

VERMIN

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

My trapping experience has been limited to protecting meat piles or fish piles or fish caches. I ordinarily used Conibear traps.



No. 55 Conibear body-grip trap. Image source:
<http://www.bugspraycart.com/traps/conibear/body-grip-55-3-5-x-4>

If you're seining, or if you're getting more fish than you can take care of and you're planning to use them for dog feed, you can just put them in a pit in the ground. You put some willows and grass in the bottom first, so that they won't freeze down, and then you cover the whole thing over to keep the jays away. But some little carnivores will try to dig into that.

I especially remember having trouble with a weasel, I think it was. That time I didn't use a Conibear trap—I just put a foot-hold trap in a stovepipe. When the weasel tried to run through the pipe to get at the fish, it stepped on the pan and the trap snapped around its body. In effect, it was a killer trap.

There's a kind of mousetrap that maybe people should know about. It's just an empty tin can with a plastic lid on it. You put something that mice and shrews would like in the can, and make a hole in the lid so that they'll fall inside. The mice get eaten up by the shrews, and if it's not checked quite frequently, the shrews will starve to death.

When I built my first iglu near Ambler in the fall of 1964, I started a hole for a corner post, and left it open overnight. When I came back in the morning, I found that a vole

and a shrew had both fallen into it. The vole was partly eaten, and the shrew had frozen to death.¹

When I used to leave my place up there, I'd always put a handful of dog feed into a five-gallon bucket and leave it setting close to the wall on the porch. Sometimes I'd leave another one inside the house. When I came back, there were invariably the remains of several critters in them.

It's that way here in California, with mice and lizards and even crickets. I make it a habit never to leave a can or bucket standing upright unless I put a stick in there, so they have a ladder to get out.

That's always a consideration, but I've never done that. My sympathy doesn't go very far in that direction because those damned things have caused me so much grief off and on since I've been out there. Even if there aren't any openings, they'll make one. Somebody suggested plugging any openings with steel wool. That stopped them from coming through there, but a little farther up they'd make another one.

Didn't you use to make a bucket trap with water in it?

It was just the same sort of a thing, except I used a No. 10 can, with oil as an added attractant. It was sitting next to a pile of lumber I had in the house. I tied a piece of cake on the underside of the lid.



A No. 10 can is six inches in diameter.

Image source: <http://www.whispersfromelizabeth.com/2012/07/cooking-without-electricity-number-10.html>

I had been away over Christmas and came home with a fruitcake from somebody. It had gotten somewhat moldy. That's what I used. It had a good consistency, so I could put it up against the tin and hold it with a piece of fine wire through a couple of holes in the lid. I got the wire from a twist tire with the paper pulled off.

What did you catch?

Lots of mice and shrews, and not just one or two either. There must have been fifty of them in my house when I came back.²

I once had a problem with mice and voles in my crawl space here, even though the house has a concrete perimeter foundation all around. I caught 23 of them before I finally

located the opening they were using. It was where the water line from the spring went through the concrete, at a point that was concealed under one of the back steps.

If you happen to see two or three around your house, you know there are maybe 10 for every one you see.

In our first three iglus, shrews would make tunnels through the moss on the roof in the wintertime, right against the warm Visqueen³. You could hear them, and sometimes see them scurrying along. For some reason, we seldom saw them inside, unlike voles.

I have had the same thing in the walls of a sod house.

One time I had a pump-action BB gun. It was quite powerful. I used it to run off the neighbor's dog that insisted in coming around. One time I shot a mouse right through the plastic.

Didn't the carcass start to smell?

I don't remember. I probably put a stick in the hole.

I seem to remember that you used to make a little tip-up diving board on the edge of a five-gallon can. The mice would walk out to the end after the bait, and their weight would cause the walkway to pivot and spill them into the water. Then the board would settle back into position for the next mouse.

I made a couple of those, but discovered it wasn't necessary. If you put something that they want into a container, they'll jump right in. They're not used to things that they can't climb back out of.

I used to catch squirrels in snares that I made out of copper wire, maybe 20 gauge. They were about 2" in diameter. The squirrels used to run along a horizontal pole that I'd tied from one little tree and another. I tied half a dozen of those snares on the pole.

When a squirrel got caught, it would struggle a little and fall off. I'd find it hanging there, beneath the pole. I caught several of them that way.

They can do a lot of damage.

Oh boy!

I've gotten rather more sophisticated now that I've become an *umialik*.⁴ I buy rat traps, and bait them with a little meat—preferably fat. I found out that fat is a good bait for squirrels.

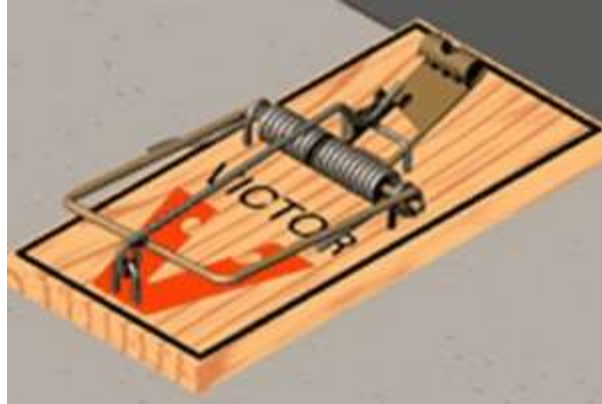
I make two holes in the trap, run a big wire through the holes, and fasten it on the back side of a tree, with the spring upward and the pan hanging down.

A rat trap has a small pan on it. I tie a piece of solid fat onto the pan with a piece of fine wire from a twist tie.

The squirrels would go up there and try to eat the fat. That's how I've caught squirrels that I didn't want around.

Did you trap them because they were pests, or for food?

They were pests, but they did get eaten too.



Commercial rat trap. Image from <http://homeandfamilyresourcecenter.com/tag/rat-traps>

Was that at the lake?

I have one set at the lake, but I've used this kind of trap at several places.

One time I was helping some people to build a sod iglu on the outskirts of Fairbanks. The squirrels were just too thick around there. They were a nuisance, so I set up a couple of those rat traps and thinned them out.

One day as I was approaching Mark Cleveland's place in Ambler, I saw him, his wife, and a couple of his daughters scurrying round outside, shouting back and forth in Eskimo. As I got closer I saw that they were throwing things at a squirrel that was up on one of their platform caches. Its walls were made out of slender poles, so there were plenty of openings. They didn't want it in there with their mukluks and whatnot.

That reminds me. One time I was checking my net and a lady was checking hers. I think it was Lillian Johnson. She hollered to me to come and help her. There was a beaver swimming around not too far away, and she was trying to scare it into her net. Finally we did, and she pulled the bottom of the net around it.

She got the beaver, but it didn't do her net any good at all. A beaver is a pretty powerful creature in a situation like that.

Did you ever catch a beaver in your nets?

No, and I never hope to, either.

I sometimes set a net right across the river from our place. I used to row over in my boat to check it. One time I found that a beaver had gotten caught in it. It must have drowned pretty quickly, because the net wasn't damaged at all.

That's interesting.

Have you ever caught loons in your nets?

Yeah, I did one time. I had a deep net that was fairly close to the surface. I don't remember if it was a loon...some kind of a bird. Anyway it was after some of those fish and got tangled up in the net.

It seemed that we'd catch a red-throated loon every other summer or so. It always hurt me to find one, but they did make a nice change from eating fish every day.

One time I was putting a net together, hanging the webbing on the float line and sinker line. I had it strung between a couple of trees. They were too close together to put the whole net up, so I was working one section at a time. I came to the end of a section and went into the house to eat.

When I came back out, I found that two gray jays had flown into the net. I tried to hold them and untangle them, but there was just no way.

Those jays sure show up in a hurry, don't they?

Yeah. What I couldn't figure out was why I caught two of them. Why didn't the second one see that it was a trap? I don't often see two jays close together.

What time of year was that?

Probably in the spring.

Maybe that second jay got into your net by attacking the first one as it struggled.

Once, at spring camp, I threw a stick at a jay that was pecking at freshly hung caribou meat. I didn't mean to hit it, but I did. It fluttered to the ground and was flopping around, probably with a broken wing.

To my astonishment, two or three other jays mobbed it, without a moment's hesitation. Within seconds they had pecked it to death. I have no idea why.

You know, we didn't have nylon nets in the early days. We bought cotton twine and wove our own. A net usually didn't last a whole season, especially a small mesh net made out of No. 6 twine or something like that. It wasn't unusual to have to hang another net during the summer. That might have been when it happened.

Were they young ones?

I don't remember them being juveniles. There's quite a difference between an adult and a juvenile.

They nest early. I think the ones I saw might have been a family.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) It's impossible to seal a sod house against mice and voles where the poles of the walls enter the earth, among other places. It's not like having drywall meeting a plywood floor.

3) "Visqueen" is a brand of polyethylene plastic sheeting, and has become a generic description for any plastic sheeting. It is commonly between 4 and 10 mils thick and is available in clear, opaque, and black. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visqueen>)

4) *Umialik* is an Inuit word now used to mean "wealthy person".