



Wildlife Management and Regulated Trapping in Montana

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Information Sheet

Trapping has a time-honored heritage in Montana.

For centuries, people have trapped furbearers across Montana. Presently, Montana sportsmen and sportswomen take part in this fur trapping heritage to legitimately harvest a renewable resource on public and private land.

State law requires FWP to be responsible for the conservation of fish and wildlife populations.

- FWP has the responsibility to conserve, protect, and manage wildlife species, including animals that are hunted and trapped, for the long-term viability of their populations, while providing for responsible public use. In following these guidelines and state law, FWP manages the state's furbearing animals, and licenses and supports trapping (similar to fishing and hunting) as an important cultural, recreational, and wildlife management activity.
- Like other animals that are hunted, furbearers are trapped to provide public use and managed for sustainable populations that are in balance with habitat conditions. *Regulated trapping does not endanger wildlife populations.*

Furbearer trapping is regulated by state laws and FWP Commission rules in Montana.

- Similar to hunting or fishing, FWP requires trappers to purchase a Montana trapping license and comply with trapping regulations that apply on both public and private land.

- The FWP Commission approves trapping regulations every two years through a public process and adopts harvest quotas for certain furbearers annually. These regulations are scientifically based and are strictly enforced. Land trapping seasons are restricted to less than three months of the year.
- Trapping regulations cover 10 legally classified species, several predators, and some nongame animals with fur. FWP has management authority for animals that have been classified by the Montana Legislature as furbearers, with an open season adopted by the FWP Commission. These species are beaver, otter, muskrat, mink, marten, fisher, wolverine, bobcat, and swift fox, which have restricted trapping seasons and fall directly under FWP furbearer regulations.
- Other animals with fur value that are trapped include coyotes, weasels, and skunks that are classified as predators, and nongame animals such as raccoon, red fox, and badger. Certain general trapping regulations apply when trapping for these animals.

Trappers provide FWP with information that assists with wildlife management.

- For some furbearer species, such as bobcats, trappers are required to present all harvested animals to FWP for the collection of information that includes harvest

location, sex, age, and other biological samples. Furbearer trapper reports and annual trapper surveys for all species are used to help monitor species distribution and trends in population productivity.

Scientists and wildlife managers across the country support regulated trapping.

- The Wildlife Society, the professional organization of wildlife biologists, managers, and university staff in North America, promotes the position that regulated trapping is a biologically sustainable, safe, effective, and ecologically sound method of managing furbearers. The Wildlife Society recognizes that “trapping is part of our cultural heritage and provides income, recreation, and an outdoor lifestyle for many citizens through use of a renewable natural resource.” This organization also stresses that trapping is important in animal damage control, wildlife research, and in suppressing some wildlife diseases. The Society recognized trapping as one of the vital components of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation in a special issue of the *Wildlife Professional* in 2010.

Trapping is biologically sustainable.

- Trapping is managed by FWP as a recreational activity, cultural heritage, and management tool for a renewable furbearer resource. Fur trapping is sustainable because levels of furbearers taken are a small percentage of the total population size and reproduction replaces harvested animals each year. Seasons are scheduled so that furbearer offspring are independent of the adult by the time trapping seasons begin.
- As an example of sustainability, trappers meet the statewide quota of approximately 2,000 bobcats taken year after year. Bobcat populations are healthy in terms of distribution, numbers, age, and sex ratio. This is a classic example of a biologically sustainable wildlife management program.

Trapping is similar to hunting in requiring strong ethics in its pursuit.

- Regulated fur trapping is the only way to effectively harvest most furbearers. Many of these species are active only at night and could not be ethically hunted. A foothold trap is designed to hold the animal by its

foot; the animal can then be released or quickly killed. A conibear (body gripping) trap is designed to result in a quick and humane kill of the animal when captured.

- As an example of the relationship between trapping and hunting, bobcats can be hunted with hounds as well as trapped, so any trapping regulations applied to this species affect hunting opportunity as well. Best Management Practices for trapping are being incorporated into Montana’s trapper education program.

Trapping takes place across the Montana landscape and provides multiple benefits.

- Like hunting, trapping takes place on public and private lands across Montana. Trappers harvest furbearers, predators, and several nongame wildlife species to assist in population management, to protect livestock and prevent damage to agricultural lands, to receive economic value from pelts, and to pursue a legal outdoor recreational activity.
- Controlling some species of furbearing animals reduces wildlife damage conflicts on private lands and on public lands along roadways and streams. For example, beaver populations in many areas of Montana are at high enough levels that landowners are struggling to find people to trap and remove them. In many areas of northwest Montana, beavers are constructing extensive dams and ponds and blocking access of federally threatened bull trout to spawning streams. Beaver are also a perennial problem in many areas where they block road culverts and cut down trees along waterways, contributing to stream channel instability and local flooding.
- Trappers are required to label all traps with their license information on both public and private lands, regardless of what species they are trapping. Furbearer trappers must have permission to trap on private land and must follow additional restrictions on public land.
- From an FWP wildlife management perspective, the term “public lands” is considered to be all federal and state lands. These include U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service federal lands. State lands are primarily FWP Wildlife Management Areas and Department of Natural Resources & Conservation School Trust lands.

Trapping is an annual component of Montana's economy and provides many value-added opportunities.

- Approximately 4,000 Montanans buy trapping licenses each year, and the number has increased in the past two decades. In terms of user-days, a standard way of calculating economic benefit for fishing or hunting, fur trapping is worth more than \$1 million dollars to Montana's economy each year. Furbearer pelts are used in garments, decorations, taxidermy, and even for spiritual or religious items. Furbuyers and businesses that trade in fur or make garments are based in Montana. In addition, many trappers sell pelts through national and international auctions. Income to Montanans from pelt sales in 2007-08 amounted to an estimated \$2,125,775 based on the number of reported furbearers taken.

Furbearer trappers must follow existing regulations to trap on public and private lands.

- On public lands, trapping regulations govern the distance furbearer traps must be placed away from trailheads, campgrounds, and other public use areas. As long as licensed furbearer trappers abide by these and other trap-type restrictions, they are allowed to trap on public and private land.
- Some local trapping closure areas exist. For example, furbearer trapping closures have been adopted by the FWP Commission that encompass about 40,000 acres in several high-use winter recreation areas around Missoula.
- FWP wildlife management areas have special regulations in place restricting the number of trappers and limiting trapping to specific time periods.
- Trapping on state school trust land involves a permitting process and special regulations.

FWP has taken actions to minimize incidental captures when setting trapping regulations.

- Montana has one of the most effective sets of regulations for avoiding nontarget wildlife and domestic pet capture in the nation. Furbearer regulations, including

types of traps that can be used and where they can be placed, exist to help prevent accidental captures of domestic pets and nontarget wildlife species.

- In the 2008-09 and 2009-10 trapping seasons, FWP documented four reports (three on public land, one on private land) of dog mortalities in traps across the entire state. Three of the dogs were "at large" (roaming without their owners nearby) and another was roughly one mile away from its owner. Responsibility also rests with the dog owner to not allow the pet to range out of the owner's control or to run at large. There is no record of a hiker or other recreationist ever being caught in a trap.
- FWP provides informational materials to trappers to help avoid or minimize the accidental capture of nontarget animals. FWP also has educational information available for dog owners and other recreationists that provides an overview of trapping in Montana, what to expect when a trap is encountered, and how to respond if a pet is accidentally captured.

Regulations encourage trappers to regularly check traps.

- FWP recommends that trappers check their traps at least once every 48 hours. State law requires that trappers must attend traps in a manner that does not waste furbearing animals and that traps must be removed when the furbearer trapping season is completed.

FWP strongly recommends Trapper Education programs which are offered in Montana.

- Voluntary trapper safety and education courses are offered each year around the state and are coordinated by volunteer instructors with regular participation by FWP staff. FWP strongly encourages all trappers to participate in the Trapper Education Program and supports the effort to make trapper education mandatory for all first-time trappers.
- Trapper safety and education is also provided during the annual summer Youth Trapper Camp that is a cooperative effort between the Montana Trapper's Association, FWP, and Montana 4-H.

Distribution of public and private lands in Montana

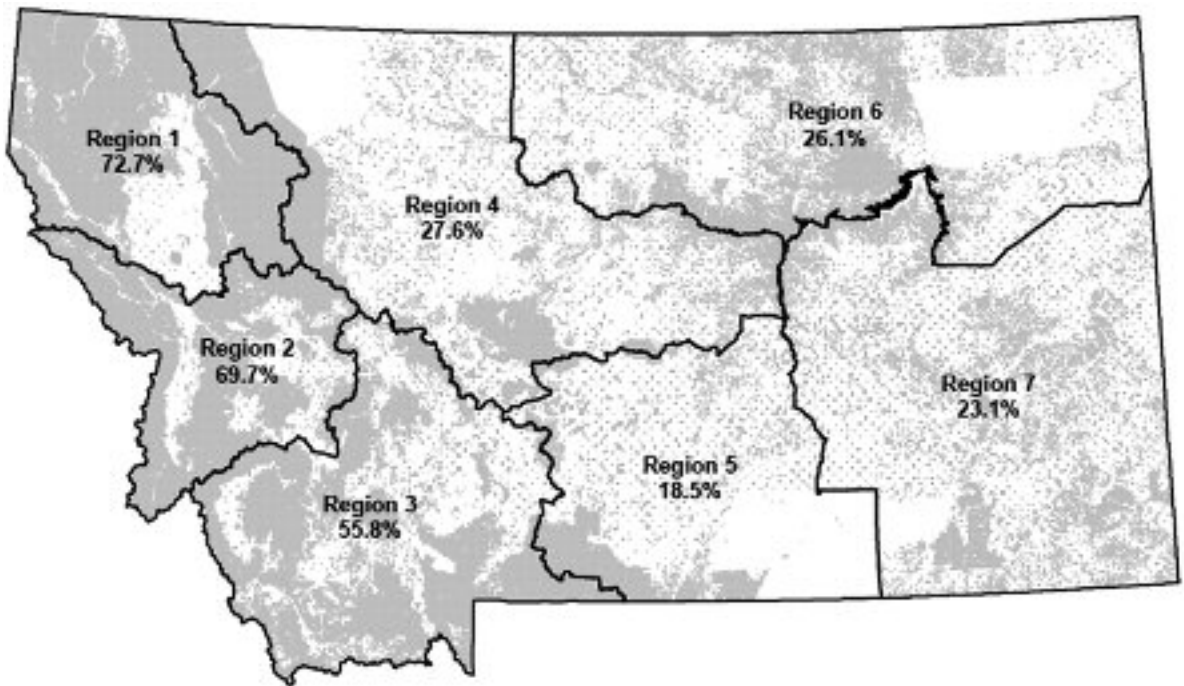
- Landownership patterns vary significantly across the state when shown as the percent of public land by FWP administrative region displayed in Figure 1. While these percentages are weighted more heavily

to public ownership in western Montana, the map does depict mixed ownership patterns occurring across the eastern two-thirds of the state. This ownership pattern and the distribution of wildlife species across both public and private lands have direct implications to effective wildlife management and associated opportunities.

Figure 1. Landownership Patterns across Montana

Wildlife species do not recognize administrative boundaries, so it is essential that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages furbearers across lands of all ownership.

Shaded areas represent public lands (and percentage) by FWP region.



- ▶ Visit FWP's Web site at fwp.mt.gov for more management and trapping information. Click "Hunting," and then select "Trapping."