

# Dog-Friendly Strategies for Trapping Public Land

By Ron Durham

For many years I have run a trapline on one of Kentucky's state-owned and managed wildlife management areas, the Kleber WMA. I found Kleber in 1985 when my job was transferred to nearby Lexington, Kentucky and immediately adopted it as my home hunting area. Kleber WMA has always been an excellent place to bowhunt for deer, call in a spring gobbler, hunt for squirrels, and do some late-season predator calling. Kleber also gives me a convenient place to scratch that old trapper's itch that seems to show up every year around late November. I've had that itch for about the last forty years and apparently the only remedy for it is to throw a bag full of traps on my back, pull on my wading boots and head for my favorite trapping grounds.

The downside I have always faced trapping at Kleber is that just as the Kentucky trapping season opens, Kleber WMA also becomes a favorite destination for many hunters who prefer to hunt with dogs. Rabbit and quail season open the same day as trapping season and Kentucky has always had a long tradition of late-season squirrel hunting with dogs and hunting foxes and coons with hounds. I have many times been serenaded by the song of someone's rabbit beagles or the baying of a nearby hound while standing hip-deep in a Kleber stream constructing a promising furbearer set. I have flushed ducks while setting traps along Kleber's streams so there is also the possibility that a duck hunter could employ one of the deeper holes of water to set up for late-season duck and goose hunting and bring along his favorite retriever. There is also a hiking and horse-riding trail through the WMA and I have occasionally encountered both hikers and horseback riders who have their favorite canine friend trotting along beside them.

Most dog owners that I know are very protective of their canine companions. As a general rule, owners of hunting dogs invest a lot

of time and money in their dogs and form a real bond with them. They tend to not appreciate finding their favorite friend with his toes in a steel trap, even if the trap is not large enough to cause any real injury to the dog. The owner can still get their feelings or their egos somewhat bruised. Likewise, I generally don't feel the need to deal with an irrational dog owner whose favorite friend has just had his toes pinched in one of my traps.

Of course, like most trappers I know, I have some traps in my arsenal that it is better if dogs are kept at a distance. While even a small hunting dog could probably shake off one of my #1 or #1-1/2 raccoon or mink traps with no problem or damage, a small squirrel or rabbit dog might get some severely pinched toes in a #2 coil spring or double-longspring set for foxes or coyotes. Latching onto a dog of any size with one of my beaver traps is a bad idea. Likewise, having someone's prized hunting dog tangle with a trap or snare intended for coyotes is to be avoided.

So a win-win for everyone concerned is if I enjoy a productive trapping season while avoiding latching onto someone's favorite canine hunting pal. With that goal in mind I have developed some basic strategies that have worked well for me for many years. I have yet to have to release someone's dog from one of my traps or deal with any upset dog owner while trapping on the Kleber WMA.

The most obvious answer to my dog-friendly trapping problems and my goal of putting some fur on my stretchers would be to simply restrict my efforts to using dog-proof traps. Box traps are totally safe for use around dogs and I have used them quite effectively many times on raccoons and opossums. Yet, while I understand it might be possible to catch a mink, beaver, fox or coyote in a box trap, I would say it is not that commonplace. Also, box traps are bulky and carrying them very far is a real job. I only use them when I have a hot set location close to an access road where I can keep my carrying distance to a bare minimum. But I do use them when the situation warrants it.

Commercial dog-proof style traps are very effective for raccoons and are totally dog-safe. In the correct situation they can be a real asset to any trapper who has to deal with dogs in his area and I certainly applaud their use. A trapper

can definitely add to his catch by utilizing them. Yet dog-proof traps have their limitations also and don't fit many prime coon trapping locations. Relying on them too heavily would mean walking past many prime raccoon set locations that simply beg for an old-style foothold or snare. I still get that old trapper's thrill out of recognizing a trapping hotspot and making a creative set that connects with fur. Dog-proofs also don't help me address my dog problem when targeting the other furbearers like mink, beaver, or one of Kentucky's new population of otters.

So while box traps and dog-proofs certainly augment my arsenal on my dog-friendly trapline, I still primarily rely on my traditional longsprings, coil springs, conibears, and snares while trapping on the WMA. Using some basic common-sense rules, I have adjusted my tactics and with only a little extra effort and care, plus some creative thinking, I have been able to effectively avoid dogs and still catch some fur.

## First, the nose

I first try to remember that dogs live by their noses. A dog loves nothing better than to run around and smell things. Their ability to locate the source of a smell even at long distances is phenomenal. It is constantly searching for and making decisions based on how something smells, especially when the animal is a trained hunting dog.

Most hunters keep their dogs penned until it is time to go hunting, so when released, the hunting dog is a bundle of nerves and energy that wants to enjoy its newfound freedom to run and smell whatever it can. And a hyperactive hunting dog can throw caution to the wind and go to great measures to investigate any unusual smell it encounters. Most dogs are not afraid of water and certainly won't hesitate to wade into a creek to investigate some enticing aroma that reaches their nose. I don't know exactly why a hunting dog would want to investigate a beaver's bank den, but last trapping season I found dog tracks indicating one had done that very thing. I also once followed dog tracks a few hundred yards along my favorite trout stream and the dog entered and exited the stream several times. I have no idea why.

Also, any dog I have ever encountered anywhere, high-bred hunting dog or household pet, is always searching for anything that smells like food. Any smell that even remotely triggers the dog's food urge will draw it like a bear to honey.

## Second, curiosity

The second thing I always remember about dogs is that they are curious animals, especially when it comes to humans. Hunting dogs are used to being around people and want to know what the people around them are doing. They will not hesitate to investigate the fresh scent of



***No bait, no lure, but a plastic crawdad on a trap located on an excellent natural funnel.***

a strange person in their immediate vicinity and they will track that person to see what they are doing, where they are going, or where they have been. On several occasions I have been trailed by hunting dogs while deer hunting, squirrel hunting, or running my trapline at Kleber. More than likely the dog just came across my fresh scent and followed it to me. The dog was simply curious about who I was and what I was doing.

Bearing those factors in mind, my first dog-friendly trapping rule is to employ a no-bait-no-lure policy on any unenclosed trap set at ground level or in shallow water. Therefore, I rely heavily on blind sets and will only use bait or lure when I can safely enclose the trap, like a dog-proof style trap, or place the trap out of a dogs reach, such as a natural or homemade cubby, or if I can elevate the trap out of a dogs reach. For instance, a few years ago I found a hollow tree on the side of the stream running through Kleber. Raccoon tracks dotted the bank around the tree. About five feet above ground level, the inside of the tree had filled with woodchips and leaves, providing a perfect elevated natural cubby. Placing some smelly fish bait and trap in the hollow tree, I put some raccoon lure at the base of the tree and poured some fish oil down the side of the tree. The next day I had a very unhappy coon in this set.

I know very well my no-bait-no-lure policy on ground-level sets inhibits me from pulling out my full bag of trapping tricks, but I also

know what one is thinking.

My second basic rule is to try to keep my own scent footprint to a bare minimum. I try to leave as little of my own scent around as I can that would lead a curious dog directly to one of my sets.

At water sets, I use the stream itself to conceal my scent trail and keep a curious dog from trailing me to a set. I enter the stream and then wade either up or downstream a ways to my chosen set location. Or if I have a

prime set location on one bank of a stream, I will enter from the other side and wade across to set the trap. I make a concerted effort to not touch anything on the stream bank that might hold my scent. The trap is set under water so it has no scent for the dog to detect. I usually determine most of my blind set locations during pre-season scouting and pre-plan a route that allows me to stay in the stream as much as pos-

sible. If I spot a good set location on the fly, I will walk a ways up or down the stream bank before entering the stream and wade to the set location. The whole idea is to not give a dog a scent trail to follow directly to one of my traps or leave any of my own scent around the set to attract the dog.

On land sets that is simply not possible, which is why I elevate or enclose the trap in some fashion.

My last rule is to utilize some sort of dog-blocker whenever possible. This usually means some sort of cover over the trap such as an overhanging bank, log, tree root, or some other feature that a fur animal like a coon, mink, or beaver can comfortably pass under or past, but directs a dog away from the actual trap. Most blind sets have some sort of feature that forces the fur animal into a funnel anyway and that feature can also block a dog from the trap. The trap should be placed as close as possible to the blocker.

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***A trap inside the streamside hollow tree makes for a good coon and mink location without bait or lure. The three-foot chain contributes to easy set construction.***

log is dog-proofed. A large rock, log, or stump close to the stream bank may create a small funnel that a only a bank-hugging mink or coon can pass through. A mink, coon, or otter will search under washed out tree roots for food and a trap placed well under the root system is out of a dog's reach. A rubber crawdad

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wired to a trap pan works especially well at this set.

I once found a small two-foot wide spring entering the larger stream at Kleber that had washed-out rock protruding from the bank and sheltering a third of the small spring. The water in the spring was only a few inches deep and slow-moving. Small springs entering larger streams are prime mink and coon trapping locations. I placed a #1-1/2 longspring under the overhanging rock and weighted it in the deeper water of the larger stream. The next day there were large dog tracks in the mud bottom of the spring. The protruding rock dog-blocker had worked perfectly and forced the animal away from the longspring. The following day there was a nice mink floating in the deep water of the larger creek.

A couple of years ago, I found a washed out bank that left a tree's root system exposed. Some animal had dug a den into the stream bank inside the roots. I had to strain and struggle to reach far enough into the root system to place a #220 in the den's entrance. I could barely work my way through the root system and there was absolutely no way a dog could reach the den. I took two coons on two consecutive nights from this den. Last year a small log leaning against the stream bank proved to be perfect for a raccoon to pass under and into my trap, but would have blocked any dog from stepping into the trap. This type of funnel point also works well with snares.

The bank denning beaver in Kleber's stream

tend to dig channels to help them float their food and dam-building materials. I like to use my #330s in these channels, but I prefer to use an extra-stout diving log directly over the trap and right at the water line to force a swimming beaver under water and into the trap. The completely submerged trap has no scent to attract a dog, and if for some strange reason a dog were actually to be wading in the channel, it would be diverted by the diving log. A snare hanging from the diving log would also work at this set.

To aid in placing my traps farther out of a dog's reach, I have added three-foot chains to each of them. I also carry extra three-foot lengths of chain with connectors in case I need the extra length. With the extra chain length, I can push the trap farther back into a good blind set location like a culvert or root system. I once caught a mink in a small metal culvert where



*A snare placed in a natural pinch-point will take passing coon but a dog is far less likely to be captured.*

my trap was pushed a least five feet back into the pipe. They allow me to place my trap farther back into a baited natural cubby such as a hollow log where a dog cannot reach. A #3 coilspring set in front of a beaver bank den is a good beaver set; yet a #3 coilspring pushed way back into the bank den is a good dog proof beaver set.

Snares also work very well for smaller furbearers while also avoiding dogs. Adjusting the circumference of the noose and its height from the ground is the simplest way to keep dogs out of them. Even a small dog's head is much larger and carried much higher than a raccoon, opossum, or mink's. Placing small snares in tight funnels where a dog cannot pass but smaller furbearers can will also dog proof them. A log crossing a stream with a small-di-

ameter noose just a few inches above the log can target coons, possum, or mink, but avoid dogs.

For many mink sets I still prefer to use my #110s. I like to place them tight against bridge abutments and steep banks, where bank-hugging mink tend to travel. I like them under overhanging banks and in tight funnels where mink normally hunt or travel. And of course any #110 in front of a muskrat den does double-duty, catching muskrats as they exit the den and mink as they enter the den looking for a muskrat meal. I stick to my basic dog-friendly rules but can't imagine these small traps to be a problem even if a small dog were to encounter one of them.

The no-bait-no-lure rule basically cancels out most of my traditional dryland canine sets with foothold traps. Also, Kentucky law prohibits placing traps or snares in paths that are commonly used by domestic animals which eliminates most of my canine blind sets. Unfortunately that means setting snares for canines is also out of my playbook. There are few places that a fox or coyote can pass through, yet a small rabbit beagle or squirrel dog cannot. I have heard some trappers boast of being able to make their fox or coyotes traps dog-proof by shortening the distance from the dirt-hole or scent post to the trap which allows fox or coyotes to be trapped but avoid dogs. I have never felt compelled to test that theory on one of the high-priced high-bred hunting dogs I see at Kleber. Maybe some trapper out there has mastered that art, but I haven't.

These factors mean that the fox and coyote population on the

WMA are exempt from my trapline. Putting a dent in Kleber's fox or coyote population usually requires some work with my predator calls and favorite rifle.

One last aspect of trapping around hunting dogs are the dog's owners. Any hunting dog that finds one of my sets is also going to have a hunter just behind it. While most dog hunting enthusiasts are just out to enjoy their own favorite outdoor activity and not interfere with anyone else's fun, there is always some sticky-fingered fellow out there who just can't resist taking home a free trap. And unfortunately there is always a certain percentage of the human population who just plain enjoy stealing from others. I learned this one the hard way.

Many years ago, when I first began trapping at Kleber, I planned on running my trapline late

one afternoon. I was organizing my gear on my truck's tailgate at one of Kleber's communal parking areas when two hunters leading a leashed bird dog returned to their own parked vehicle. We chatted as they loaded their dog into the back of their truck. They both seemed nervous when they learned I was there to run my trapline.

Thinking the exchange a bit odd, I bid them farewell and started for my first set. I was barely out of view of the parking area when I heard their vehicle start up and they seemed to exit the parking lot in a hurry. I found out why when I reached my first set. Dog and people tracks crisscrossed the area. I had connected on a big coon and the animal had made it a short distance pulling the long pole I was using as a drag. The coon was still there, dead and riddled with buckshot. The wire connecting the trap to the drag had been unwrapped and the trap was missing. So much for outdoor camaraderie.

Now I strive to check my trapline as early in the day as possible. Usually I am stepping away from my vehicle by the first rays of sunrise. Ideally, I hope to have my line run and any catches removed before the dog hunters have finished their morning coffee and loaded their dogs into their hunting vehicle. I don't use drags anymore at all. I want any live trapped animal to stay put. The extra chains I add to my traps help with this also. They aid me in either allowing my catch to reach deeper water and drown or allowing a live trapped animal to reach enough cover to conceal itself. I carry a long catch pole with a hook on the end to help pull trapped animals from deep within hollow logs, culverts, overhangs, or other hard-to-reach hiding places. I haven't lost another trap to thieves in many years now.

I don't deny that at times I envy the wilderness or backwoods trapper who can place his sets unconcerned about dogs or hunters. He can unleash his whole bag of tricks on the furbearers in his area without restriction and he can utilize bait and lures without caution. Yet, I still thoroughly enjoy my public land trapline just as the backwoods trapper enjoys his. The true trappers' art is to study and learn the habits and ways of furbearers and how to effectively trap them. I just have to study a little harder and give some extra thought on how to avoid dogs on my trapline and still trap my share of fur.

I try to think of my approach to trapping on a heavily dog-hunted public area like Kentucky's Kleber WMA as just another challenge of being a good trapper. It is always doubly satisfying to lay a good day's catch on the tailgate and know I did it right under Mr. Rover's high-powered nose.