

Trapping the heartstrings

Coyote hunting contest angers animal rights activists

By: Jesse Froehling
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Don Bothwell of Kalispell loves animals. He understands how enamored people become with their dogs and other pets because he too has owned a dog. But he's also a trapper, and since snares can sometimes catch unwitting dogs, he knows what it's like to draw the ire of animal rights activists.

"My big concern is that trapping tends to get painted in a pretty negative light and it's because people don't understand what trapping is all about," he says. "They see the old movies, they imagine these antique bear traps with big steel teeth and assume that that's the tool of the trade."

Bothwell serves as a board member for the Montana Furbearer Conservation Alliance. With little fanfare, the group organized the "Howler Hauler," a statewide coyote-hunting contest, which started Jan. 3 and runs for two weeks.

Trappers and hunters are encouraged to kill as many coyotes as they can, with the winners—judged by number of pelts—earning prize money. The event is timed for when coyote pelts are most valuable, or thick, and before mid-winter breeding season begins.

"What it's about is an opportunity for those of us who harvest coyotes to demonstrate our skills and do it in a friendly competitive manner," Bothwell says. "We're also hoping to take down coyote species to help other game species."

Footloose Montana, an organization pushing to ban commercial and recreational trapping on public lands, couldn't object more to the contest. A few days after the competition began, Footloose member Susie Waldron called the event a "barbaric, cold-blooded excuse to wage wholesale warfare on species deemed pests by those who feel they have more right to inhabit planet Earth than their prey" in an open letter to the media. More to the point, she questioned whether the contest actually helps control the coyote population.

Kerry Foresman, a professor of biology and wildlife biology at the University of Montana, says "thinning down" coyotes does little to control numbers. Coyotes, he notes, are an extremely resilient species. If, for instance, a group were to make a concerted effort to kill all the coyotes within, say, 10 miles of Missoula, the animals within 11 miles would quickly move in. Without the competition, food is more prevalent, females have larger litters and the coyotes quickly resume their presence.

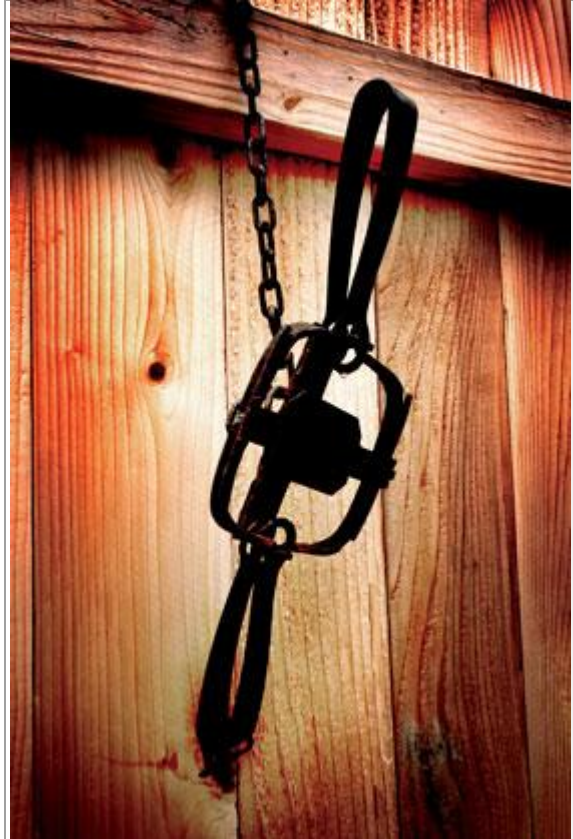


Photo by Chad Harder

The Montana Furbearer Conservation Alliance organized a "Howler Hauler," a statewide coyote-hunting contest that runs Jan. 3–17. Trappers and hunters are encouraged to kill as many coyotes as they can, with the winners—judged by number of pelts—earning prize money.

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"If you're serious about managing a population, you don't go into these boom and bust cycles," he says.

That said, Foresman says he understands both sides of the trapping issue. He has found that trappers by and large don't match the perception the public may have of them and that they've done a good job of policing themselves.

"You need to be really careful when you write articles like this to just lay out the facts and not get caught in the emotional aspects of all this," he says. "I want to be sure that if I'm quoted in this article, I'm not anti-trapping. I've worked closely with trappers, I respect them and it's a legal activity."

That's something Footloose Montana aims to change, and the group points to the "Howler Hauler" as a prime example of how trapping needs to be more regulated.

"Increasingly trappers trap where people recreate with their companion animals," says Anja Heister, Footloose's executive director. "And I think they're going to overlap. As the population grows, there will be a lot more incidents. But our main motivation is the suffering of animals, all animals. That includes animals that are being trapped for their fur."

In Waldron's letter, she described how she thinks the coyote killing contest will end: "January 17, coyote carcasses galore, the final 'weigh in,' a photograph of blood-smeared flesh and fur worthy of sending to the judges for the grand prize—a percentage of the entry fees."

Bothwell says January 17 will not resemble such a gory scene. In fact, he notes modern traps are a far cry from the steel-teeth monstrosities of the past.

"[The trap is] designed to hold by pressure and friction. They are not designed to break bones," he says, noting that he's caught his own hand in his traps numerous times without severe injury. "My son and I have actually come up on traps and found the animal sound asleep. Once they figure out that they can't move, they struggle for a bit, but once they figure out, 'Hey, I can't go anywhere, what the heck,' they just take a nap."

And despite Foresman's contention that the hunt doesn't effectively thin the population, Bothwell believes it helps in some way to control an aggressive animal.

"We're seeing a phenomenal growth across America of coyote populations," Bothwell says, adding that he's seen them "packing up," a somewhat erratic behavior for coyotes. "And it's getting to the point where in some cities we're seeing people having problems with their pets getting attacked by coyotes. And, in fact, I know of one instance last year here in Kalispell where a woman had her dog grabbed right in her backyard by a coyote."

The "Howler Hauler" concludes Jan 17. The winning team will receive 25 percent of the total entry fees collected and a plaque for each team member.