

LESS PREDATORS, MORE GAME

Most hunters are in a position to trap, poison or shoot predators. For instance, just trapping around your maimai in the season is worthwhile. All it takes is a little preparation. What can you do to improve your next season's gamebird prospects?

Who are the culprits?

Any of the mustelid tribe; namely ferrets, stoats and weasels. There are a lot more of these around than we ever see and trapping soon reveals this. Wild cats are also especially bad. Hawks can be troublesome, but you'll need to be aware of legal limitations before addressing these. Rats too can easily become a plague, especially if you feed ducks out of season. Hedgehogs are predators too, perhaps surprisingly to anyone who hasn't looked close at their teeth. They eat both eggs and chicks yet ironically these same prickly animals are gardeners' allies. Pukekos too steal eggs and chicks and are quite enough to wipe out a whole duck brood on their own. You might even have eel issues. Let's look now at our 'tools of war' to deal with these.



DoC 250 trap

DoC 200 and 250 traps:

These New Zealand inventions are not unlike the Fenn trap but with a stronger spring. They come in a variety of sizes and, probably for liability purposes, they also come mounted inside stout wooden boxes that can only be opened with a power-drill. They have 2 mesh layers with small openings for a predator to get past, and this eliminates any accidental by-catches as well as minimising any curious humans from putting their hands in. Somehow even quite large hedgehogs squash down to gain entry through these small holes. You can make up an egg-holding-cup from timber screwed into the far end of the trap so as to lure predators over the plate. You can also use meat baits. Eggs should

be replaced every week or two, though sometimes they'll act as a sight, (rather than smell), bait and will continue to catch long after this. I suppose it depends how hungry the predator is. Some trappers say that a few feathers, for instance from a duck, sprinkled in and around the trap helps lure predators in. Most trappers say that you can't beat fresh rabbit for mustelids and cats but fish, (fresh or smoked), eggs and poultry all work so experiment with different baits.

Box and cage traps:

It is possible to buy wire-mesh cage traps for mustelids, rats and hedgehogs from certain sports shops. These are like the old possum cage but are quite a bit smaller and use a treadle to release the door. A meat bait behind this will soon test what is around. Once you've caught something, the next question might be; what now? An air rifle or air-pistol is fine for dispatching such animals. You can also simply drop it in water to drown them and a cattle-trough will do the job at a pinch. A third option is to put the whole trap into a grain bag and then apply this to a cold vehicle exhaust pipe. If you decide to release the animal for a dog to dispatch, don't be the least surprized if they escape. It probably also violates several humane laws and codes of practise besides!

Box traps can be made from timber. The best has a door both ends so that the wild cat or whatever thinks it's safe to go inside. But when it pulls on the bait, which could be a smoked fish tail, for instance, it sets the trap off and both doors fall at the same time. These traps have a wire mesh section on their roof that, when the cover is pulled back, allow an air rifle to be used to dispatch the animal inside. AWF&GC can supply plans for DIY trappers.



Timber box trap

If there's a small stream in the area you trap, consider providing predators with a bridge over it, either a tree truck or a wooden plank bridge, with the open-both-ends box trap, (or Fenn tunnel) in the middle. A treadle style of box-trap release works best in these situations, if it sets off from either direction. If you put a box trap alongside something that guides the animals into it, such as alongside a wire-mesh fence, or a stone wall, even just alongside a fallen log, so much the better. You can also use stakes in the ground and branches woven into them to make a funnel that leads the animal into the trap entrance and makes it harder to avoid it once they're on that track. Again, a clean entry to the trap ensures a clean catch.

Poison:

Especially if you're feeding ducks, rats will become a problem. Even when feeders are mounted over water, the rats can dive and retrieve grain. It's a good idea to lay poison nearby the feeding area but rats can sometimes drop poison they're taking to hoard away and gamebirds can then eat it, so what's the simple answer? Firstly, it's good practise to use a rat poison box, which is a box with a small entrance both ends – too small for ducks to enter. The box is divided into 2 with a low wall in-between and the poison grain goes at the back. So a bird can't readily put its head in and help itself. Most rat baits these days have a hole in the middle so that the bait can be nailed to the box or better, anchored with wire, to prevent rats removing it. Because they have to eat it there and then, this ensures it's not taken away and hidden from other rats and you'll target the whole local population that way. It's good practise to clearly stencil this box "poison" in red paint and also to lock it besides with a small child-proof padlock. Initially the poison may seem to disappear at an alarming rate, but after a while you'll break the back of the local rat population and thereafter it'll just need maintenance top-ups. If you're on a budget, try putting the poison inside a Fenn tunnel to act as a rat attractant. You'll get multiple catches per individual bait.

Shooting:

Trapping will reveal that there are many more mustelids, rats and hedgehogs around than you would ever credit from simple observation. The fact is these animals keep a very low profile. You can also test this by leaving a few gamebird carcasses around, for instance, breasted birds, and see just how quickly they disappear – usually overnight. A sitting (i.e nesting), duck has to survive this threat for weeks on end.



Not likely to come back!

If your dog should flush a wild cat when you have a gun in your hands, don't spare the cartridge. The worry is, of course, it could be someone's pet. If it's several hundred meters away from anyone's house, it's almost certainly wild besides which, it's certainly up to no good. It's not a bad idea to find out what your neighbour/s cat/s look like, just in case "Binty" turns up at the pond edge one day. Then you can still look your neighbour in the face and remain good friends. We have tried many

tricks to teach a tame cat caught in a cage not to come back, such as playing a hose on it then letting the dog chase it, (after a safe head-start, that is). However, as miserable as they look at the time, they typically come back within just a few days. They're quite incorrigible. To date no wild cat we've shot has ever repeated their offending.

Pukeko will kill off an entire brood of ducklings and there's really only one way to stop this sort of thing. Relocating them has been tried – up to 80km away, but failed when these birds all returned, (because they were banded after capture, there was no question they were the same ones). So use the 4-month long pukeko shooting season to control them in areas where this sort of conflict is taking place. They're not to be despised as gamebirds either and you can have a lot of sport trying to outwit them. If you haven't found the perfect pukeko recipe yet, some hunters report that pook-soup definitely has its merit.

Hawks can be caught in ladder-traps, the design of which can be found online. They're also attracted to pukeko and breasted duck carcasses left somewhere you can readily sneak up on them, such as just past a hedge, or around some sort of corner. However the legal status of hawks poses more than a few problems if you're losing ducklings hand over fist to them. The Fish & Game NZ website contains a summary of what you can and cannot currently legally do. Please stay on the right side of the law by reading it first.



Important to keep the pook population under control

Improving your odds:

A trap will only attract animals from the immediate area, for instance, those that come into range of the bait's smell. This can be improved upon considerably by using a drag - either a dead rabbit or duck carcass, etc. Cut open the gut cavity and some of the gut itself. Then pull it around the paddock on a piece of string so that it leaves a distinct trail. You can do this on foot but even better is a farm bike, because the rabbit bounces up and down leaving bits of gut behind. Make sure you pull it towards the trap and do the same from at least one other direction. Any predator that hits this trail will follow it, perhaps several hundred meters, into the trap. One day a stoat was seen on a farmers' front lawn. Using this trick the Fish & Game officer had it caught by the next day, in a Fenn tunnel set beside the nearby barn.

By the way, if you get some rabbit gut on your hands, it'll come off if you wash them with a bit of meth's, then soap. Repeat in 30 minutes as it'll work out of your skin pores as well. Particularly if you're going out on a hot date that night, suggest instead you use thick rubber gloves to field dress the bunny. One European gamekeeper told us that, if he catches a female mustelid, he squeezes her bladder over the trap and catches any love-sick males in the area. But if he catches a male, he pulls its tail back hard and wipes its' bottom on the upper, inner tunnel entrance. This is where the animals' musk glands are. The way he described it was thus: Mustelids patrol their territory for interlopers. Imagine you came home and smelled strange cigarette smoke coming from your wife's bedroom. Would you hesitate to investigate?

Some say that a largish feather suspended on a piece of string in the breeze above a box trap will attract wild cats who'll come to investigate it – a sight lure. Cat biscuits also have a role to play as bait with the advantage they last longer than meat baits. Old baits will attract hedgehogs, as much for their insects on them as the meat itself. Hedgehogs struggle with large hen eggs, but anything smaller is at their mercy and quail especially, (but perhaps also ducks or pheasants), will not thrive in their presence.

Possums may not seem to be a threat to ducks, but they occupy duck nest boxes and also natural nest cavities in trees that ducks might otherwise use. They also do major damage to food-bearing trees that are being planted for the benefit of game. In short, they're a real pest. Timms traps, (square, yellow plastic traps), are a kill trap that is especially easy to use for possums. Even granny's use them. You can also bait them with meat skewered onto the trigger to catch ferrets and wild cats. However fruit works best with possums. The freshly killed possum will then attract other predators so why not use this to your advantage? Suggest you tie this bait to something so it doesn't get carted away. Put it where you can easily ambush it, then sneak up on the carcass some hours later with a shotgun and be ready for a quick snap shot at what's feeding on it. You can also try this trick at night using a spotlight and a varmint rifle such as a .22 rimfire or a .22 Hornet. Some hunters pre-feed for several nights, then suspend a dead possum just out or reach from a tree branch. When they play their spotlight beam on it late in the evening, there's often 2 or 3 wild cats taking turns trying to try to pull the carcass down.

When should I trap and for how long?

Animals have clever ways of working out if their neighbour isn't around any longer. For instance, if they're a species that scent marks, and that marking has gone stale, they know old Charlie is no longer in residence. So, they naturally move in. For this reason, you can't really blitz an area, and then enjoy several years of low predator numbers. It's a never-ending task. But if you are limited as to time, then the best time is just before and during the breeding season. Even if you're only in the field for a few days each year, for instance, the weekend you tag and tidy up the maimai and opening weekend, why not set a trap or 4 overnight and see what's there the next day? Every predator caught counts. By law, you need to check traps every 24 hours they're set. However, there's no law against leaving a trap on safe inside its tunnel, so that animals routinely run over the top of it. Then, when you can come back next time, set it up to catch those critters which have by now have lost all caution of it. This is really effective if the tunnel offers a quick or easy way to get from point-A to point-B, for instance, on a plank over a wide ditch.

Trapping can be a challenging and rewarding activity in itself – not least when you see how many more gamebirds you have successfully bred, for instance, on your farm, lifestyle block or pond as a result. Keep an eye open too for annual competitions where you could win good prizes for your trapping skills.

Good luck.

