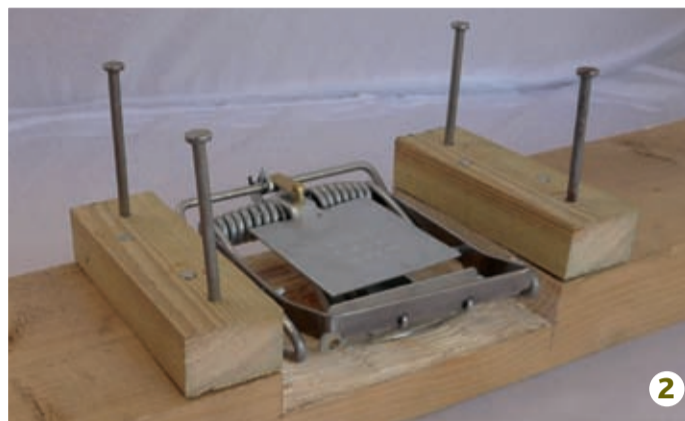


# BY BRIDGE AND RAIL

John Bryan explains the ins and outs of making effective use of bridge traps set on rails, and how you can get started now to maximise your chances in the spring



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Rail trapping is the term given to one highly effective and well-proven technique for funnelling vermin traffic through your trap sets. It exploits an animal's natural instinct to avoid obstacles and use the easiest, most direct route even when travelling through familiar territory.

The most common location for a rail trap is on a natural or artificial 'bridge' across a stream or ditch. Rats, stoats and weasels might all explore ditches when hunting or foraging, but when moving around they will regularly cross at the easiest points. After all the recent heavy rain and flooding, many of the established crossing points on small streams and ditches will have been washed away. This is the ideal time to get some new bridges in place, so you can start to get them used and get the routes established. Even if you are not yet actively trapping, this preparation will pay dividends in the spring.

Anywhere that squirrels, or even rats, are regularly running along the top rail of a fence is another great location for a rail trap. A pole running between two trees works just as well and can be placed anywhere that squirrels are a problem or congregate in numbers – for instance at the edge of a clearing or at a feeder site.

Whatever you use as the platform for your rail trap, the mechanics of the set are the same. The trap must still be used within the rules of the Spring Traps Approval Order; that is, a tunnel and suitable fencing must be used to restrict access and guide the target animal into the trap. Just as when the traps are used on the ground, both of these legal requirements also improve the effectiveness of your set. Always remember to secure the trap using the chain and a screw eye, wire staple or other fixture.

The first step in preparing your rail is to think about mounting and fixing your trap, as even a flat plank or rail will benefit from a little modification. A fenn trap or equivalent will

rest quite happily on a flat board but just as in a ground set, it works best if it is 'bedded in' a little below the surface. Even when set, the fenn trap has quite a high profile if viewed from the approaching animal's perspective. Ideally you want the target animal to bound onto the trap without hesitation to receive a firm and humane strike, so the less obvious the trap is the better.

If the rail is thick enough, one option is to cut a shallow recess into the surface which the trap can drop into. This has the added benefit of holding the trap in place should the rail get knocked. On a rail with a curved surface this technique is even more useful as it creates a flat and level bed for the trap. An alternative or complementary idea is to use jump rails. By firmly fixing strips of wood or small branches either side of the trap you create a platform level with the plate of the trap. In some cases the animal will simply jump up over and land squarely on the trap plate. More cautious ones may investigate a little first, but will still be positioned correctly even if they climb up slowly.

Bodygrip-style traps are not able to stand up by themselves – a set trap must be supported either by the tunnel or by a separate stand or mount. This makes them very suitable for rail traps as a mount can be fixed directly to the rail. Many commercial mounts are available and homemade alternatives are easy to construct. An added benefit is that once attached to the mount, the bodygrip trap works just as well at an angle. A rail can be positioned on the ground, leaning against a tree, making a very attractive shortcut for squirrels.

The other key part of your rail trap is the tunnel, which can be made from mesh or wood. For a mesh tunnel I prefer to use strong mesh, ideally of 14 gauge (16 gauge at a push), as this will keep its shape if knocked or if larger animals walk over it. It's also strong enough to provide the firm tunnel roof which fenn traps require in

order to be properly effective. A mesh tunnel can be fixed on one side of the rail using screw eyes or wire staples – but not too tight as this side will need to act as the hinge. On the opposite side of the rail partially knock in a few large headed nails and hook the edge of the tunnel on to those. The mesh can be left just as it is, but I prefer to fix a light covering of vegetation or even dark coloured plastic to the outside. The tunnel ends can be fenced by shaping the mesh or by knocking some large nails into the rail.

If using a wooden tunnel it can be hinged directly to the rail, or alternatively, a complete rail trap unit can be built with the tunnel attached to a baseboard. This baseboard should be slightly longer than the tunnel to make it easier to fix to any suitable rail. This approach works well for both trap types and can be moved about easily from location to location with minimal work required to prepare the rail each time.

Once your rail and tunnel have been made, get them in place and blended in as soon as possible. However there's no need to bother with a trap straight away if you're not yet ready to run your trap line. A little time allowing these new features to settle into the environment, to be discovered and to become part of regular routes, will improve the catch rate when trapping begins.

With a little thought you can apply this principle to any barrier by creating a similar controlled route from one side to the other. A path though the base of a wall, a thick hedge or even a wire fence can all be exploited in the same way as the rail trap. Create and install permanent tunnels of a consistent size and shape, preferably when the boundary is being built or repaired. Keep a 'master' copy of your tunnel in the workshop so that you can mount a trap and fencing onto a baseboard and check that it fits the tunnel correctly. Once there is any sign of activity through your tunnels, it's just a quick task to deploy a trap. ■

## 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 lots of photographs, and 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](http://www.fourteenacre.co.uk)



● £17.00

**1:** Cutting a shallow recess into the rail will help to reduce the profile of the trap

**2:** Adding jump rails as well as or instead of a recess will hide it completely. Adding a pair of large nails on each side of the trap will guide the target animal onto the middle of the trigger plate, improving the effectiveness of the strike

**3:** Ensure that the tunnel allows enough room for the trap to close, but is not too tall. Secure the trap to the tunnel or directly to the rail

**4:** A BMI Bodygrip 116 trap as it might be typically used on a rail trap. Note the mount holding the trap at the base and the use of nails inside the jaws of the trap acting as guides towards the trigger

**5:** A rail trap in place across a deep ditch. Taking a little time to cover and naturalise the tunnel is always worthwhile



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