

Trapping stoats & other mustelids

December 2020

Predator Free 2050 is an ambitious goal to rid New Zealand of the introduced predators that most threaten our natural taonga, economy and primary sector. Neighbourhoods around New Zealand are joining the predator-free movement. Pest-Free Upper Hutt is a community-led programme started by Forest & Bird and with financial and practical support from Upper Hutt City Council, Greater Wellington Regional Council and the Department of Conservation.

Why target mustelids?

Mustelids (stoats, weasels and ferrets) were introduced to NZ to control rabbits. Their main food sources are rodents (mainly rats and rabbits in the case of stoats, rabbits in the case of ferrets, and mice in the case of weasels). The trouble is, mustelids are excellent hunters and don't discriminate: if they can catch a bird, they'll kill that too. Stoats are generally regarded as the worst of the three for our native wildlife. They are known to kill for fun, killing poultry without eating them, for example.



Both rodents and mustelids can breed very quickly when conditions permit. When food supplies increase in summer, rat, mouse and rabbit numbers rise, and mustelid numbers also rise in response. As winter approaches, the rodents' food runs out and their numbers drop, which leaves a lot of hungry mustelids that will kill anything they can get their teeth into. This pattern is especially bad in "mast" years, when a super-abundance of fruit and seeds leads to a boom and bust in rat and mouse numbers.

What sort of trap?

The standard trap for killing stoats and weasels (which also does a fine job on rats and hedgehogs) is the DOC200. These are very effective kill traps and easy to use. They are not rated for use on ferrets (although many ferrets are successfully caught in them). For ferrets we recommend the DOC250 which is bigger and more powerful. DOC200s can be set by hand if you are reasonably strong. DOC250s need a setting tool. This also works for the DOC200 if you are not confident to set it by hand. Pest Free Upper Hutt can supply DOC200 style traps at a good price, installed in locally made boxes, delivered to your door ready for use.

Getting the trap ready for use

A DOC trap is fixed inside a wooden box with three sets of wire mesh: one at each end (with a hole cut in one to let the animal into the trap box) and a baffle in the middle with a hole to guide the animal onto the treadle plate, which sets off the trap. The holes cut in the wire meshes often have big sharp cut-off wire ends around them. It is a good idea to file or crimp down these spikes. An animal that gets a jab from a sharp wire may back out of the trap and not return.

Where to put the trap

Mustelids have huge home ranges for such small animals – up to 200ha in the case of a stoat – and they travel a lot. They like to follow lines: stream banks, tracks, fences, etc. The best places to put traps are where different lines intersect, e.g. where a well-used track (animal track, walking path or vehicle track) meets a stream. Make sure the trap can't be washed away in a flood though.

Put the trap on clear ground so that it is visible from all around. Make sure that any visual lure (see below) can be seen from the stream bank or track you are targeting. If your site has long grass, clear it away from around the trap. A good option is to put the trap on a square of old carpet to keep down the grass and weeds. Make sure the trap is stable and doesn't wobble. A wobbly trap will scare away some animals when they try to go inside.

Bait

The best bait of all is fresh meat, especially rabbit, hare or possum, but any fresh meat is worth a try. Eggs also work, though not as well as meat. In my view, you can't beat the combination of fresh meat plus an egg. The egg is visually attractive and if your trap can be seen from further than a few metres away it will bring animals closer to investigate. When they get close to the trap the smell of the meat takes over and lures them into the trap. You'll need to change fresh meat baits every few days. Eggs need replacing before they start to smell bad, but they often last for up to a month.

Erayz bait from Connovation (www.connovation.co.nz) is an excellent commercially-produced bait. It is made from dehydrated rabbit meat. It has a strong smell and attracts mustelids, hedgehogs and rats. The big advantage of Erayz is that it lasts for at least a month, even up to two months in cool, dry weather. If you don't have a steady supply of fresh meat chunks, I'd suggest using Erayz plus an egg.

In my mustelid traps in the bush, which get checked only about every month or so, I use Erayz plus golf balls, which look like eggs from a distance and never go rotten. Another trick I like is to hang a rabbit's tail on a piece of string from a nail inside the box, so that it moves around in the wind. The fluffy white flash of a rabbit's tail is really eye-catching and they smell right too. Some trappers also use feathers and feet from rabbits or birds and they tend to dry out so last for some time.

Baiting and setting the trap

Bait the trap before setting it. DON'T put your hand inside the trap box with the trap set. Besides the main bait that goes in the bait basket (off the floor so it stays dry), I like to put one other pea-sized bait on the treadle plate, in the position shown. This will help to encourage reluctant animals on to the plate. When using Erayz I pinch off the stickiest corner of the bait square, roll it into a ball and stick it to the plate. Most animals are killed with their nose on the treadle plate bait. If using fresh meat for bait it is also a good idea to put a little just inside the doorway to encourage animals into the box.



For instructions on setting and maintaining a DOC trap see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xwo-w0-MI>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kABskKb1NzE>

Clearing dead animals from the trap

To remove a dead animal, pull up the striker bar with one hand and pull out the baffle wire mesh with the other. This will lift out the dead animal with it (make sure you put the mesh back the right way round). If the animal has been dead a long time you should clean the trap and the box with a bunch of grass or leaves. If you check your trap weekly then you won't have to clean up any soggy mustelids.

How to contact us

We are on **Facebook: PestFreeUpperHutt**. If you are keen to help restore birdsong to Upper Hutt then contact us on pestFreeUpperHutt@gmail.com and tell us your address, or at least your street and suburb. Your email will be forwarded to your local Coordinator.

Forest & Bird: Chair: Graham Bellamy, Brown Owl; Pat van Berkel, Pinehaven; Chris Cosslett, Pinehaven.

There is plenty of advice on the Predator Free 2050 website – <https://predatorfreenz.org/>