

BURROW TRAPPING

John Bryan revisits an old keeper favourite – the FENN trap – and explains how to get the best out of them in burrows



The name of A.A. Fenn & Co was established during the 1950s and it has been a familiar brand ever since. The company's later vermin traps became firm favourites with keepers everywhere and have remained trusted and reliable. The most popular and enduring of the FENN products are the Mark 4 and Mark 6 spring traps, and in the plate and dog of the trigger mechanism on these, as well as in earlier FENN traps, you can see the influence of the old gin trap design, which these new models replaced.

The Mark 4 is approved for use on grey squirrels, stoats, weasels, rats, and mice, while the slightly



larger and more powerful Mark 6 is also approved for use on mink and rabbit. There are now three manufacturers of this style of trap who are named on the Spring Traps Approval Order; FENN, Springer and Solway. Beware of cheap imitations – usually that is exactly what they are and you'll be both disappointed and breaking the law if you use any of them.

These days FENN traps seem to be mostly used in purpose-built tunnels, and I wonder how often people remember that the Mark 6 in particular was designed to work as a burrow trap, just like the Imbra and Jubby traps, which were invented in the 1950s. I was recently reminded that FENN traps still take some beating in burrows when a customer of mine conducted an interesting experiment. Nick Merritt, of Poison Free Pest Control in West Sussex, trapped a large rabbit burrow over a period of four nights and five days, using an equal mix of FENN Mark 6s and the excellent BMI Bodygrip 116 traps. His total catch was an impressive haul of 47 rabbits, of which 32 were caught in the FENN trap against 15 rabbits in the 116.

Although very similar to any tunnel trapping, there are a few tricks to getting the most from trapping burrows.

PREPARATION: If at all possible, a preparatory visit to the site, a week or so before you plan to trap, can make a huge difference to your success rate, particularly if the area is overgrown or there are many holes. It's not essential, but it will give the rabbits a chance to regain confidence and be less suspicious of any disturbance that you cause.

The first step, before you touch anything, is to take a good look round at how the burrow is being used. Look for the well-used, well-worn holes and mark them either with pegs above the entrance, on a sketch, or just in your mind if your memory is better than mine. Once you've done that you can choose your target holes to trap and if necessary

clear some of the plants and debris from around them. You can also focus traffic through target holes by blocking some of the other ones.

Even on a preparation visit take a trap with you, and a trapping hammer or other tool so that you can test fit a trap in the tunnels. Check the trap for size in both the set and fired positions (width and height); widen or deepen the tunnel as necessary and create a 'bedding in' space in the tunnel floor. The jaws of the trap should almost touch the top of the tunnel when sprung so that the rabbit is caught firmly within them. Setting a trap with too much clearance above it is one of the two most common reasons for missed catches with FENN style traps. If you have ever caught foul by the leg, or find traps sprung but with just a little fur between the jaws, then this will have been the cause. Most tunnels get narrower as they go underground so you should be able to find a suitable spot for the trap, but in any event make sure that your traps are fully within the tunnel. Once you have your trap sites identified and prepared, leave the burrow alone for a few days and allow the rabbits to become familiar with any changes that you've made.

SETTING: If you have left a break between visits, gently check and, if necessary, re-clear the trap bed, ensuring that the height is still correct by removing or adding soil as you need to. Make sure that there is no loose debris or stones which might prevent the plate from pushing down. Set the trap, with the safety catch on, and place the trap into position in the tunnel. Use a setting stick under the plate to hold it up and to prevent the trap being fired accidentally.

To disguise it further, cover the plate and whole trap with fine sieved soil taken from the spoil heap or from some mole workings. Be sure to remove any stones, and if you're bringing pre-prepared soil with you, it must not have been stored anywhere likely to give it a chemical or animal smell. Many modern trappers recommend moss peat as the best and easiest covering to use. Some also place a square of paper over the plate and out to the sides of the trap which will prevent the soil covering from falling through and going under the plate. Flexible materials such as baking parchment or latex are less affected by damp conditions.

BURROW TRAPPING TOOLS

The trapping hammer was a traditional tool in the early 1900s, and is still an indispensable tool for knocking in and removing the trap securing pegs, clearing the site and raking a space to bed the trap using the large flat side on the rear blade.

A setting stick is an essential tool for burrow sets. It should be about 20 to 25cm long, about 10mm thick and shaped to a wide, shallow point at one end. When positioning and covering a FENN trap, the shaped end of the stick is pushed under the plate to prevent the trap being accidentally

pushed down and the trap triggered. At the final stage the stick is used to move the safety catch aside.

This simple trapping sieve can be made from four pieces of roofing lath or thin timber and a rectangle of 5mm square mesh. It should be small enough to be held over a trap in a rabbit burrow and jiggled from side to side to sift fine soil over the trap. Sieves can be made with higher sides to hold more soil, slightly tapered so that they fit more easily into the entrance of a burrow, or even with a handle.



The trap must always be pegged down, using the chain provided and a wooden or metal peg. This will prevent any catches being carried off by larger predators, and will ensure that any mis-caught or injured animal cannot carry the trap away. With the trap and the animal still at the trap site you'll be able to manage the situation and the welfare of the animal, be it a non-target species or a foul caught target.

Once the trap is all ready to go, use the setting stick to gently flick off the safety catch. Use a thin twig to 'swish' the soil flat where you've been working, like a golfer in a sand bunker. This helps to remove the traces of your activity and also makes it easier to see if the entrance has been used by any critters when you return to check the traps. Return to check your traps at least daily, but ideally give them a check both in the morning and the evening.

Oh, before I forget, there's one more thing – what is the second most common reasons for missed catches? If you can see that rabbits have been using a trapped entrance but the trap has not fired, the most likely cause is either debris beneath the plate or that you left the safety on.

Just as a footnote, I have another friend who next season plans to run a rabbit trapping programme using only Imbra traps. It will be interesting to see how well they perform and that might be the subject of a future article, if we can get enough traps together to make it viable. ■

TRAPS AND MORE TRAP MAKING

John's latest book, 'Traps and More Trap Making', is full of how-to guides and tips for anyone interested in learning more about making their own traps, or about using spring traps effectively. Based on traditional designs, each chapter includes photographs, detailed diagrams, plus a range of variations to alter the designs to incorporate updates or new ideas.

Modern Gamekeeping price: £17.00 direct from www.fourteenacre.co.uk



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