



Beaver Control in Alabama

In the 1930s, beaver populations in Alabama were reduced to about 500 animals as a result of trapping, hunting, and the demand for fur. Conservation efforts, such as reintroductions and regulated harvest, in conjunction with low fur prices that reduced trapping pressure, have resulted in an increased beaver population throughout the Southeast. Today, beaver populations in Alabama have come full circle, from the rare, occasional sighting to numbers that have created nuisance issues in some areas.

The beaver's return has generally been beneficial to wildlife because they alter stream flows and open forest canopies, creating habitat that generates a tremendous diversity of plants and animals. The additional wetland habitat resulting from the recovery of beaver populations, coupled with sound wildlife management, have aided the return of the wood duck from near extinction.

The territorial behavior of beavers has also fostered their expansion because they are constantly looking for new home sites. In late winter or early spring, the parents force out juveniles to recolonize elsewhere. Most juveniles travel between one and three and one-half miles to find a suitable home site. Depending on the region and quality of habitat, beaver reside in colonies averaging four to eight individuals, and territories range from twenty to forty acres. The reproductive potential for beaver is relatively low compared to that of most rodents because they don't mature until 2 or 3 years old and have a yearly litter that averages just two or three young, called kits. Still, a breeding pair that is left uncontrolled can have dramatic impacts in a short time.

Damage Identification and Signs

Telltale signs of beaver presence are dammed culverts and streams; flooded timber, fields, and roads; girdled or downed timber; cut crops; stripped limbs; lodges; bank dens; slides; crossovers; and castor mounds. Muskrats and otters are two other animals that can create signs similar to those created

by beavers. Understanding the differences is important in identifying what species requires control. Both muskrats and otters can create slides and runs and use bank dens. Muskrats will also create small lodges using cattails and vegetation (unlike beaver that use cut limbs and mud), and they also stockpile smaller cuttings of vegetation in a feed bed. Unlike beaver and muskrats, otters are carnivorous and will often leave scat filled with fish scales and bones in areas they frequent. Muskrats will not produce the cut and stripped limbs nor the large, wide basketball-sized runs and entrances to bank dens that are made by beaver.

If you are willing to tolerate some timber loss, the presence of beavers may not always be detrimental as the ponds they create can be excellent for wildlife and serve as areas to duck hunt or fish. However, if their activities are problematic, controlling beavers as soon as possible will help minimize damage and losses.

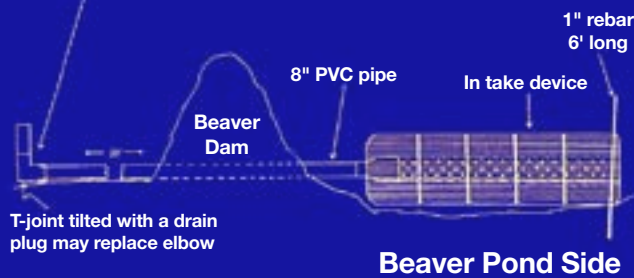
Control Techniques

Unfortunately, the beaver's return has created problems for some landowners. Economic estimates of beaver damage in Alabama are not available; however, timber, crops, ornamental plants, and even buildings have been damaged by beaver. Consequently, some landowners seek to eliminate beavers on their land by using various methods, many of which have been unsuccessful. Some research efforts on the development of reproductive inhibitors and practical poisoning techniques for beaver have not proven successful.

The most prudent approach to controlling wildlife damage problems is an annual harvest, particularly where such harvests can be made at no public expense. Considering the recreational aspects of trapping, the income potential, and the edible meat, the beaver is an animal that is suitable for population control through trapper harvest. This approach promotes the use of nuisance populations as a renewable resource, rather than as wasteful control as pests.

The Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler

Optional elbow and stand pipe —
in case you want to maintain the pond



Used with permission of Clemson University.

Trapping as an effective means of reducing beaver populations has been used throughout the history and range of the beaver. The search for beaver and other fur-bearing animals opened many sections of North America. As long as prices for beaver fur remained high, the laws of supply and demand ensured an abundance of trappers; however, with lower prices during the past 20 years, fewer people, particularly young people, have shown an interest in trapping. Lower prices also have created the need for greater efficiency in trapping, skinning, and handling the fur to make a profit. Following are efficient procedures and techniques for trapping southern beaver and for controlling damage.

Beaver Proofing

In some cases, beaver damage from flooding or girdling of timber can be controlled by beaver proofing the damaged area. Keep beavers out of culverts and drain pipes by fencing the area. These exclusion areas may require frequent cleaning because beavers may try to stop the flow of running water around the fences. Beavers may actually incorporate the fenced drain into the dam.

A pond-leveling device, such as the Clemson Beaver Pond Leveler, allows the landowner, rather than the beavers, to control how much water is in a pond. The ability to manually raise or lower the water level in a pond is helpful if the landowner wants to manage the pond for other wildlife, such as waterfowl. These devices are placed through the dam to maintain water levels; however, if beavers are abundant, they may attempt to stop up these drains and reduce the water flow.

Metal barriers or strong fences may effectively prevent beavers from damaging valuable trees. These structures are best used temporarily to prevent damage while beavers are being removed from an area.

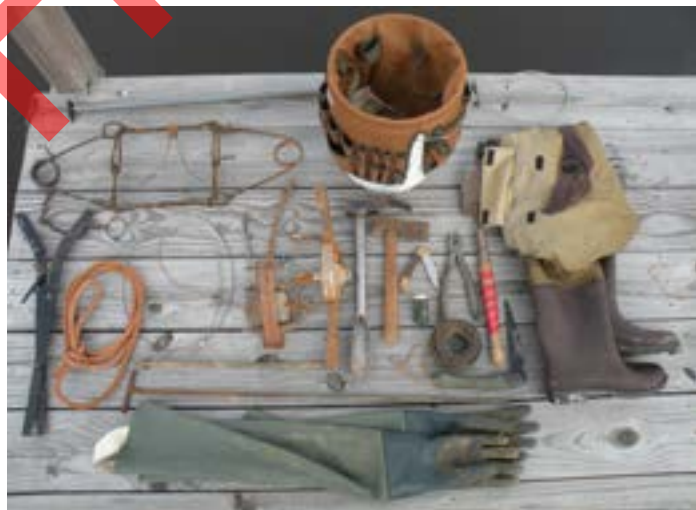
Trapping

Trapping has been proven to control beaver throughout their range, but there are several questions that you must answer when planning this approach. First, do you have access to the areas where beaver reside? If not, request permission from the landowner. Surrounding landowners may be glad to allow access for beaver control because they are likely to have the same damage issues. Consider enlisting as many



neighboring properties as possible. Trapping and cooperation among surrounding landowners will result in more effective and longer lasting beaver control. Sharing the duties in setting and running traplines can also reduce the individual costs of control. The gasoline and time saved by sharing duties can be tremendous.

Another important consideration are nontarget catches. For example, are the neighborhood pets at risk? Do you have otter or muskrats using the property? Is human safety, primarily children, an issue? As a trapper, you are liable for any damages that occur from the traps you set.



Common beaver trapping equipment.

The final considerations are the skill, know-how, and time required to be an effective and humane trapper. Like any outdoor endeavor, trapping and processing beaver (or any fur bearer) come with a learning curve. Consult an experienced trapper or take advantage of resources that can help you become an ethical, effective trapper. Consider national and state trapping associations, Alabama Extension (ACES YouTube Beaver Trapping Series at www.aces.edu/go/489), state fish and game agencies, and numerous Internet forums and online videos. Beginning trappers, regardless of the trap type or set used, should remember to be patient and persistent. Sometimes beaver can be captured in just the first few days of a set, and other times it may take weeks. There

is a great difference between effective trapping and efficient trapping—efficiency can usually only be improved with time and experience in the field.

Anyone considering trapping beaver should have, at minimum, boots or waders, a small hatchet, a roll of 11 or 14 gauge wire, lineman pliers, a variety of 18" to 30" stakes, a pack or bucket to carry it all, and, of course, traps suited to needs. Setting tongs for body gripping traps are also considered a must by most trappers because they are helpful for setting and removing beaver from traps, particularly in cold weather. Alabama law requires that all trappers carry a choke stick to safely remove nontarget catches from traps and that traps used for beaver be tagged with the trapper's name and address. A trapping license is not required for trapping nuisance beaver; however, written permission from the landowner should be obtained. A license is required if beaver pelts are to be processed and sold.

Body Grip Traps

Body grip traps are lethal traps that kill the beaver within a few seconds of entering the trap. Although opinions vary among trappers regarding the best trap to use, most agree that the 8" x 10" body grip trap (the 330 Conibear, for example) is the best trap available for southern beaver. Because of their potential danger to humans and domestic animals, this style of trap is one of the most dangerous and difficult to set traps without proper training and practice. Alabama law requires that body grip traps with a spread exceeding 5 inches must be set in water.

Body grip traps are versatile and highly adaptable for water sets in both shallow and deep water, either partially above or beneath the surface. They can also be set in many different configurations on a variety of travel areas. They are especially effective placed at the entrances of dens and lodges and at most crossovers, culverts, or any other restriction that concentrates beaver travel. They are used most effectively in two or three primary types of sets. One set involves placing the trap on top of or immediately below a beaver dam at an active crossing. If the dam is new (characterized by an abundance of freshly peeled limbs and fresh mud), the trap may be placed in the crossing on top of the dam and blended into the shaggy appearance of the dam. Body grip traps work well when placed in crossings below older dams that usually have rooted vegetation in the accumulated mud and organic matter.

Another productive set is body grip traps placed in shallow runways between bank dens, lodges, and feeding areas. If beaver are active, these runs are usually visible and easy to locate. Many times, beavers may be trapped close to the water's surface. In such cases, the trap should be positioned with the top of the trap 2 to 3 inches above the surface, the trigger mechanism beneath the water, and the prongs sticking upward. In some instances, it may be necessary to modify trap positions for deeper sets. Make dive sets by placing a stick across the surface of the water above the trap. This forces the beaver to dive under the stick and through the trap. Scent mound sets using beaver castor as a scent lure can be used at sites where beavers may have been crawling out of the water.



A body gripping trap set where a beaver slide meets the water's edge.



A snare set at the entrance of a bank den.

Snares

Snaring is another useful form of beaver trapping. However, like large body grip traps, Alabama law requires that snares be set in the water. Many trappers prefer snares over body grip traps for several reasons: (1) snares are significantly lighter and easier to transport; (2) they are safer to humans; and (3) in some sets, nontarget animals may be released unharmed.

Snares can be set so that they drown the beaver, or they may be set to simply catch and hold the animal until the trapper returns. This requires that the trapper check the trapline daily. Snares can be set in the same situations as body grip traps, such as in a run, a dive set, or a scent mound.

Foothold Traps

Foothold traps are useful in some situations, particularly if a beaver is trap shy or if it avoids a body grip trap. Number 3 or larger foothold traps can be used where beaver exit the water or make dam repairs. These traps can be set to drown the beaver after it is captured.

An ethical and effective drowning set requires a cable staked taut at the shoreline with a drown slide that can access 3 feet of water and be anchored by at least 30 pounds. A foothold is attached to the drown lock and placed just beneath the water's edge for a front foot catch or deeper for a hind foot catch.

Securing Traps

Regardless of the trap type used or where the set is made, all traps must be sufficiently secured so the captured animal cannot escape, be injured, or otherwise suffer. Proper staking varies based on soil composition. Stakes 30 inches or longer are often required for sets in loose, sandy, or flooded soils. Shorter, 18- to 24-inch stakes may be sufficient in drier, more compact soils, such as clay or loams. Some soils are so rocky that staking is not an option, and traps must be cabled or wired to trees or rocks or be placed on a drag. With sets in or near streams subject to high runoff, run a piece of wire from the trap ring to a substantial tie on either bank, preferably downstream. This arrangement will prevent the loss of traps during high water and occasionally may prevent the loss of a trap and beaver to feral dogs. Sufficient swiveling is also important so traps do not bind or cause injury to the captured animal or the leverage to escape—especially important when using footholds and snares. To ensure as little stress on trapped animals as possible and to preserve pelt quality, state regulation requires that land sets be checked every 24 hours and water sets be checked every 72 hours.

Shooting

Shooting may be an effective means of beaver control in ponds and lakes with small or infrequent beaver populations. A 12-gauge shotgun with #4 buckshot or BB shot is a good choice over rifles, which increase the risk of dangerous ricochets. Remember that shooting will often render the pelt worthless. Using red cellophane to cover light sources used to locate beaver at night will not frighten the animal and will provide more time for an effective and ethical shot. If beaver are to be shot at night, special permission must be obtained from the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Dam Removal

Water backed up behind a beaver dam may place standing timber or crops under stress and, ultimately, kill them. If a dam is torn away while beaver are still in the area, they will try to repair it. Trapping of beavers in conjunction with removing the dam will reduce the damage. Depending on the situation, it may be better to leave the dam intact until all the beaver are trapped from an area. However, in other situations, partial removal of the dam may attract beaver to the running water. This may be a good place to set a trap for as the beaver come to repair the broken dam.

When the dam is finally ready to be cleared, several options exist. The final decision depends on the goals of the landowner, size of the dam, and economics. If the dam is small, potato rakes and axes may be sufficient for tearing out a hole to allow water to drain. Larger dams may require the use of heavy equipment or explosives to move the large volume of sticks, mud, and other debris from the dam. Explosives can be dangerous and are subject to state and federal regulations. If a dam requires explosives, contact the United States Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services for more information.



A drown slide setup using a #5 coil spring foothold trap.



Adult and juvenile beaver caught from one pond in a single night's trapping. Castor gland is being removed to use in making a lure for future trapping.



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