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Jerry Riedel

Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Watertown, South Dakota

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Snaring as a Beaver Control Technique in South Dakota¹

Jerry Riedel²

Abstract.--Methods used for alleviating beaver damage include suggestions on farm management, extension trapping, and direct control. Direct control is utilized in the majority of the complaints with snaring constituting the most often used control technique.

The region of responsibility for my animal damage control work in South Dakota is the ten counties in the northeast corner³ of the state, encompassing 7,184 square miles.³ Geographic features include the glacial produced Lakes Region, Coteau Hills, two rivers, numerous streams and drainages, all four types of wetlands, and farm and pasture land.

The Lakes Region includes 257 natural lakes totaling approximately 198,000 acres of water (Anonymous, 1973). The shorelines are surrounded with various species of deciduous trees which provide good beaver habitat.

The Coteau Hills is a rough highland extending from the North Dakota border southward for about 200 miles.⁴ This highland forms a "hogsback" approximately 25 miles wide with an elevation of over 2,000 feet above sea level (Schell, 1968). Wooded coulees rise above the streams coming down the eastern side of these hills. These drainages feed into larger streams as they reach the flats.

On the flats there are gentle rolling hills and level farm country that is intersected by the Little Minnesota River and the Sioux River

along with the Twin Brooks, Whetstone, Yellowbanks, and other various smaller tributaries. All these features add much diversity to the region while at the same time making it very suitable for beaver and very susceptible to beaver damage.

I divide my beaver damage problems into three categories: cutting, flooding, and eroding. From a total of the last 500 beaver complaints worked on 46 per cent were from the cutting of trees and corn (of which 94 per cent involved trees). Also 46 per cent of the complaints involved the beaver controlling water levels by either preventing the flow from going downstream, or the flooding of the upstream. Beaver eroding earthen structures such as road grades, railroad beds, sewage lagoons, and stream and lake banks totaled 8 per cent of the total complaints.

The geographic and the damage diversity necessitates various approaches to solving beaver damage problems. On 4 per cent of the total complaints I have suggested changes in farm management practices. For example, I have recommended the use of woven wire or electric fencing around a shelterbelt or cornfield for beaver exclusion. I have recommended the use of an electric fence to prevent beaver from repairing a torn hole in the dam. Lowering the water level with the use of an installed trickle tube can be another form of farm management. Screening or wrapping of individual trees is another example. However, these methods give only temporary relief at best.

Approach method two is the extension approach. I handle approximately 10 per cent of the complaints in this manner. I will assist in locating a private trapper to do the control work or will give individual instructions to private trappers or to the complainee.

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²Jerry Riedel is Extension Trapper, Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Watertown, SD

³Anonymous - 1973, South Dakota Geographic Names, Brevet Press, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

⁴Schell, Herbert S. 1968. History of South Dakota, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE.

The approach I use most often on beaver damage is direct control, where I eradicate the beaver myself. For my direct control work I use the snare the most often. I take approximately 95 per cent of my beaver in snares, about 3 per cent of the beaver are taken with leghold traps, one per cent are trapped with bodygrips, .5 per cent are taken in live traps and .5 per cent are shot. Snares are very effective on beaver and have the advantage in that they are quite versatile and are quick and easy to use. With snares you do not scare or spook the beaver and the nontarget catches are just about nonexistent.

For the snare itself I prefer a 36 inch length of 7x7 3/32 inch cable, a Gregerson swivel and either a Hoffman or Gregerson lock. An S-hook attaches the snare to a second swivel on a four foot length of chain which rotates around the anchoring stake. The short snare and second swivel on the chain will help prevent the snare from being kinked or frayed after a catch is made. Wire will bend and break and should not be used for anchoring a snare.

I use two different types of stakes. A three foot length of 3/8 inch rod is used for firm soils such as sod or partially frozen ground, and a three foot length of 3/4 inch diameter pipe is used for soft or spongy ground. Where available I will attach my chain to a tree or other immovable structures that are present for a means of anchoring the catch.

To support the snares a length of baling wire 14 inches long is crimped and wrapped on the snare near the swivel. The other end of the baling wire is then attached to a support stick, placed upright in the ground. There should only be 4 to 6 inches of slack left in the baling wire allowing the snare to pull tight quickly. The baling wire is light enough to allow flexibility for centering the snare in its exact setting position, but yet is strong enough to support the suspended snare.

The imitation castor mound has been the most productive snare set for me. It offers good eye appeal as well as having the attractability from the odor of the lure. If possible I select a slightly elevated bank as this adds to the visibility of this set. Wind direction is also very important when selecting a location for this set. I've caught many beaver on eye appeal alone but the success is much greater when the wind carries the odor of the lure to the beaver. In making the set slick up the bank with mud and build a small mound about 2 to 3 inches high with mud, and sticks, leaves or grass. Dead branches are used for guide sticks and are pushed into the mud about 6 inches apart and angling away from the bank.

Build this fence about 2 feet out along the shoreline on each side from the center of the castor mound. This will prevent the beaver from working the set from the sides. This fence is more or less V-shaped with an opening at the point of the V being one foot or more out into the water directly in front of the castor mound. This opening is then guarded with a snare. Beaver like the security of the water so by having the snare in the water instead of on shore you will catch the beaver that normally won't leave the security of the water. But most importantly, by keeping this much distance between the snare and the lure the beaver will have to go into the snare to get close enough to the lure to satisfy their curiosity. Keeping the snare off the bank will also eliminate nontarget raccoons.

The snare is set with a 9 to 10 inch noose with only about 2 inches of the snare being under water. If there is a high population of muskrats or waterfowl present the snare can be lowered another inch or two to let these animals swim through without pulling the snare down. However, the higher you can keep the bottom of the noose the quicker it tightens on the beaver. This eliminates the bulk of pulled snares by beaver as well as leg or tail catches.

During rainy weather the lure is placed in open plastic containers or covered with a 4x4 inch sheet of plastic and incorporated into the castor mound. This prevents the lure from being diluted or being washed away. However, most of the time a dead stick is used to collect an amount of lure about equal to the size of a honey bee and is simply placed on the castor mound. I might also mention rainy and windy nights are generally not as productive as "fair weather" nights. I believe the beaver's activity is somewhat reduced during bad weather and they are also more hesitant in working lured sets. The sets are relured after every catch, and if the lure was not covered, they are relured after every rain. During the hot summer months lure is added about every third day, if still needed.

For lure I prefer dried, ground castor with enough glycerine added to form a paste. As a backup lure I use ground castor with anise oil and cottonwood bud oil as additives. I add 1/2 of a tablespoon of each of the oils to an equivalent of two baby food jars full of castor and again add glycerine to form a paste. Either lure works well all year with the castor and oils mixture showing a significantly higher catch rate on a set that has already taken beaver over reluring with straight castor. During the hot summer months beaver lose some of their curiosity to lures and beaten up 2 year old beaver may shy completely away from a castor based lure.

Bait sets for beaver are most productive in early spring and again in late fall. However, this set seems to provide more interest to younger beaver, and is usually not productive on any beaver during the summer months. If there is evidence of trees being currently used for food during the summer the set will work, otherwise assume the beaver are feeding on aquatic vegetation. For the bait set, as with the castor mound set, I prefer keeping the snare in the water with only an inch or two of the snare under water. The bait is also placed in the water. This is accomplished by using naturally formed bays, or by fencing; thus allowing the beaver only one way into the bait. For bait I prefer green soft wood varieties such as cottonwood, poplar, or willow. The bait branches are from pencil-sized to wrist-sized and are placed in a floating pile with the bark removed from the ends of some of the top most branches. Corn, even when being utilized by beaver makes a poor bait due to disturbance by raccoons, muskrats, waterfowl and squirrels. Castor may be used at this set but I generally prefer not luring the bait sets as it will add variety from the castor mound set.

I also snare any narrow "bottleneck" in the stream that narrows the waterway the beaver are using. Some fencing to help guide the beaver may be necessary and again keep all but 2 inches of the snare suspended above water. This is a very productive set and no lure should be used.

Trails leading over dams are also good, especially in a multi-dam colony. I keep the snare in the water by fencing in front of the trail on the top of the dam, or most often in the trail on the bottom side of the dam where the trail meets the water as this requires less fencing.

Trails leading to the upland are also set but these trails are normally active only in the fall of the year. Again the snare is placed in the water at the head of the trail as this will avoid deer and raccoon. If the snare is used over dry ground suspend the snare about 1/4 inch off the ground and shorten the noose size down to about 8 inches.

I will usually make 6 to 8 snare sets per colony using a combination of the sets I have mentioned. Like other trapping, best results come from a variety and/or variation of sets. It is helpful to get as many beaver as possible in the first two nights before they get shy and/or lose interest in the lure.

If beaver lose interest in the lures a hole may be punched in the dam and guarded with a leghold. Keeping the hole small, about 6 inches wide and 3 inches deep, is enough to get the beaver's interest but yet keeps the beaver centered on the set in their attempt to repair the dam. I place the trap for a front foot catch so the trap is placed about 2 inches off center and no more than 3 inches under water. For animal damage control work where the entire colony must be removed the trap placement for the hind foot catch can be too variable due to the various sizes of the beaver. By September the young of the year are assisting with dam repair and any trap set for a hind foot catch on an adult will miss these smaller beaver. Another set for lure shy beaver is opening the dam and placing some dead branches on the bank a few yards upstream from the dam and guard these branches with a snare or leghold. The beaver will often times attempt to use these branches for repairing the dam.

In summary, the methods as mentioned are the methods I have used during my 14 1/2 years of animal damage control work. It is my wish with this paper to share the methods that work for me in hopes some will be applicable for you. The more methods that are available to, and used by the individuals responsible for animal damage complaint work the more efficient we will be in alleviating the problems that have been created by either man or animal.