

Hard Lessons: Still Recovering...From Being Burned
Article from Jan - Feb 2009 Buckeye Trapper
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After you've been in the predator trapping/hunting field for a while you'll probably end up getting burned. No, I'm not talking about getting physically burned by say your boiling hot trap dye or your trap wax. I'm talking about being burned as in being taken advantage of, deceived, or let down by unappreciative people. We all know a few of these types. These are folks that usually want something for nothing. Like the ones that believe your compensation when trapping summer nuisance animals should be "those animal's pelts." I can't tell you the number of times I've been told, "I'll even let you keep the pelts from those (summer caught) raccoons." Trappers being the salt of the earth type usually have to kindly inform these folks that there is no value in summer caught animal pelts. And that yes, we will need compensation for the removal of those nuisance animals.

I remember when I first started out trapping, I did a lot of A.D.C. work for farmers and other landowners just for a minimal gas fee and rights to fur trap and hunt their ground come fall. Removing a half a dozen ground-hogs, a few ground squirrels, a skunk, or other animals to trap and predator call a few hundred acres was well worth it to me at that time. But the older I get, the more my view has changed on doing this type of work for minimal reimbursement. With today's gas prices and the increased prices of everything else, higher fees are warranted. It might also be that I have developed a bit of a hard streak from being told one thing and having something else occur right before my plans are supposed to come to fruition.

A few examples come to mind. I remember one vividly. A farmer had called about some sweet corn raiding raccoon one summer. He had gotten my name from a landowner friend on whose farm I had trapped and hunted on for years. The sweet corn farmer wanted these 'coon trapped. I tried putting him off, telling him that I'd trap the raccoon during fur season, but he told me that he needed them "gone yesterday" as he ran a small farm stand selling his vegetables to the public. I shot him a figure for gas and a price for each 'coon I caught. He replied that he didn't have a lot of money, but if I trapped the raccoon he would let me trap the two properties that he owned. I knew that he farmed a piece of ground that had a fairly large creek that also had a huge hardwoods on it. The other ground was typical Illinois flat farm ground that had some thick fencerows near the railroad tracks. And I love trapping near railroad tracks! I usually find lots of furbearers nearby. I figured I could make out picking up enough fur on those two parcels to make it worth my while so I agreed.

The next day, I arrived with six cage traps and four egg traps and went to work. I ended the week with eleven raccoons and a few 'possums before the traps went dead. I made sure that the farmer saw my animals each day. He smiled every time I stopped by.

I scouted the two parcels that the farmer had promised. Raccoon, muskrat, and even a few mink tracks dotted the creek's banks. Wandering gray and red fox tracks and droppings were found in some of the dusty late summer farm lanes. I smiled as my mind went into overdrive at the thought of all the fur I was going to catch.

Well the season opened and I was packed and ready to go. I had a few other farms in the area of the two new properties and set them up first. Around noon, I swung into the farm lane of the railroad track property. I noticed a red pickup parked in the woods. The farmer hadn't mentioned that anybody else should be on the property, but I paid it no mind. I got to work making dryland fox and 'coon sets. I used a lot #1 1/2 Victor and Montgomery coils back then. Each trap had 12 inches of well-swiveled chain and was staked with a 24-inch rebar stake. This was back in the late '80s before coyotes became heavily populated. I made ten sets on this property. I drove to the property with the creek and set that up too. I made mostly water sets as I had plenty of #1 1/2 longsprings in my trap bucket, but was running low on land traps. I liked the Victor and Blake and Lamb #1 1/2 longsprings for my water trapping back then. I ran about two feet of chain and used a T-bar to anchor the trap. I was a pocket set trapper back then. A good deep hole with a chunk of fish and a dab of

mink lure. But I never passed a good blind set.

The next day, I arrived back at the railroad property to find that the red pickup was again parked there. I drove up to my first few sets and found the traps fired and pulled out of their beds with boot prints in the pattern. My blood pressure was up and I gritted my teeth in anger. It was obvious that the person attempted to pull the stakes up but was unsuccessful. I quietly patted myself on the back for using the longer 24 inch long, 1/2 inch rebar instead of my normal 18-inch stakes. I walked up to my other sets I had made and saw where the same thing had occurred at three other sets. The traps were snapped off with trap and boot prints present. Two other sets had actually connected with raccoon and one other had a gray fox bustling around. These sets were blended flat sets and I surmised that the trap molester must have missed them.

I dispatched the catches and remade all of the sets. After putting my gear and animals away I drove to where the red pickup was parked, turned off the engine, and waited. It was getting late in the day and I figured the hunter would wrap up pretty soon. I didn't want to accuse anyone of anything, but I was wondering if this guy had permission to be on the land and if he knew anything about my problem.

About a half hour later a camouflaged bow hunter came walking out of the woods. He dropped his bow off in his truck bed and saw my truck and walked over in an obvious huff. I got out and introduced myself. I asked him if he had permission to hunt the property. He said that the same sweet corn farmer had given him permission to hunt there. I asked him if he knew about my traps being messed with. He did, as he was the guy who did it! His story was that he didn't realize anyone else had permission to be out on the property and just wanted to see who was out there by looking at the trap tag on the traps. "You are in violation! I couldn't find a trap tag on your traps," he said. That didn't set too well with me. I tore into him and had him down on the ground in seconds. (Note: I was younger and dumb at the time. This type of action could get one in trouble with today's pacifistic society.) "I'm in violation?" I yelled. "You mess with my traps and I'm in violation," I screamed. The hunter's eyes bugged out his head. He wasn't sure what was going to happen next. I had thoughts of pounding the castor out this jerk, but the thought of 30 years to life for a few snapped off traps didn't seem worth it. I climbed off him and told him to get up. I walked back over to my truck and grabbed a trap out of the bucket. I walked back over to him and showed him where my trap tags were located on each of my traps. He was still kneeling and out of breath. He was shaking badly. "You have obviously trapped before," I said. "You know it's taboo to mess with a trapper's sets. What were you thinking?" I said sternly. I didn't know what to do so I jumped in my truck and drove home.

The next day I drove up to the railroad farm. I didn't see the red pickup there...relief. Two raccoons were caught in the sets that had been molested the day before. Three other animals were caught – a skunk and two 'possums. All sets were remade. I left feeling a little better about the property.

I drove over to the property with the creek and found the red pickup parked there. I couldn't believe it! I quickly ran my sets. I caught a few muskrats and a couple of 'coon in the creek. I remade the sets and went directly to the four land sets I had out. Two 'coon and a lone skunk were caught in the sets. I reset the traps and left hurriedly for the sweet corn farmer's house.

As I pulled into the farmer's driveway, I could see he was in at his vegetable stand. I got out and greeted him and told him what had happened. "Red pickup truck ...let me see. Oh yeah, that guy asked last week if it was okay to bow hunt the farms. I didn't think it would cause you any trouble," he said. "Come on now, its just a few traps," he said. I thought to myself, "Oh, it was just a few ears of corn that the 'coon were eating." What could I say? I left not quite sure what to do. I made a mental note to myself to charge this man money in the future.

The rest of the week went smooth with no other trap related issues. The following weekend I drove out to the farm with the creek and was greeted with three other pickups. Huh? Some waterfowl hunters had set up in a

field that bordered the creek. They had parked their vehicles literally over the top of two of my trap sets. There were goose and duck decoys strewn all over the field and they had their blind in a weedy fencerow. I cursed the farmer under my breath as I got out of the truck, pulled my hip boots up, and went to check my sets in the creek. I decided to pull my traps up, as this was getting ridiculous. I still managed to catch a mink and two 'coons.

As I struggled to the top of the creek bank with the animals, traps and stakes, I saw a hunter approaching fast. "Here we go," I thought. "Hey! Who are you? Do you have permission to be out here," the hunter shouted. "Yeah, and it seems like everyone and their brother does too!" I replied. The hunter walked up and saw the animals and traps. "You're trapping out here? I've got a hunting dog in my blind," he shouted. "Relax! I will pull my traps up and get out of here...as soon as you move your trucks off my sets," I replied. I pointed over to where the trucks were parked and we walked over. I explained the situation to the hunter telling about the miscommunication with the farmer. The hunter told me that they had hunted the place for a few seasons and had stopped by just last weekend to double check if it was okay to hunt with the farmer. He never mentioned my trapping to them. After the trucks were moved I recovered my traps, and one had been smashed. I didn't say a word as I felt it wasn't the hunter's fault. I shook hands with the hunter and told him I'd be talking with the sweet corn farmer. I drove out of the field and directly to the railroad track farm and checked and pulled my traps up. I caught a red fox and two more skunks and noticed fresh droppings outside the area where I had caught the 'coons. This farm had a lot of possibilities but it just wasn't worth the hassles.

I drove over to the farmer's house, knocked on his door, and asked him what he was thinking in as calm of a voice as I could muster. He asked what I was referring to. I told my story of the waterfowl hunter and his dog. And what would happen if the dog got caught in a trap that I had set? I went on to inform him about my traps being run over and that expense. He became indignant and told me that I was no longer welcome on his property and slammed the door in my face.

I have grown up and learned a lot of things since that time. I have learned that some people will tell you what you want to hear and promise you the moon. They have an agenda and they will do whatever it takes to fulfill it. They don't care about you or really anything but their objectives. In retrospect, I was partly to blame here because I took it for granted that the farmer knew about my desires when I am trapping. I still get burned from time to time, but the severity of the injuries are less. Now I am sure to ask more questions and attempt to cover my bases by leaving nothing out about my fur taking conditions. I am not afraid to turn down situations that I don't feel comfortable with, like sharing properties with other people while trapping. Or other compensation for work I do regarding removing problem animals. I seem to learn best from hard lessons in life. And I think that's part of the game we call life. ### Mike Marchewa, 1235 Alexandra Blvd., Crystal Lake, Illinois, 60014.