

# Fur-Bearing Animal Traps— and Dogs, Kids, Horses, Oh My!

By Diana Levey, Central Oregon Chapter

Recently a friend and I rode in the Powell Buttes east of Johnson Ranch Road (in Alfalfa, near Bend). As long-time horseback riders, we've ridden many Central Oregon trails, but those buttes were new to us. We're always accompanied by experienced trail dogs. My dog runs loose and her dog wears an electronic collar that keeps her near her horse.

A sign at the trailhead welcomes horses and hikers. We entered on a well-used dirt road that led to a single-track horse and hiker trail. We followed this trail perhaps three miles until it began fading, but remained clear enough through loose shale to guide us up and onto a butte. At the top our trail ended at a vehicle roadway. Before descending on the road, we paused to admire the panorama and identify community landmarks.

Suddenly my friend's Australian Shepherd began screaming! She dismounted and found his foot in a coyote trap, twelve feet off the trail. She restrained him while I struggled to find a trap release lever. As a child I saw a large animal trap with saw-tooth jaws and release levers. This coyote trap had very rusty levers that I couldn't push on hard enough to achieve release. We hadn't tools to release the jaws or cut the chain securing the trap to a juniper tree.

I felt around on the ground blindly for something to help open the jaws, while also trying to stop my dog from rolling on a cotton wad smelling awful of bait and secured in tree bark. After identifying levers that might open the trap, we pushed together, managing to open it and release the dog. He moved gingerly, bruised, but without broken bones.

Then I spotted a second trap—lightly covered and still un sprung—in the area where I'd felt around for something to open the jaws. Fortunately, that trap hadn't caught my hand or captured my small dog rolling on the bait. We couldn't undo the chain that secured traps to the tree. In anger and frustration, we heaved lava rocks until we rendered the traps unusable.

We saw no identification on the traps. We later understood that the bottom might have carried a unique identification number issued by ODF&G (and only F&G can identify trappers to numbers). We saw three turkey feathers tied together and attached to a tree limb, apparently marking the traps' location.

Upon contacting F&G to report the incident, I learned that trapping coyotes is legal on Oregon public lands. F&G claims six incidents have been reported in Central Oregon this year. I've also heard from friends who have released their trapped dogs without reporting it to F&G. Therefore, I think the annual trapped pet numbers are higher than reported.

I'm advised that releasing a trapped animal or disturbing a

trap is punishable by law. Now I'm trying to ride with tools that might help release a pet. If I hadn't seen an animal trap as a child, I wouldn't have known that levers open such a device. One of us would have stayed with the trapped dog while the other worked her way down the butte seeking help. A person alone with a trapped pet faces tough challenges and decisions.

My riding friend and I moved to Central Oregon several years ago. We've regularly ridden Central Oregon trails with dogs that stay nearby. We knew nothing about animal trapping and that it's allowed on public lands. We didn't know about laws dictating trappers' rights, or that there's liability for damaging a trapper's property. We knew nothing about how to release pets from various devices.

Two days later, we went to the Bend office of F&G where a young man showed us the only two samples that office had on hand, both leg traps, one old and rusty, the other an updated variety with jaws lined in hard rubber. My friend and I individually tried to open the traps. We were neither heavy enough to depress the springs by standing on the release levers, nor strong enough to open them by pressing with our hands. Only when we worked together on a trap, pushing simultaneously on levers, did the jaws open. Even the fellow showing us the traps was too light to open jaws when standing on the levers; he did, however, have enough upper body strength to spring the trap with hand and arm pressure.

That office didn't have a conibear trap or a snare trap to show us. The representative said that one could cut the wire of a snare trap. He didn't know how to open a conibear trap (designed to kill almost instantly by capturing a whole body and crushing the windpipe). The snare trap is designed so that the harder an animal pulls, the more it works its way into the skin. If one can't quickly cut a snare wire, it buries into the animal and becomes impossible to separate out and cut.

(While we were there, a teenage boy arrived carrying a covered bucket and wanting to register an otter that he caught using a conibear trap. We were shocked to learn that trappers legally destroy harmless otters! And the list goes on; they legally destroy a great variety of non-nuisance animals. In the "Bend Bulletin" dated February 25, 2012, Steven George, District Wildlife Biologist with ODF&G, calls trapping a "sport.")

We borrowed the two traps and went to Harbor Tools and then to Home Depot. At each store, salespersons who knew the tool stocks tried to help us. We found no tool that would assist a not-very-strong person open trap springs. We tried them all.

Then I purchased a leg trap and a conibear trap to learn how to open them. If a leg trap is not old, rusty, large, and

heavy, I can open it by standing on the levers. The conibear simply is an ugly, terrible, and terrifying device. There's a special tool for setting and opening it (or risk getting your fingers chopped off). The release tool is too long and heavy to carry on horseback, but I'll create a way to pack it along.

Currently, I ride with a 3-way fencing tool, a Leatherman type all-purpose tool, and several feet of rope (recommended for opening a conibear, if one strong enough can follow diagrams that illustrate how to release with ropes). I lack faith that any portable aids might help me in a situation, but having "something" on hand beats having nothing.

Recently, in Central Oregon, there have been several reports of dogs caught in traps. The dogs' owners were unable to release their pets on the spot. The worst case was a small dog captured by a conibear trap set only 18" off a popular Metolius River Trail by a fourteen-year-old trapper. This trail is used by children, adults, pets, and horseback riders. Luckily, the owner found someone nearby to help free his dog as it was dying (it required all the strength of two grown men to pull the conibear apart). He then applied mouth-to-nose necessitation and saved his dog.

According to Fish & Game the teen trapper did nothing illegal. And I suppose he's still free to continue setting traps in the same area—near the hatchery, probably a lucrative route for fresh water otters looking for meals.

As if all this isn't enough, I hadn't thought previously about the danger traps present to my horse. But having seen a conibear trap—a set (open and flat) conibear could capture a hoof, or even a horse's muzzle as it grabs a bite of grass!

How many outraged pet owners will it take to get appropriate attention directed to correcting problems associated with rampant trapping? Or will it require an injured or dead human to get the wheels of change rolling?

Change comes slowly and many Oregonians feel grandfathered in to "the right to trap." The trapping community is not kind about responding to victims' concerns. Check out trapper comments on television and newspaper sites that report pet-trapping incidents.

I wrote to Oregon Department of Fish & Game explaining my trap-release experience and stating my concerns. The Department's canned response assured me that trappers do receive training; and they surely don't want to hurt a dog, because, after all, most trappers have dogs, too. Gulp. How can numerous non-trappers perceive the situation so differently?

There must be immediate change, and at the very least, communication and education directed both at trappers and the recreational population using public lands. The recreational public should understand at every trailhead that trapping exists legally, and that traps potentially are underfoot. Non-trappers should have available means to view and handle sample traps, and to receive instruction about how to open them to release pets alive on the spot.

Many new residents to Central Oregon and annual visitors use trails by horseback riding, hiking, and biking, often with pets and children. If adults decide to rest or picnic under a tree with children, animal traps are a threat. And oh yes, the threat includes a possibility of becoming trapped by stepping into a bush to relieve oneself. Think about it.

There must be widespread communications to create user awareness, to provide advice about how to deal with situations of entrapment. And finally, hopefully, someone will invent a portable tool for opening traps that a not-very-strong person can carry to affect releases.

For more information, visit [www.TrapFreeOregon.org](http://www.TrapFreeOregon.org). This website has information and data, including types and numbers of trapped animals, kinds of traps used; and it explains rules and responsibilities relative to trapping in Oregon. It includes a petition asking for support to help make Oregon trap-free. (Are you aware that in WA and CA, live animal trapping is illegal?)

The number of licensed trappers doesn't tell us much. The Trap Free Oregon site explains that a trapper can set 300-plus traps on a string. Where are we and our charges safe?

There are growing opportunities to chime in. The small dog (named Kieri) that almost died in the Metolius conibear trap now has a trapping information and awareness petition called "Kieri's Law." You can read the petition and sign to support it at [www.kieri.org](http://www.kieri.org). You also may make comments on that site.

A Central Oregon group is in the process of forming. It will be associated to Trap Free Oregon. Soon the Trap Free Oregon Website will provide a link so folks can access this new group for anti-trapping information and associated activities in Central Oregon.

Please help to keep this topic alive and going strong. Let's make our voices heard for user-friendly public lands and ever-increasing safety to people and pets.



Unset leg trap



Leg trap opens with pressure on release springs



Unset conibear trap