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 ground. “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 the animal’s limb.

Though frightening, Hadley’s incident remains so. “The memory still gives me the shakes,” he says. But it’s a situation that worries many dog owners, even the slightest concern that your dog will sense your alarm and may struggle more.

As for the danger of traps to people, FWP says the risk is small. Modern foothold traps have rubber-coated jaws or ones that don’t close entirely (true, reducing permanent injury to dogs. Above: Even older versions usually result in only minor paw injuries.

FOOTHOOLD TRAPS

Upland bird hunting dogs 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 trap releases a quick kill. They are placed on the ground where predators 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 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 snaring 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 smallest 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
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, furbears 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 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.

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 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.

To avoid accidentally capturing dogs or other “nontarget” animals, use a dog’s paw.

SAFE SNIRES: By keeping their dogs nearby, cross-country skiers and hikers can greatly reduce the already slim odds of a trap or snare encounter. (Unless it’s to free your dog.)

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-licensed 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.

SAFE SNIRES: By keeping their dogs nearby, cross-country skiers and hikers can greatly reduce the already slim odds of a trap or snare encounter. (Unless it’s to free your dog.)

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-licensed 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.

THE MONTANA OUTDOORS TEAM PHOTOS BY THOM BRIDGE

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-licensed 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.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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 practical (with supervision) beforehand. Smaller versions are easier to open but require instruction.

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 traps are set near or around houses or with dogs. The odds of anyone with a dog encountering a trap are extremely slim.