

AMERICAN BEAVER

Castor canadensis

On more than one occasion I have received a call from a landowner who believes vandals have gained access to the area around his or her lake or pond and maliciously cut down the small trees and shrubbery surrounding the water body. Upon close examination, however, it easily can be determined the culprits are nothing more than one or several beavers that have decided to take residence in the vicinity and proceeded to do what beavers do best – gnawing or cutting down trees and shrubbery!

The American beaver is the largest rodent native to North America and its distinctive broad flat tail and webbed hind feet are among several features that make them well suited for an aquatic environment. Beavers' eyes possess a thin nictitating membrane, capable of extending across the eyeball while under water, along with valvular ears and nostrils.

After a gestation period of approximately 128 days, a female beaver gives birth to three or four young,



Beaver cuttings on a young pine sapling

known as kittens, between March and June. Sexual maturity is reached at 1½ years of age, and adults have an average life span of approximately 10 years. Beavers are territorial, with colonies consisting of four to eight related individuals who resist additions or outsiders to the colony or pond. For this reason, young beavers often move great distances from their place of birth to inhabit new water bodies.

From an historical standpoint, beavers served as the driving force in spurring the westward expansion into areas that eventually would become part of the United States. Their popularity in the early 1800s was for pelts that brought great wealth to fur buyers in the eastern United States. Demand for beaver pelts led to extirpation or greatly reduced numbers of beavers in many parts of their former range.

Beaver distribution in Louisiana by the late 1930s was limited to small areas of the Amite and Comite river basins in East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, St. Helena, Ascension and Livingston parishes. From these areas, transplanting of animals began in 1938, and by the late 1950s, that had led to the establishment of 75 colonies in 21 parishes west of the Mississippi River.

Popularity turned to problems when prices for beaver pelts began to fall and populations quickly expanded in the absence of trapping control mea-

tures. Prices in recent years have averaged slightly over \$3 per pelt, leading to a loss of economic incentive for pursuing these animals. Timber interests lose millions of dollars each year from beavers flooding timber stands, and local, state and federal government agencies spend additional millions to control beaver damage near roads, bridges and other transportation facilities. During recent years, there also has been a much greater volume of nuisance beaver complaints from homeowners living in subdivisions near lakes and ponds. Beavers in these situations have a strong tendency to use baldcypress, willow, crapemyrtle and many other woody ornamentals as a food and dam construction material.

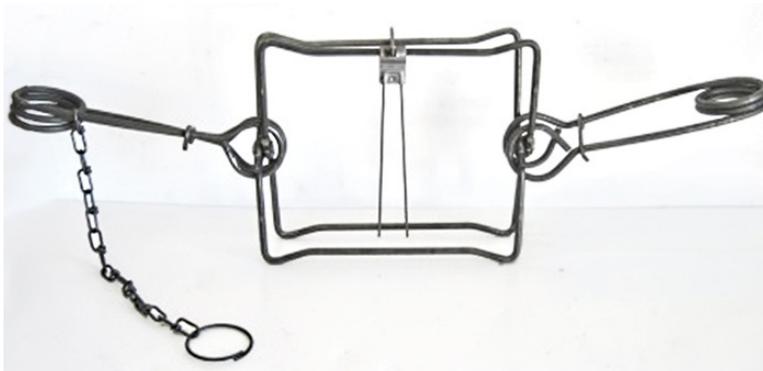
Control measures

Beavers are classified as outlaw quadrupeds in Louisiana, allowing for year-round legal take during daylight hours.

There currently are no toxicants labeled for use by private landowners to control beavers, making trapping and shooting the best available options. The strength and size of beavers makes trapping with either Conibear No. 330 kill traps or large No. 3 double-spring leg-hold traps the best options. Leg-hold traps usually are used in drowning sets as the most humane method of use.

Although seldom used, live capture and removal also is legal, and there are basket- or suitcase-type traps available for this purpose. Shooting, where local laws permit, is legal, although most beaver activity occurs during the evening, after legal shooting hours. For this reason, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries allows the nighttime take of beavers from the last day of February to the last day of August each year. Artificial lights, infrared or laser sighting devices or any other types of night-vision devices are legal.

Beavers are a tremendous economic liability in our state, and several parishes have dedicated funding for beaver control activities. Government agencies such as Wildlife Services employ trappers for this purpose, and much of their work protects not only landscaping and timber stands but also road and rail infrastructure from the damage standing water can create in such areas.



Conibear© 330 beaver kill trap.



Suitcase-type trap used in the live capture of beavers.

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