

Where Have All The Trappers Gone?

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

I was driving down the road near San Angelo the other day, pondering the recent turn of events on the political scene. Change is certainly in the air. Truly a lot has changed since I was a kid. Many of the freedoms we enjoyed 30 or 40 years ago slowly, yet ever so surely, have slipped away, as urbanites have taken over the world. As a young

man, I remember being able to take my gun to school and store it in the cloak room, so I could hunt right after school. No one ever considered any of us would do anything bad. The high school parking lot was full of pickups with guns bracketed in the back windows. My father had no worries about me heading out alone on my grandfather's farm, gun under my arm, at the age of nine. "Be careful," was the only admonition from Dad. (I also remember kids showing up for school and being sent to the washroom to get the skunk smell off—careful indeed!) Almost every one of my friends hunted, fished, and trapped.

Trapping in particular was a good way to earn money, and it was challenging and fun! Yes things have changed. Today it's a violation of the law to even set foot near a school with a firearm. And as for trapping, well, to say it's politically incorrect for a young person to trap would be an understatement.

Trappers have been forgotten even by those who claim to support the right to keep and bear arms. "We can't afford to fight on this issue," one prominent gun rights proponent told me at a meeting in North Carolina. "Trapping is a real hot-button issue." To this I say "Bull!" We all are in this together—gun hunters, bow hunters, sport shooters, and trappers. Trapping is a wonderful pastime, one that has many personal and wildlife management benefits. Trapping is an activity that teaches more about the behavior of animals than any other. To successfully outwit a coyote, raccoon, or beaver requires a level of woods-sense few outdoorsmen have today. Successful trappers have all the traits of the good hunter: patience, perseverance, knowledge, and skill. So then, why are so many people against trapping?

There are many misconceptions, particularly among hunters, the most notable being that trapping is inherently cruel. These are indeed different times. In my childhood, we gave little thought to the idea of a raccoon caught in a leg-hold trap. It was just part of nature. Besides, that same 'coon had probably raided our hen house, taking away Sunday breakfast! Too, I remember the first time I saw what coyotes had done to one of our calves. That didn't instill much compassion for an animal Mark Twain described as, "Snarling at you with a mouth full of teeth, while the rest of their face apologizes for it!" Today's modern trapping equipment is designed specifically to *not* inflict undue pain on its captive. Leg-hold traps do nothing more than restrain the animal until you get there, which, if you are an ethical trapper, is quickly. Conibear traps kill instantly, though they do not provide the opportunity to release a non-target animal; however, snares can be constructed to not kill or injure dogs, deer, and other animals. So again, why are people so opposed to trapping?

After about 30 years of constant exposure to Walt Disney and a host of cartoon movies, modern kids, even country kids, have developed an anti-trapping mind set. Whereas young boys once roamed the woods looking for good places to set their traps, modern kids satisfy the same instinctive need with "healthier" video games. Yeah, I guess it's better to learn how to blow up your fellow man than trap a marauding bobcat.

Trapping opponents in the animal rights industry like to crow about their success. The public is treated to nightly news broadcasts with scenes of activists throwing paint on innocent women wearing furs. Read the anti's literature, and you could actually buy into the idea that they've had a serious economic impact on the fur business. Yes, fur sales have been flat for the last decade, but there are two facts to consider in looking at that statistic. First, most furs are sold to European women, and the average person owns just over two fur garments. Second, fashion trends are cyclic and fur coats and garments have not been in fashion until recently. I'm not saying the animal rights faction hasn't had an impact, only that there are a

number of complex factors affecting whether or not people buy furs. Back to my childhood again. We considered it our patriotic duty to trap. If a coyote dared howl in our part of Central Texas, every rancher in the area flew into action. In no time the offending animal had been shot or captured. In an average year, we routinely removed dozens of predators, including skunks, raccoons, coyotes, bobcats, weasels, and opossums.

Does this mean I support the wholesale killing of all predators? Absolutely not! However, in the last three decades I've seen mid-level predator populations soar. How sure? We invented infrared-triggered cameras and have developed many ways to use them in wildlife management. To date, we have more than 300,000 photographs of deer at feeders—we also have, I believe, the world's record for most raccoons in one photograph, to wit, 23. We even have a photograph of one raccoon helping another up into a trough feeder! One of the questions most frequently asked of wildlife biologists is, "Why don't we have more bobwhites and turkeys?" There are many answers, but a significant factor, in my professional opinion, is predation. Those game birds are ground nesters, and given the high densities of mid-level predators, it's no wonder the Herculean efforts of various state agencies and the National Wild Turkey Federation to restore Eastern birds to the South has met with poor results in many areas. This is especially true for the "block stocking" approach, where smaller numbers of birds are released at each site over a broad area, instead of more concentrated mass stockings in high quality habitats. A handful of birds just don't stand a chance of reproducing in 'coon country.

Researchers at Stephen F. Austin State University are actively studying these issues and hopefully will discover better ways to assure survival, but my thoughts are that, until ways to thwart small predators or even manage them are implemented, we will not see acceptable results. So, how do we reduce mid-level predators to more manageable numbers? This is one of those columns that does not end with a sound recommendation for making things better. The farmers and ranchers of my childhood actually were taking the place of higher predators such as bobcats, mountain lions, and wolves. Where these larger predators persist, mid-level predator populations are significantly lower—you'd be amazed how many raccoons, opossums, and even coyotes are eaten by top carnivores. But can you imagine the public reaction if TPWD announced they were going to stock mountain lions?

As people move off the land and sell out to recreational landowners, the interest in controlling predators diminishes. If you're not making a living from the land, you have little interest in protecting your investment. Thus, the future looks pretty grim for game birds. There's no perfect solution to this problem. However, on properties I manage for deer and turkeys, I have been fairly successful by intensively managing for habitats that provide enough food and cover to out-pace predation. For example, by increasing fawning cover through a reduction in grazing pressure and burning, I was able to double fawn survival on a South Texas ranch, and I did it with only a modicum of predator control; you *never* can protect your game if you have grazed the land down to bare ground. High fenced properties of modest size (1,000 acres or less) do, however, require predator control, since you're dealing with confined deer populations. At Ft. Perry, Georgia, we observed that, when fawning peaked, so did invasion by coyotes. Our recruitment suffered until we began a serious control program. Lastly, why are we not including trapping instruction in our many youth education programs? Wildlife management courses at universities do not include trapping instruction to any real extent. In fact, most young wildlife professors I know have no experience with trapping. Are we afraid of offending that boogey man we call the "public?" The conservation and hunting groups who have walked away from our trapping friends may someday regret giving our enemies a toehold!