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Timber Wol in winter.

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## Wolf culls ensnared in ethical debate

A groundswell of critics believe the century-old method of trapping animals should be done away with, writes **Mark Hume**

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The Globe and Mail

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or more than two decades, Gilbert Proulx has spent countless hours in an enclosed wooded

**F** compound, monitoring foxes as they hunted rabbits and squirrels, then setting what he thought were the perfect killing snares on the foxes' favoured pathways.

But the wildlife researcher, who has been looking for more humane ways for trappers to capture animals, said that when his perfectly set snares were sprung, they rarely caught the foxes in a way that would quickly bring death.

“If you want to have a perfect kill, you have about a one-centimetre target zone right behind the animal’s jaw,” said the science director for Alpha Wildlife Research & Management, a consulting firm based in Sherwood Park, Alta. “But hitting that is like waiting to win Lotto 6/49 – we found it was impossible,” said Mr. Proulx, whose studies have proved that snares rarely work the way they are supposed to.

His first study on snaring foxes was done in 1990, but in a paper published last year, he says little has changed and he is now calling for snares to be phased out.

“A killing neck snare is more cruel than a leg-hold trap,” he said in an interview. “I find this is really, really wrong and inhumane [technology].”

The snare is a primitive but lethal device that has been used by trappers for more than a century in Canada. But because of research by people such as Mr. Proulx, whose studies show snared animals face slow, painful deaths, snaring is coming under intense scrutiny in B.C. and Alberta, where controversial, government-sponsored wolf culls are under way. The provinces aim to reduce predator populations (annually by about 80 in B.C. and about 300 in Alberta) to address the impact of wolves and coyotes on ranchers' livestock, on declining woodland caribou herds and on big-game species valued by the guide-outfitting industry. And trappers argue that snares have become more humane over the years, and are more economical to use.

Critics, however, say snares not only are inhumane, but wildly indiscriminate, often killing non-target species, such as cougars, deer, bears and moose. As if to underscore the random nature of snares, in late February two golden eagles were brought in to the Medicine River Wildlife Centre near Raven, 60 kilometres southwest of Red Deer, after being caught in wolf snares. One bird died a few days later.



Dr. Gilbert Proulx, Director of Science, Alpha Wildlife Research Management and wolf researcher, holds a snare for catching wild animals, in Sherwood Park, Alta.

JASON FRANSON/FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dwight Rodtka, a retired predator-control expert who worked for the Alberta government for nearly 40 years, said wildlife officials in Sundre, about 90 kilometres northwest of Calgary, recently disposed of 15 cougars killed in wolf snares.

Mr. Rodtka, who snared about 1,000 coyotes and dozens of wolves during his career, says many animals caught in snares take hours or even days to die, and he is joining Mr. Proulx in calling for the devices to be phased out.

“There are two basic problems with them,” Mr. Rodtka said of snares, which played a key role in founding Canada’s first industry – the fur trade. “The first one is they are really inhumane. This has been something governments and trappers have ignored over the years. The second thing is they are almost completely non-selective. Any animal that comes along, or even birds as these eagles illustrate, get caught in them as well.”

Mr. Rodtka said modern snares are designed with special locking devices that are supposed to make them kill faster, but also with breakaway systems that are meant to enable non-target

animals (such as moose and deer) to escape.

But he says even the best-designed snares can easily misfire, catching an animal by its leg, its nose or even around its waist, instead of around its neck where it is meant to kill quickly by compressing the carotid arteries, cutting off blood flow to the brain.

There is just a multitude of things that interfere with getting the perfect catch. The result, then, is that the animal can live for days.

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Dwight Rodtka, retired predator-control expert

“If everything works properly, under lab conditions it could possibly kill an animal in about 10 minutes,” he said.

But lab tests can’t often be replicated in the bush, he said, because snares can be set wrong, the locking mechanism can freeze, and animals can bite through the anchor cable or chew off a leg to escape.

“There is just a multitude of things that interfere with getting the perfect catch. The result, then, is that the animal can live for days,” Mr. Rodtka said.

He remembers one cougar he was called out to track down after it was seen near a community skating rink. He treed the animal with dogs and shot it, only to find it had a snare around its waist, cutting so deeply that it exposed the animal’s intestines.

He estimated the cougar had been dragging the snare for two weeks. That was 20 years ago, but the memory of that animal still haunts him. “I was sickened.”

Mr. Rodtka, who lives in Rocky Mountain House, said he recently talked to a trapper who told

him five of 14 wolves he snared this winter had chewed through the anchor cables, escaping with the snares still around them.

“So there’s five wolves that suffered a really, extremely inhumane death,” he said. “You know they weren’t even allowed to strangle to death.”

Mr. Rodtka said that, even when animals get caught around the neck, as intended, they often suffer.

“When the animal doesn’t die in the first few hours ... the head and neck swell to the size of its shoulders, and sometimes the eyes swell shut,” he said. “The muzzle and everything swells up. Circulation is cut off. The animal’s head can partially freeze while it is still alive.”



Dr. Gilbert Proulx.

JASON FRANSON/FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sadie Parr, executive director of Wolf Awareness Inc. in Golden, B.C., is also calling for an end to snares. She complains the devices “are not subject to trap performance criteria set out in the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards.”

The AIHTS sets standards for most traps, but not for snares because they are considered to be homemade devices. Snares are subject to provincial regulations that stipulate design standards. In some provinces, trappers also have to take a mandatory course, which includes instruction on the proper use of snares.

But Ms. Parr said the standards are doing little for animals. She said trappers in B.C. have told her about the same kind of problems encountered in Alberta. “Snares not only capture the intended species, but endangered species too ... We should be beyond that. It’s like [setting] land mines,” she said.

In a recent letter, Ms. Parr urged the Alberta government to “ban neck-killing snares for their inhumaneness and non-discrimination as killing devices.”

Dave Kay, head of commercial wildlife and priority species for the Alberta Ministry of Environment and Parks, said a snare, properly set by a trained trapper, will kill an animal quickly. But he said there is little scientific data proving the devices are effective and humane.

Mr. Kay said the government is planning a study that will answer some of the questions raised about snares.

“We have a fur-bearer management strategy here, and two of the objectives are ... to minimize incidental take of non-targets and also to up the bar on humaneness in some of these non-manufactured devices like snares,” he said, adding: “So this year we are instigating a study right now with the trap research centre in Vegreville to look at this very thing.”

The study is a collaborative effort between provincial governments across Canada, the federal government and the Fur Institute of Canada.

Mr. Kay said snares do catch non-target animals, and cougars are highly susceptible. But he was surprised to hear 15 had been killed near Sundre.

“That would be high – I would definitely want to verify that,” he said, adding that, annually, the ministry estimates that about 30 to 40 cougars are killed province-wide in snares set for wolves and coyotes.

Brendan Cox, a Fish and Wildlife branch spokesman, later said in an e-mail that Sundre officers

“have confirmed that there have been over a dozen cougars caught in wolf snares this year.”

Snares are used mostly to target canids – wolves, coyotes and foxes. While foxes are sought for valuable furs, coyotes and wolves are mainly targeted as predators that kill livestock and valuable game species such as deer, elk, moose, caribou and mountain sheep. Trappers are encouraged to go after wolves by bounties of up to \$500 that are offered by some municipalities and by the Alberta chapter of the U.S.-based Wild Sheep Foundation.

In a conference call, Kevin Klein, a director of the Alberta Trappers’ Association, and A.J. Callbeck, the ATA’s trapper education co-ordinator, defended the use of snares.

“As far as the kill-time of snares, the snare technology has advanced immensely in the last couple of years. We have killer spring devices on these snares, so typically in a properly set snare, an animal should be unconscious in about 90 seconds,” Mr. Klein said. “As far as non-target catches, we have breakaway devices we have put on snares so ungulates [deer, moose, caribou etc.] and stuff like that, once they are caught, the breakaway device releases those animals.”



A Bald Eagle on Harrison River near Harrison Mills, B.C.

And Mr. Callbeck said a properly trained trapper will set the device so that it won't catch non-target species. "We teach people how to do it properly," he said, noting that in Alberta all licensed trappers have to complete a comprehensive training course.

Mr. Klein said trappers have also worked to improve the design of snares over the years because they too want quick kills, and don't want any animal to suffer.

"If snaring wasn't working properly, we'd be the first ones to change it. We feel really confident that snares offer a good solution and really are a humane way of trapping animals."

Mr. Klein was asked why trappers would use snares (they sell for as little as \$2 apiece online) when reusable and more efficient traps that meet international standards for humane treatment of animals (\$60 to \$100 each, depending on manufacturer) are available.

"It's quite a bit more economical," he said of the use of snares.

"One point you should note is no one cares more about these animals than the trappers. The trappers are the ones who were at the forefront of developing this technology, because we want to see the animals respected."