

Trapping then and now on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Gary Titus



Beaver trap with a 110 attached to the pole under water set up by Amanda Alaniz.

A cold north wind blew in the early morning light as I strapped on my snowshoes. My trail took me across a frozen lake and then into the woods where my trap line started.

As I approached my first set, my anticipation began to rise. Had a lynx been attracted into the set by the feathers that I hung in the surrounding branches?

Once again, the answer was “No.” Most of the time a trapper’s trap is empty, and that’s where the patience comes in.

I know that I am not the first to trap this stream. Nineteenth-century Dena’ina natives from the village of Kenai ran their trap lines by dog team along this route. The native trappers, and white trappers on Skilak and Tustumena Lakes, often ran long trap lines, mostly to supplement their meager winter cash supply.

Trapping has been around for a long time and, like today, it has never been a good sole source of income. The financial return is usually small; a season’s catch in 1912 would put a modest \$350 in a trapper’s pocket. During the rest of the year the early trappers worked in commercial fishing, mining, and big game guiding.

On my patrols through the wilderness of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge I occasionally come across

signs of trapper activity from long ago. One summer I noticed an old spruce tree with its lower branches cut off. The long-dead branches, now brittle with age, had been stacked against the trunk to form a “cubby” set—a short tunnel—which probably still attracts an occasional lynx.

Looking down at the base of the tree I noticed a trap chain apparently growing out of a tree root nestled in the thick moss and spruce cones of a squirrel midden. As I stepped closer to inspect the chain, I felt two muffled thumps beneath my feet, and realized that I had inadvertently sprung two long-forgotten traps.

Following the chain with my hand and a stick, I carefully dug through several layers of spruce cones and moss until I found two rusted No. 3 leg-hold traps, the jaws still set until I sprung them.

Andrew Berg ran a trap line in this area around the turn of the century and had a small shelter cabin nearby. Was this a trap that he had forgotten?

Leaving a trap set after the close of the season has always been against the law. Berg served as a Territorial game warden in Alaska, and no doubt was quite familiar with this regulation. So I’d prefer to think that this wasn’t one of Andrew Berg’s traps, yet it was located right in the heart of his territory.

Trapping regulations in Alaska were a long time in the making, and probably arrived none too soon. An 1898 report on the preservation of fur-bearing animals stated that failure to apply restrictions would work “irreparable injury” to the Alaskan fur trade. The report described the rapidly declining furbearer numbers, and blamed this decline on indiscriminate trapping of animals all year long.

The first regulations protecting fur-bearing animals in Alaska were approved on April 21, 1910, and The Department of Commerce and Labor was to appoint “fur wardens” to enforce the law.

Trappers breaking the fur laws were to be fined not less than \$200 nor more than \$1000; in addition, they could be imprisoned for up to six months, and all of their equipment forfeited. The law also prohibited the killing of beaver until November 1915.

One of the first offenders to be cited under this law was King Thurman, an outlaw trapper whose checkered career has always intrigued me.

King Thurman had cabins and a trap line in the Chickaloon River region. During the winter of 1913 he was suspected of shooting a moose and poisoning the carcass to use as bait to kill fur-bearing animals. In March, Game Warden John C. Tolman along with Deputy Marshal Isaac Evans rushed into the Chickaloon area in an attempt to locate Thurman and place him under arrest.

They soon found a cabin being used by Thurman and, knowing his suspicious nature, Tolman stayed in the cabin and Evans departed.

Tolman waited in the cabin for two hours. When finally he heard a dog sled pulling up in front, Tolman opened the door and stepped out, only to find the dogs and an unoccupied sled.

Tolman then spotted Thurman about 40 yards away watching the cabin. As soon as Thurman saw the game warden, he turned and fled on foot into the forest.

Tolman was unable to catch him, and so he confiscated the dog team and Thurman's gear. The following July, Thurman turned himself in and pleaded guilty, arguing all the while that he was innocent. He was sentenced to 50 days in jail.

Nowadays, trappers running trap lines on the Kenai Refuge must have a trapping permit, and must attend a trapper orientation class in order to receive this permit. Each year they must register with the Refuge. In my opinion, most of our trappers hold themselves to a high standard of ethics and safety, and we would ask that visitors respect trap lines in their wintertime travels across the refuge.

Gary Titus is the Wilderness Ranger and Historian at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Refuge Ecologist Ed Berg and Gary Titus will be speaking about tree-ring dating of old log cabins and climate change on the Kenai next Nov. 8 at the Kasilof Historical Society meeting scheduled for 7 p.m. at the McLane Center in Kasilof. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.