

Beaver Control in Alabama

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In the 1930's, beaver populations in Alabama were reduced to about 500 animals as a result of trapping, hunting, and the demand for fur. Stocking of beaver in suitable habitats, low fur prices, and a reduction in trapping pressure have resulted in an increased beaver population throughout the Southeast. Today, beaver are plentiful in Alabama and beaver swamps may be seen even in suburban areas of the state.

The beaver's return has generally been beneficial to wildlife. Additional wetland habitat resulting from the recovery of beaver populations, coupled with sound wildlife management, have aided in the return of the wood duck, a species that was near extinction at the turn of the century (See Circular ANR-519, "Wood Duck Management In Alabama"). Many other wildlife species use beaver swamps as part of their habitat.

Control Techniques

Unfortunately, the beaver's return has created problems for a number of landowners. Economic estimates of beaver damage in Alabama are not available, but timber, crops, ornamental plants, and even buildings have been damaged by beaver. Landowners have used various methods - many of which were unsuccessful - to eliminate beaver on their land. Research directed toward the development of reproductive inhibitors and practical poisoning 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 lends itself to population control through trapper harvest. This approach promotes the use of nuisance populations as a renewable resource, rather than wastefully controlling them as pests.

Trapping is an effective means of reducing beaver populations has been demonstrated many times throughout the history and range of the beaver. It was the search for beaver and other furbearing animals that opened up 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 over the past 20 years, fewer 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. This publication presents efficient procedures and techniques for trapping southern beaver and controlling damage.

Beaver Proofing

Beaver damage because of flooding or girdling of timber may be controlled by beaver proofing the damaged area. Fenced culverts and drain pipes exclude beaver. These exclusion areas may require frequent cleaning because beaver may try to stop the flow of running water around the fences. And, they may actually incorporate the fenced drain into the dam.

A three-long drain, placed through the dam, may prevent beaver from controlling water levels. If beaver are abundant, they may stop up these drains to reduce the flow of water.

Metal barriers or strong fences may be used effectively to prevent beaver from damaging valuable trees. These structures are used best as a temporary measure to prevent damage while beaver are being removed from an area.

Conibear 330

Although opinions vary among trappers regarding the best trap to use, those who have tried them tend to agree that the Conibear 330 is the best trap available for southern beaver. This trap usually kills instantly and is almost 100 percent effective in preventing escapes. But, because of their potential danger to human beings and domestic animals, Alabama law prohibits the use of Conibear 330 traps on land.

Conibear traps are highly adaptable for both shallow and deep water, either partially above or beneath the surface. Because drowning sets are unnecessary with the Conibear, a trapline can usually be set quickly and will require fewer traps. In addition to the Conibear traps, anyone seriously considering beaver trapping should have hip boots or waders, a pair of setting tongs or some other setting device, a small hatchet or axe, some rolls of wire, and wire cutters. Although some trappers set Conibear traps with their hands, this is not recommended.

Several setting devices have proven to be very helpful, particularly in cold weather, both for setting traps and for removing beaver from them. 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.

In the generally mild Alabama temperatures, trappers seldom have to contend with ice trapping. So, Conibear traps can be used effectively in two or three major 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 (showing a lot of freshly peeled limbs and brush), the trap may be placed in the crossing on top of the dam. The trap blends well with the shaggy appearance of the dam. Conibear traps work well when placed in crossings below older dams, which usually have rooted vegetation in the accumulated mud and organic matter.

In another type of set, Conibear traps placed in shallow runways between bank dens, lodges, and feeding areas are very productive. If beaver are active, these "runs" are usually visible and easy to locate. Many times, beaver may be trapped close to the water's

surface. The trap should then 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. "Dive sets" may be made 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 may be made at sites where beavers may have been crawling out of the water. These sets use beaver castor as a scent lure.

Regardless of where the sets are made, traps should be wired to a secure stake or tree, and, if placed in streams that are subject to high run-off, a piece of wire should be run from the trap ring to a substantial tie on either bank, preferably down stream. 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.

Snares

Snaring is another useful form of beaver trapping. However, as in the case of the Conibear 330, Alabama law requires that snares be set in the water. Many trappers prefer snares rather than Conibears for several reasons:

1. Snares are significantly lighter and easier to transport.
2. They are safer to human beings.
3. In some sets, non-target animals may be released unharmed.

Snares may 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 makes it important that the trapper check the trapline daily. Like Conibears, snares may be set in a run, as a dive set, or as a scent mound.

Leghold Traps

Leghold traps may be useful in some situations, particularly if a beaver is "Trap shy." Number 2 leghold traps may be set at the water's edge with the pan and jaws covered with leaves. These traps may be set so as to drown the beaver after it is captured.

Shooting

Shooting may be an effective means of beaver control in ponds and lakes. A 12-gauge shotgun with #4 buckshot or BB shot is a good weapon for this technique. If beaver are to be shot at night, special permission must be obtained from the Alabama Department of Conservation.

Dam Removal

Water backed up behind the beaver dam may place standing timber or crops under stress and, ultimately, kill them. Trapping beaver, in conjunction with removing the dam, will reduce the damage. Beaver will try to repair a dam if it is torn away while beaver are still in the area. Depending on the situation, it may be better to leave the dam intact until all the beaver are trapped. But, 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 beaver as they 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, the 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 quite dangerous and are subject to state and federal regulations. If the dam requires explosives, consult your County Extension agent for advice.
