

School Boy Sets, Again?

When I first started trapping a little more than a few decades ago, the terms school boy trapper and school boy sets were used pretty commonly, there was a reason for that. Back then kids that were trapping didn't have much to draw on. Most trappers that were more experienced were either tight lipped or inaccessible. No internet, no outdoor shows on TV, not much promotion at all, so what we had were other school boys. If you were lucky there was one in your grade, or close to it, that had an older relative that was a wise old trapper and he was privy to the deep secrets of the trade. Unfortunately, most of them were really no different than the school boys, only older!

We did things then that just make us grin now, like line up traps with the jaws touching from the bridge wall to the water, since just laying one trap on the sand bar produced nothing but raccoon tracks walking beside it, it just makes sense that a whole barrier wall of traps was something guaranteed to catch every raccoon that dare attempt to go under my bridge!

Every little run that entered a bigger ditch was another guaranteed location since a trap under water was sure to fool the wariest raccoon, and dumb luck did prevail here often enough to make you think you were onto something. Along with this, every ground hog trail and tile was deserving of a well placed trap, at least until you ran out of traps, which didn't take real long. Once the ground was covered with snow a whole new world opened up, only if we would have known the Canadians had a market for red squirrels, and Ohio let you sell them!

Gradually we started trying to figure out why some things, such as the tiles and trails, produced a variety of critters and other places didn't. The revelation that when we set traps where the critters were more constricted in their travels was a breakthrough, but there were still too many paw prints over traps that were undisturbed, and too many traps that were sitting there sprung, or worse yet with a little disturbance but no raccoon.

Comparing notes with all the other trappers at school, through everybody's trail and error we came up with things like guides in the form of stepping sticks, a little bit of camouflage on the traps, and anchoring traps so the raccoon couldn't grab onto something to help it pull free of the trap. I don't recall any of us discovering trap bedding until we graduated to fox trapping. Constant study of misses actually made you a fairly proficient raccoon trapper within a couple years.

As with anything, as time goes on you discover books, magazines and trappers associations, the latter having these really neat things called conventions. As an eager high school kid now, as much of this information and experience as possible is devoured like you are starved to death. The opportunity to learn from others seems unlimited now and you can take advantage of this and leave the school boy stage in the dust, just a distant memory.

You continue to learn and evolve, trapping, just like life is now becoming much complicated, and expensive. You simply have got to have all the latest gadgets, special tools for limited applications, different traps, rigged and adjusted differently for different

species at different sets, one lure for a dirt hole set in November, a different lure for December, a special lure for a flat set, and the list can go on. Along with all this can come a little bit of an attitude, when you hit canines you need three different types of sets at each location to cover all the fox that are shy of certain sets, you feel the need to place a body grip trap over every hole in the ditch or creek, no matter if it's a den or feedhole, you're a real trapper now, forget that school boy stuff!

Then one day, as time becomes much more limited, joints begin to ache, and muscles just don't seem to recover as quickly as they used to, it's like somebody whopped you up side the head with a 2x4 with the old saying, work smarter not harder on it. You realize you can set one or two locations for fox and still catch the same amount. You can set 4 to 6 traps for muskrat, mink and raccoon and spend 10 minutes a day running them for a week, instead of setting 20 traps and spending 30 minutes a day running them for 5 days and still catch the same amount of fur. What it comes down to is simplifying your sets, and only setting hot locations, leave the marginal stuff alone. In my case, that meant reverting back to what many would call the school boy sets, so here are some simple and productive examples. We're going to focus on water sets.

No matter what size the watercourse you are trapping on, the basic "cut bank" set is probably the simplest and most effective set there is. Variations are limitless; every location has its own uniqueness to it, that's why I enjoy water trapping so much. The sign will tell you the hot spots, but the ideal location would be a bank that's almost a sheer drop of a couple feet or more, a shallow shelf about an inch under water that tapers slowly for about 4 to 6 inches, then drop off into deeper water, a grass or root overhang that creates an overhead cover for muskrats even so much it forms a tunnel, and within a few feet both upstream and downstream wider flats that just out into the water course with grasses or other vegetation growing on them, creating a reason for the raccoon and mink to be down off the high bank and hunting the waters edge. You could literally make a checklist of these features, and the more a location has the more fur you will catch.

The set itself is also about as simple as you can get, but very affective. In picture 1 you see a simple cut bank. The trap is set right where the animal would either come off the grass area into the water as it wades along the under water shelf, or be coming out of the water onto the grass. It doesn't take anything complicated, just cut the bank so it is vertical where you will place your trap right up tight against it, and put a stepping stick just outside the jaw hinge on one end or the other, the animal will tend to either step over the stick or right before it, either way that puts the paw on the pan.



Picture 1

Another variation is with a channel. In picture 2 and 3 you see both a close and wide view of the set. The grass you see to the left was partially submerged and it was real quick to go ahead and open a channel to fit the trap, again, nothing but a step stick on one

side, a small stick on the bank side since the bank had a little too much curve to straighten the whole thing, and the grass clump made the guide on the outside. This set had caught a few raccoon before I took the pictures so it doesn't have near the grass overhang it did at first.



Picture 2



Picture 3

Another variation, and the last one for this article, is actually a combination of two different sets. It's a set that would work as a cut bank, but because of the wider shelf under water, both up and downstream, I wanted to add a little more eye appeal so I simply dug a small pocket right at the same location I would make the cut bank set. See picture 4. To me it's strictly an eye appeal set, so I don't worry about lure or bait, just slick the bank and mouth of the hole and you're set. A couple of guide sticks are all that is needed. If muskrats are present this slicked up hole is deadly on them as a pocket set, just push a couple pencil sized sticks into the bottom, up against the jaw on the water side then break them off just below water level, these will act as a bump stick for the muskrat causing them to drop their feet right onto the trap.



Picture 4

If you're wondering about the traps you see in the pictures, they're #2 long springs. A big reason for this trap choice goes back to the simple thing, bedding the trap. If you have never tried it, get your hands on some long spring traps and see how easy it is to set them under water and make them bed nice and solid. My rule of thumb is also about an inch of water over the trap. This will result in mostly front foot catches on muskrats, and experience has taught me that a higher catch is actually a good thing on muskrat because of the light bones, and a front foot catch drowns a muskrat so much quicker than a back foot catch, this is especially important when you don't have real deep water.

Hopefully this little explanation of why I have reverted back to a little bit of a school boy trapper is helpful to some!