

Another Memorable (Weird) Trapping Season by Dave Schmitz

We're at the end of the 2015 trapping season and I am mulling over the experiences I had on the trail this winter. The season was filled with variety.

I decided to mentor a young couple, Jordan and Ashley, who I met at the ATA trapping school in October. I took them out on my 'line north of the Arctic Circle. They had done a lot of research on equipment and were able to buy some good gear including a Skandic wide track snowmachine, an Arctic Oven tent and a variety of traps. I explained that this would be sort of like a Masters degree in trapping, rather than the middle school variety. They thought I was kidding, but now they understand.

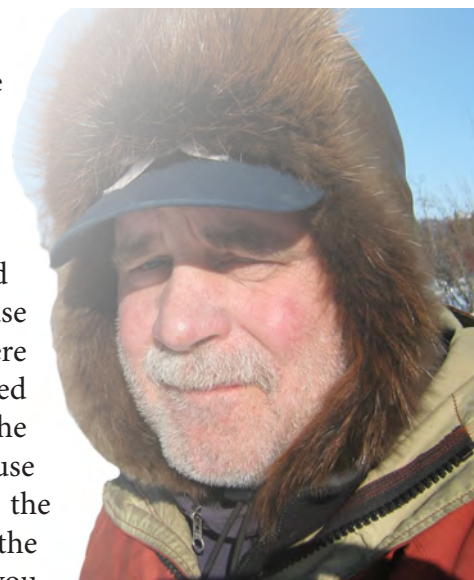
The beginning of our trapping season was not at the beginning. Are you confused? We were not able to get out on my 'line in early November because of the complete absence of the fluffy white stuff. We finally got started on November 29, but hit a roadblock, literally. I trap in an area on the Koyukuk River which is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. In order to stay within the BLM restrictions, I need to begin my snowmachine journey on the Bettles Ice Road right of way.

Five bumpy miles from our starting point, I was breaking trail when I came upon a landslide. This was not a minor 'slide. It was an epic, once in a lifetime, catastrophic landslide that had been caused by the record-setting wet summer we experience in 2014. Acres of trees and soil had slid down and completely obliterated about a half mile of the ice road. It was like the road was never there.

"No problem," you say, "just go around it." True, except this particular landslide was on a hillside with a 12% grade and heavy birch and alder and burned trees for cover. The next day, I scouted a route and we cut and

broke a trail around the landslide. It was steep enough that I had to cut several switchbacks to get through with the snowmachine and a big sled of gear behind it. No problem!! By the end of day two of trail breaking, we had gone all of five miles.

Next day, I broke trail through an area that was burned badly two years ago. I call this the Dead Zone, because nothing lives there now. I also named the trail "The Grinder" because with the brush, the tussocks and the hills, it grinds you up.



The author

Jordan and Ashley met their match in the next section, a hilly very overgrown alder area. I thrashed my way through with my Skandic Super Wide Track. Jordan stopped and was very reluctant to drive his new \$10,000 machine into the fray. In fact, I think he thought I was nuts. I named this area "The Slapper" and we had red welts to prove it. It was here that my students felt it would be best to camp and spend a couple of days hacking, lopping and chopping at the healthy growth of alder and willow while I continued on to where I would base my tent. As I crashed through willows and bounced over trophy-sized tussocks, I noticed few marten tracks.

Between cabin repair projects, breaking trail, setting and baiting traps, I managed to fly through two three-

on

week stints out on my Arctic trapline. My apprentices, Jordan and Ashley had to go back to work, so I was trapping solo again after they left. The trapping was great, but the catching ... not so much.

The ratio of female to male marten in my harvest was greater than one to one. I was not happy with the high number of females, so I shut down the marten operation earlier than normal.



My apprentices, Jordan and Ashley

I explored some new country with hopes of expanding my marten trapline in the future.

I thought of naming this trapping season as: “The year of the Little White Menace and the Relentless Land Shark.” Those of you who have actually been out this winter getting after it, can probably guess what at least one of these two are.

The White Menace refers to the ermine; those white-in-the-winter weasels. The ermine seem to have repopulated to a twenty year high for my trapline. Their tracks were everywhere. I am guessing some of you saw the same thing where you trap. As ferocious and interesting as these little guys are, I am not as pleased finding them in everything from conibear sets to pole sets as I would be with a dark male marten. I plan to go back over my trapping journals from ten and twenty years ago and see if their presence signals anything in the marten population’s future.

The second feature of the trapping season was the Land Shark, also known as the wolverine. I have had more wolverine tracks on my ‘line this year than the last ten seasons combined. On one occasion in mid-January, a wolverine ran a full ten miles of my ‘line, coursing back and forth on my trail like a destroyer looking for subs, or like a Great White shark hunting. It visited ALL of my sets, springing each one, whether it was a foot-hold pole set or a #120 Conibear box set. He stole a LOT of my beaver bait.

At one Conibear box set, the wolverine chewed up a third of the box to get to the bait. It was sort of like having a combination of a rabid anti-trapper type springing my traps, with a Tasmanian Devil on a leash to eat all the bait. Do I come across to the reader as having a vivid imagination? OK, I plead guilty.

In answer to your unspoken question, yes, I did put out sets for wolverine. Don’t be packin’ up your pick-ups and headin’ North guys. I’ve got this covered. This critter just went where my sets were not. The same thing happened on my shorter ‘line to the north of my



Camp all set up

base. I put out three or four foot-hold bait sets and a half dozen #330 Conibear baited sets.

A wolverine has sort of a mystical quality to it. They appear without notice, blitz your traps and disappear over the hill. They might come back the next day or three weeks later. Or never. I prayed each time I headed back up to the ‘line, that one of the Land Sharks would be waiting for me ... frozen.



Good trails ahead

Whether I catch a lot of fur or not when I am on the 'line, I am very thankful to God for the amazing country, the satisfaction of meeting diverse challenges

in the harsh weather conditions and the hope that next season will offer more unique experiences, safety and of course, more fur. Hope you all had a great season!

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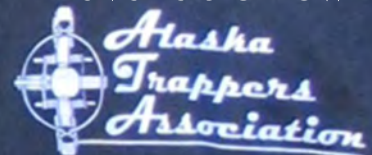


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