

HUNTING DOGS

Trapped!

TOM DAVIS



Foothold traps—like this Victor 3N double long spring (top) and Sterling MJ600 coil spring—are designed to securely hold without inflicting damage. Removing dogs from them is a matter of compressing the springs.

The hunt was over; the grouse hadn't been home. The trail came out at the edge of an old farm field that, year by year, grudgingly surrendered a little more geography to the forest. The truck was parked due north, no more than a hundred yards away.

I turned in that direction, knowing

that Rumor, my English cocker spaniel, would swing around . . . when all hell broke loose. Suddenly Rumor was snarling and shrieking, and when I got her in sight I could see that she was biting furiously at something. My first thought was that it had to be a ground-dwelling animal—a badger, maybe?—but, despite looking hard, the only animal I could see was my dog.

It took me several seconds, in fact, to identify her “assailant”: a foothold trap clamped above her right forepaw.

I said some bad words then.

Thankfully, I remembered that the first rule of dealing with a dog caught in a trap is to get the head under control. Otherwise, he or she is going to try to bite you, period. The recommended way to do this is to cover the dog's

head with a coat or jacket. Having neither, I had to improvise with a strap-style game vest. An extra set of hands would have helped immeasurably (and reduced the volume of bad words), but at last I was able to stand on the trap's springs, release the tension and enable Rumor to extract her paw.

At that point I assumed our next stop would be the nearest veterinarian's office. But when Rumor immediately began flying around as if to make up for lost time, it was pretty clear that she was right as rain—and that the only injury had been to my psyche. Still, I called my veterinarian buddy Terry Barker just to be on the safe side.

"Is the skin broken?" he asked.

"No."

"Is she favoring the leg?"

"Not at all."

"Any swelling?"

"None that I can see."

"She's fine. You can give her half a Rimadyl, if you want, but I don't think she needs it."

I also texted my friend Tim Otto, an avid trapper who happens to be a

Wisconsin Conservation Warden too. I had no reason to believe that the trap had been set illegally (it was state-owned land), but I was curious to know what seasons were open—i.e., what the trap had been set *for*.

"Coyote just opened today," Tim replied. "I'm sure that's what the trapper was targeting."

Talking it over later with Tim and Terry—the three of us got together at a mutually convenient DNR office—I learned that Rumor's experience had checked off virtually every box of the "typical" bird-dog-meets-trap encounter. She'd stepped into a foothold trap intended for wild canids—by far the trap a bird dog's most likely to run afoul of. The trap had been set near an established trail—a travel corridor for the target species—and it had been relatively close to a drivable road.

"Trappers need to be efficient with their time," Tim explained. "It's a lot of work carrying traps in and carrying animals out, and by law, at least in Wisconsin, we're required to check our

dry-land sets every day. It just doesn't make sense for us to set traps hundreds of yards from where we park."

The most important takeaway, though, was that while the experience had been unpleasant and stressful, no real harm had been done. Something else Tim explained was that modern foothold traps are designed to securely hold but not injure. To prove the point, he set a trap similar to the one that Rumor had gotten into, and then stuck his hand between the jaws and triggered it. He didn't even flinch.

Both Tim and Terry agreed, in fact, that other than the possibility of some torn skin, the real risk for dogs caught in foothold traps is damage to their *teeth* from biting at the trap. And even that's a rare occurrence. "In 38 years of practice," Terry said, "I saw maybe three dogs with broken teeth due to biting at traps. But I never saw a broken bone."

The point is that in the hierarchy of dangers to our dogs, foothold traps rank pretty low. Are they something to be aware of and know

how to deal with? Absolutely. But the risk they pose is not remotely as high as the risks of a lot of other things our dogs can encounter in the field: broken-off fenceposts, pieces of old farm machinery, barbed wire, jagged stobs of wood hidden by vegetation, skim ice . . . the list goes on and on.

Of course, foothold traps aren't the only traps on the landscape. There are two other types of traps that hunting-dog owners need to be aware of: snares and body-gripping traps (commonly known as Conibears, for a company that makes them). According to Tim Otto, many (although not all) states have outlawed "true" snares—meaning devices that continually tighten around animals' necks—in favor of cable-restraint snares or, simply, "cable restraints." These devices release tension when the animals stop struggling, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to choke themselves to death. Cable restraints are analogous to foothold traps in this respect: intended to securely hold without inflicting damage.

Indeed, many dogs caught in cable

restraints reportedly react just as they would if they were clipped to a tie-out chain, making it a relatively easy job to relax the tension completely and slip the "noose" off the dog's head. (Check out the YouTube video "How to Remove a Dog from a Snare," by the

*It makes sense to
play it safe and
learn how to
release a body-
gripping trap.*

South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks.) You can always use a cable-cutter, too, and it's important to note here that the wire-cutter on a Leatherman-type multi-tool will *not* cut the cable on a snare—a good thing to know under any circumstances but

especially if you hunt in a state where traditional-style snares remain legal.

This brings us to the body-gripping trap—the one that probably strikes more fear in the hearts of dog owners than any other. At some level this is justified. The body-gripping trap is designed to kill, and if your dog has the incredibly bad luck to get caught in one, you have a very narrow window—no more than a few minutes—in which to safely release it.

That being said, the use of body-gripping traps for dry-land trapping (the only kind that's of real concern for dog owners) is subject to a number of restrictions that make it extremely difficult for dogs to get caught in them. This is not to say it can't happen, though, so it makes sense to play it safe and learn how to release a body-gripping trap. The key is compressing the springs with a rope, a dog lead or even a stout zip tie. You can find videos of these techniques online. (A couple of the better ones are "How to Remove a Dog from a Trap," by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks, and "Animal Traps—How to Release Your

Pet,” by the Fur Takers of America.)

Should you ever have the misfortune of having to release your dog from a body-gripping trap, I certainly would recommend having the dog checked by a veterinarian afterward.

Still, you know what they say about an ounce of prevention. “There’s a perception among bird-dog people,” mused Tim Otto (who, for the record, is the owner of an American water spaniel), “that if they hunt where traps are set, their dog’s going to get caught. Well, that’s just not true. In fact, I’m convinced that our dogs are so focused on finding birds that they run past most traps without ever slowing down.

“I’m also convinced that by taking a few simple steps we ‘bird-doggers’ can avoid a lot of potential conflict. Make it a point to know which seasons are open; and if you hunt private ground, ask the landowner if anyone’s trapping it. Learn to

*‘Learn to
recognize places
like trails and
field edges where
traps are likely
to be set.’*

recognize places like trails and field edges where traps are likely to be set. If you see something that strikes you as a little out of place, or if you notice your dog acting interested in something but not in a ‘birdy’ way, call him out of there.” (The scent bait that is often used may make a dog curious.)

One more piece of advice Otto offered was this: As important as it is to understand how traps work and to know the steps you need to take if your dog’s caught in one, perhaps the most important step of all is simply to remind yourself to stay calm. 🐾

Tom Davis is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*.