on the snow. I use

a little trick I learned from some veteran drag trappers; I pre-tangle the drag at the set around an unmovable object whenever possible. Throwing the hook around the base of a small tree or bush will make it easier to locate the caught animal when you return. Keep in mind that if it snows after a catch is made tracking the catch will be difficult.

My best luck with these sets is the intense cold periods where there is not much fluctuation in temperature. The snow is light and powdery and there are very little problems with freeze down. Strong skunky lures or quality gland lures and urine work very well in these cold times. If you're in bobcat country try using some visual attractors that are legal in your state. Personally, I like to contain my lures or urine in a 35-mm film canister filled with cotton balls. I position it by wiring it off near the trap. These containers are usually black, which may add to the set's eye appeal; but more importantly the color absorbs the sunlight's heat, keeping odors more active.

After a catch is made, the trap will fire off the platform and the animal will leave the immediate set area. So after a catch is made remakes are usually a cinch. First, locate the platform, check to see if it's in good enough shape to reuse. Sometimes the captured animal will chew it up, so bring extras. Be sure to bring additional nails/screws and tools for remaking sets. In many cases, it's a simple matter of just cleaning the trap up a bit with some snow or debris and resetting the trap on the same platform. Be careful not to set too close to other dragged sets as entanglement might occur with two caught animals.

Well, there you have it, another set trappers can attempt to use to catch furbearing animals in the cold, snowy conditions. Try it out and hope old Ma' Nature doesn't change things up on you too bad. ### Mike Marchewka, 1235 Alexandra Blvd., Crystal Lake, IL 60014

Editor's Note: I would like to welcome Mike's story and thank him for his interest in the OSTA and the Buck-eye Trapper. Thanks for sharing your ideas with us in Ohio. While we are able to use snares in Ohio, there are probably quite a few places on your winter trapline where this set would work great.