

Quick Release

The odds of your dog ever becoming caught in a trap or snare are slim. Even so, you might want to know where the devices are typically placed, how they work, and, in the unlikely event your dog gets caught, how to set it free.

By Tom Dickson

In 2006, Wayne Hadley of Deer Lodge was hunting pheasants with his wife Kathleen on private land in central Montana with their Labrador retriever, Annie. Toward the end of the day, as he walked along a sheep (woven wire) fence, Hadley noticed two coyote skulls on the ground. “That should have gotten my attention, but I was tired and was looking forward to getting back to the truck,” says the retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fisheries biologist.

When the dog ducked under a low spot in the fence about 15 feet away, she stopped and began pulling at what Hadley quickly saw was a coyote snare set in the gap. “It had closed just behind her head, and she was already having trouble breathing,” Hadley says. “I grabbed her and held her close to the fence to prevent the snare from pulling even tighter.”

Hadley yelled for Kathleen to hold the dog while he tried to find the locking mechanism. “I fumbled a bit but eventually figured out how to release it and back the snare off Annie’s neck,” he says.

The dog was unharmed and within minutes was happily back searching for pheasants. But Hadley was shaken—and remains so. “The memory still gives me the willies,” he says.

Though frightening, Hadley’s incident with his dog and the trap was uncommon. “I’ve run Labs in the West for over 40 years and never encountered this problem before,” he says. But it’s a situation that worries many

upland bird hunters, hikers, and cross-country skiers who roam the outdoors with their four-footed partners. Fortunately, few of the estimated 200,000-plus dogs in Montana get caught in traps or snares each year.

State law requires trappers to report all dog captures to FWP. Excluding dogs allowed to run “at large” (unrestrained and unsupervised), department officials say that roughly 13 dogs are caught in traps each year, or one dog per 250,000 “trap-nights” (a 24-hour period when a trap is set anywhere in the state by Montana’s roughly 5,000 licensed trappers). In those instances, the owners or trappers release the dogs without injury 72 percent of the time. Injuries are usually limited to swelling or relatively minor cuts.

“In the extremely rare case where a dog is killed in a trap or snare, it’s almost always in an illegal set or is a dog that has been allowed to roam at-large on someone else’s private property,” says Bob Inman, FWP Furbearer Program coordinator.

Yet for many dog owners, even the slight possibility that their pet would venture near a trap or snare can be worrisome. Many people who hike, cross-country ski, and hunt with a canine companion find peace of mind in knowing where the devices are most likely to be found and how to release their pet if it were caught.

SNARES

Upland bird hunting dogs would most likely encounter a *wire snare*. These multistrand cable loops are mainly used to kill coyotes preying on livestock. They are set about 18 inches off the ground so that when the predator moves along a path, the loop catches and tightens around the neck, quickly suffocating the animal.

Snares are found mainly on private land, especially around sheep operations, but they also are set in other places.

If your dog is caught in a snare, you need to remove it quickly. A dog can suffocate within minutes, and the more it struggles, the more the snare tightens around its neck. But you also need to remain calm because your dog will sense your alarm and may struggle more.

The snare has a small, metal locking mechanism that prevents the cable from loosening. To release the mechanism, you

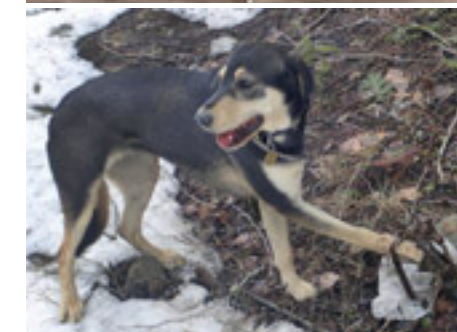
need to actually tighten the snare a bit to release tension. Visit a store that sells trapping supplies (Sportsman’s Warehouse, for example) and ask if you can look at snares to see how the locking mechanisms work.

Another way to free your dog is to cut the cable at the neck. Use a special trapper’s cable cutter or heavy-duty, eight-inch diagonal (side-cutting) pliers carried in your hunting vest or day pack. Wire cutters or Leatherman-type multitools rarely can cut a multistrand snare cable. To ensure your cutter will work, buy a few feet of $\frac{3}{32}$ -inch cable at a hardware store and try it.

FOOTHOLD TRAPS

Dogs with hikers or cross-country skiers would most likely encounter *foothold traps*. These nonlethal metal traps are used to catch and hold bobcats, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, and wolves by the foot until the trapper returns to make a quick kill. They are placed on the ground where furbearers travel, typically baited with an attractive scent, and covered with a thin layer of soil or leaves. Many foothold traps have rubber-coated or offset jaws designed to hold but not damage the animal’s limb.

To release your dog, put a jacket over its



NONLETHAL Modern foothold traps have rubber-coated jaws or ones that don’t close entirely (top), reducing permanent injury to dogs. Above: Even older versions usually result in only minor paw injuries.

head to calm it, ideally with its muzzle in the sleeve. Dogs caught in traps can become frantic and may bite their owner.

Press down with a foot or palm of your hand on each spring to open the jaws. Usually you don’t have to compress the springs much to loosen the trap enough for the dog to slip free.

BODY-GRIPPING TRAPS

The third and least commonly encountered device is the body-gripping trap (also known as the Conibear, for its original designer). Powered by two large springs, a body-gripping trap works like a giant mousetrap—but without the wooden platform—by snapping around the animal’s neck or body. These traps are mainly used for taking beavers in or near water.

On federal lands such as national forests, and on state trust lands and state forests, state law requires that large body-gripping traps must be set inside a box with no larger than a seven-inch by seven-inch opening so that curious dogs can’t enter and trip it.

These traps come in many sizes. The smaller ones are easy to open (with instruction), but the larger versions are extremely difficult to open and free a dog, especially on snow or other soft ground where leverage is difficult. You can learn how to open large body-gripping traps by watching YouTube videos and practicing (with supervision—these traps are dangerous to handle). Waterfowl hunters and others with dogs who regularly encounter water in the fall and winter may wish to learn the process.

AVOIDING TRAPS

The closer your dog is to you, the less likely it will be caught in a trap or snare and, if caught, the quicker you can free it. Most dogs caught in traps or snares are either allowed to roam unsupervised off-leash or are wide-ranging bird hunting dogs often out of sight of their owners. If you have concerns about traps or snares where you hunt, hike, or cross-country ski, keep your dog on a leash or at least within sight. Cross-country skiers: Many pet shops sell special “bungy-style” leashes that keep your dog from pulling you over.

As for the danger of traps to people, FWP has no record of an adult or child getting caught in a trap or snare. These devices are set

WHOA! Setters and other wide-ranging bird dogs are particularly susceptible to traps and snares

specifically to catch certain types of animals, in places where people rarely venture.

On public land, trappers typically avoid setting traps anywhere near trails. “Due to the high foot traffic and the number of dogs, furbearers are driven far away from popular trails,” says Jim Buell, president of the Montana Trappers Association. Buell adds that trappers are well aware of their public image and the growing threat to trapping that comes from changing attitudes in increasingly urbanized areas. “Trappers have absolutely no interest in having dogs or other nontarget animals end up in their traps,” he says.

Traps and snares on public land are most often set in winter, when furbearer pelts are thickest and most valuable. Trapping seasons for regulated species generally run from November 1 through the end of February. When there’s snow on the ground, avoid any single set of human tracks or sled marks heading off-trail, which could indicate someone running a trapline.

If exploring private land, ask the landowner about any traps on the property and specific locations to avoid. Be especially alert in places with domestic sheep or sheep fencing; these areas often contain snares used to protect livestock from predators.

SETBACKS AND OTHER LAWS

Many laws regulate trapping locations in Montana. Traps or snares can’t be set in a national park or most national wildlife refuges. They are prohibited within 1,000 feet of any designated public campground or

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SAFE SKIING By keeping their dogs nearby, cross-country skiers and hikers can greatly reduce the already slim odds of a trap or snare encounter.

recreational site such as a boat ramp or fishing access site. Traps or snares aren’t allowed within 50 feet of the edge of trails or roads designated by administrative signs or numbers, such as those in national forests (e.g., “FT 113”). Depending on the type of trap, they are prohibited within 300 to 1,000 feet of a designated trailhead. And it’s illegal for a trap or snare to be within 500 feet from the edge of trails and roads in more than two dozen high-use hiking and cross-country ski areas in northwestern and southwestern Montana (for details, see pages 6–7 of the 2019 Montana Trapping Regulations, available at FWP offices, online, or at sporting goods stores).

Trappers are not legally required to post orange flags or other warnings at their trap sites. That’s primarily to prevent people from vandalizing the sets. The one exception is that state school trust lands containing traps must have signs indicating their presence. Also, it’s illegal to destroy, disturb, or remove any trap or snare you might

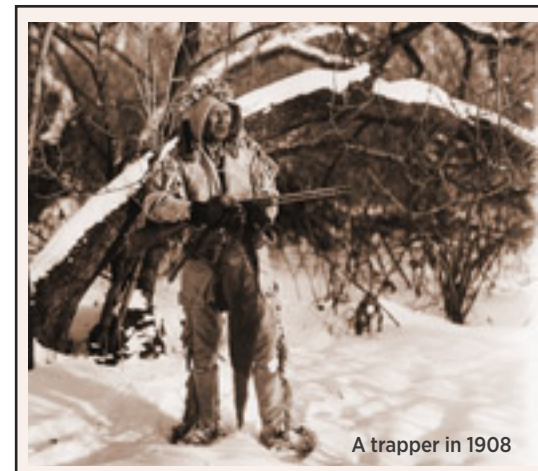
encounter (unless it’s to free your dog).

Trapping is legal under site-specific regulations on most state wildlife management areas (WMAs) as well as on Block Management Areas (BMAs) where the private landowner has clearly given permission for trapping. Many upland bird and waterfowl hunters wonder why this is allowed, since it increases the risk of hunting dogs encountering traps. “The short answer is that licensed trapping is a legal activity, and WMAs are purchased in part for both public hunting and trapping,” Inman says.

As for BMAs, Inman notes that landowners do not forfeit any property rights by enrolling land in the program. If they want to allow legal trapping, they may. Because FWP does not require that BMA enrollees post signs or otherwise indicate that their land may contain traps, hunters should always assume that any BMA could contain traps and take precautions.

Hadley says he still thinks about the day his dog Annie almost suffocated from a snare. But he also recognizes that, as tragic as the incident might have been, it was a rarity. “I’ve read a lot and talked to many other hunters about traps since that happened,” he says. “The advice I now give is to keep your dog close, stay away from areas mostly likely to contain traps or snares, and carry a snare cutter that you know will cut cable.” 🐾

FWP, Alaska Fish and Game, Idaho Fish and Game, and several trapping groups provide online instructions and videos on how to release a dog from various traps and snares. The FWP video is at fwp.mt.gov/hunting/trapping.



A trapper in 1908

Trapping culture

People have been trapping in Montana for centuries. Early Native Americans trapped animals for their fur and to trade with early explorers. Later, European trappers trapped and sold beavers and other animals for commerce. Trapping continues today as a biologically sustainable form of outdoor recreation as well as a management tool for removing nuisance animals such as beavers, which sometimes build dams that cause roads, crop fields, and other areas to flood.

Roughly 5,000 people are licensed to trap in Montana. FWP requires trappers to buy an annual license and follow regulations regarding seasons, limits, and trap use and placement. Wolf trappers must also be certified by taking a state-facilitated class. The department encourages all trappers to participate in voluntary trapper education programs that, among other things, provide advice on how to avoid accidentally capturing dogs or other “nontarget” animals.

Snares & Traps 101

SNARE

Lethal: Yes

Dog can be left while the owner seeks help: No

Ease of opening: If the locking mechanism can be wiggled free, a snare can easily be removed from a dog’s neck. Otherwise, it takes a specialized cable cutter—not a wire cutter or a Leatherman-type multitool—to cut the cable, which should be done where the wire meets the locking mechanism.

Where: Most common on private land, especially around sheep operations, but also on public land, where they are used mainly to catch coyotes.

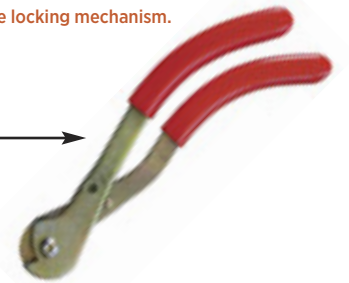
When: Year round on private land. Mostly in late fall and winter on public land.



Toggle the locking mechanism to loosen the cable.

Cut the cable at the neck near the locking mechanism.

Available at trapper supply stores, devices like this American-brand cable cutter costs less than \$25 and will cut through any snare.



FOOTHOLD TRAP

Lethal: No

Dog can be left while the owner seeks help: Yes

Ease of opening: The jaws can be pried apart by placing the trap on the ground and pressing down on the springs on both sides with your feet or the palms of your hands enough for the dog’s paw to pull free.

Where: On private land, and on public land beyond legal setback zones

When: Late fall and winter

Press down with your feet or the heel of your hands on both springs to free the dog’s paw.

BODY-GRIPPING TRAP

Lethal: Yes

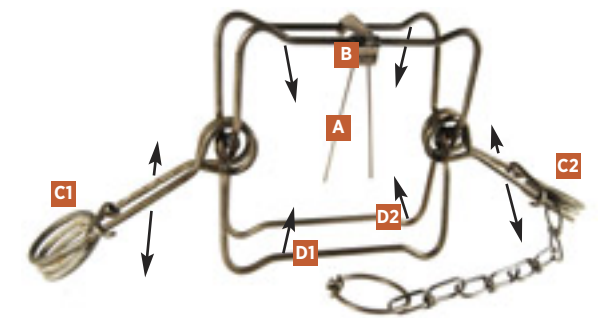
Dog can be left while the owner seeks help: No

Ease of opening: Larger models are extremely difficult to open and require training and ideal conditions. Smaller models are easier to open but require instruction to learn how they operate.

Where: On private land, and on public land beyond legal setback zones

When: Late fall and winter

Note: Many state laws regulate trapping locations, especially where people hike or cross-country ski with dogs. The odds of anyone with a dog encountering a trap are extremely slim.



This body-gripping trap is set for capture. When an animal pokes its head through the opening (A), it trips the latch (B), which allows the closed springs on either side (C1, C2) to open, causing the trap jaws (D1, D2) to snap down on the animal’s neck or body. Larger versions are extremely difficult to open without practicing (with supervision) beforehand. Smaller versions are easier to open but require instruction.