

Passin' It On—Trapping

One of the joys of raising children is that they have the unique ability to rekindle youthful memories that have nearly been extinguished through the years. My long smoldering interest in trapping slowly flamed into a bonfire with my sons' persistent questions during the late spring and early summer of 2005. "Dad, can we trap that fox running around the bottom pasture this winter?" asked Cade, my 7 year old, as he observed our red-hided friend catching mice one summer night. "Dad, here are some coon tracks" noted Chance, my 8 year old boy, as we walked the shores of the Yellowstone River near our home. "Didn't you catch them when you were a boy?" he inquired. Their questions resurrected fond memories of my childhood when my good friend Arlen and I would explore the "wilds" of Five Mile Creek on the outskirts of Billings during the summer and set traps for muskrat, coon, fox, and rabbits during the fall and winter.

Late summer found me busily purchasing new traps and lure, dyeing and waxing traps, and scouting set locations. Excitement grew for the boys as they watched traps collecting in the shop and trapping books gathering on my bedside table. We would take strolls down the river to look for set locations and to plan our first day on the line.

Come fall the thought of skinning, fleshing, and stretching the pelts was a little daunting. However, I had not trapped in 30 years so the chances of actually catching any furbearers were slim—or so I thought. Thanksgiving morning found Chance, Cade, and I out on the Yellowstone setting two coon pocket sets, one beaver drowning set, and a dirthole set for fox. We spent the morning targeting our selected locations and carefully placing the traps. Both boys were full of questions but mostly I saw the hope in their eyes that we would have full traps on Friday morning. I, on the other hand, was not so optimistic.

Six AM came early on my day off as Chance shook me out of a deep sleep. I reluctantly got up and fixed breakfast. Cade decided to wait out the cold-looking morning at home as Chance and I jumped into the truck and proceeded down to the river. As we passed, we noted that the dirthole set was untouched. I could see the disappointment as Chance's shoulders fell. The coon set was more concealed so Chance bailed out of the pickup almost before I could get the vehicle stopped. His optimism was back—the joy of trapping as every set offers a new opportunity! Before I could grab my trap bucket, he yelled, "We have a big coon, Dad!" He was ecstatic! Being sensitive to his tender age, I dispatched the ringtail while he searched the small stream for freshwater scuds. We made our way to the beaver set and found the traps empty but we had our first catch!



Chance with our first catch

Excitement filled the house as Chance announced the details of our first catch to Cade, Mom, and Grandma. My youngest son Cade was disappointed that he had decided not to brave the cold but this served to fortify his desire to attend any other checks. He even tried to convince me that we needed to go out that afternoon and I had to explain to him that we needed to wait another night for the game to find their way to our sets.

Saturday morning found both boys eagerly hopping into the truck at the crack of dawn even though temperatures had plummeted further. We made our way down to the trapline—no fox in the dirt hole set, no coons in the pocket sets. Still hopeful, the boys ran among the cobblestones of the Yellowstone River to the beaver set practically wrestling one another to get there ahead of the other. Cade got there first and hollered back to me that the traps were gone. I could hardly believe it. I arrived at the castor-baited set and proceeded to pull on the drowning wires. It felt like someone had added another bag of rocks to the end of the drowning wire. We watched the brown blob transform into the biggest beaver that I have ever seen. Later, he weighed in at 70 pounds! Cade jumped up and down and claimed the pelt for his bedroom wall. What a day! On Sunday, we caught another 60 pound male so Chance was able to adorn his room too. Our long weekend trapping adventure had yielded more success than I could have ever hoped.



Cade displays the 70# beaver

The boys were now hooked. We trapped over the Christmas Holiday and during the March Spring Break. The boys would locate sets, beaver lodges, mink tracks, and fox dens while I set traps. By the end of the season, we had caught 13 beaver, 5 coons, 2 mink, 1 fox, and 1 muskrat.



The boys with our first mink



The boys with our first fox



Found the Lodge!



Is it lunch yet?

The most fulfilling part of the whole experience was the time that I was able to spend with my sons on the trapline teaching them about the ways of the wild. One of my good friends commented that the boys “were fortunate to learn the skills of a disappearing trade.” I was grateful for the opportunity to pass on a life experience that will help my sons appreciate the beauty and fragility of nature and to create memories that will remain with them the rest of their lives.



The end of the line.....for now.