Opinion

Getting it right with traps

In the last issue we ran a feature asking whether break-back and mole traps cause unnecessary suffering. In this article, NGO member and mole trapper, Dave Archer of DKA Pest Control, takes up the theme.

ALTHOUGH THE RESEARCH DONE ON THE efficiency of traps by Oxford University and Imperial College is invaluable when assessing how humane traps are, one should be wary of relying on this technical research as the final word on trapping. To achieve the best trapping results in the field, many factors come into play.

One of the biggest problems faced by our profession is that of animal traps and poisons being readily available to the general public, who generally have little or no comprehension of the cruelty that these can have on both intended and non-target wildlife. Regardless of how effective a trap is, in untrained or inexperienced hands it can lead to a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

After 33 years of trapping I have seen many non-target species (eg. robins, blackbirds, pheasants, etc) caught in other's badly and illegally set traps, amazingly sometimes set uncovered in the open. The trapper's shock at their results is on a par with my anger at their ignorance. My thoughts on professional trapping and how to achieve the best overall results are as follows:

1. Know your target species intimately. If you understand your intended target's behaviour, your chances of success will be far greater. Professional training is invaluable.

2. Be absolutely certain of the identification and legal status of your intended target. If you are unsure don't trap! Use sand/flour to get footprints in the area, find hair samples, and get other expert opinions first.

3. Use the correct trap for the situation. Many a time Fenn Mk 4 instead of Mk6 for example, has been used in ignorance and animals will suffer if the trap is not the correct size for the victim.

4. Ensure your trap is of a design you know works and is efficient. Many traps are made by engineers who know how to work metal, but have no idea of the effectiveness of the trap in the field.

5. Ensure the trap is serviced and tested before use. Old faulty Fenn or Scissor mole traps have often been laid, and when triggered grasp the victim feebly, leaving it to die a lingering and painful death.

6. Site the trap naturally in the best possible area where there is no chance of other wildlife or domestic pets gaining access to the trap. Hedgehogs and pheasants can meet an untimely end by being able to access a tunnel trap. Keep tunnel entrances limited by means of briars to allow access only by intended quarry. Lay soil or sand over metal floors of cage traps. If possible cover the trap from inclement weather. Peg/weigh down live traps to prevent (as far as possible) foxes and badgers turning traps over.

7. Do not set traps (cage or break-back) immediately. Any animal will be wary of a newly-sited trap. Bait for a while and let the animal gain confidence before you finally set the trap.

8. If you are running a large number of traps ensure they are marked in some way so you can locate them easily. If I am running many mole traps on large farm treatments it is surprisingly easy to forget where traps are located. I use orange tent pegs as indicators or, if in areas where vandalism/theft may occur, leave subtle indicators (string/baler twine tied near the trap area).

9. Never trap unless you are sure you can return within a maximum of 24 hours. This also means taking into account the likelihood of snow falling whereby traps are lost to view.

10. Ensure you have the legal means for dispatch of caged animals. Mink/squirrels etc. don't take kindly to being live trapped and will get very stressed when discovered.

Whatever the target, we trappers have a legal and moral duty to avoid suffering at all cost. We cannot feel we have less of a responsibility for a rat suffering alive in a badly set break-back than we have for, say, following up a wounded deer running after a misplaced shot. If we have instigated the action, we *must* ensure the result is as swift and humane as we can possibly make it.

DAVE ARCHER