

TURTLE TRAPPING for dummies

Some species of freshwater turtles can become problematic in natural ponds or lakes for various reasons, and there are instances where their safe and humane removal becomes desirable.

While there are many capturing and removal techniques purported to be effective...some of which are quite ingenious and novel...or even silly, there is one method preferred by professional trappers in North America which consistently yields spectacular results.

This method will work anywhere in the world with carnivorous and/or omnivorous freshwater turtles.

The trap:

The Turtle Net Trap sold by Memphis Net & Twine:

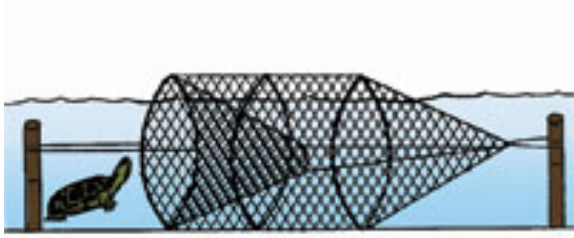
http://www.memphisnet.net/product/5091/traps_animal_turtle

How it works:

This trap is simply the ancient, tried and true hoop net design, configured to catch aquatic turtles instead of fish. Bait is placed in the rear of the trap, which turtles locate by scent. There is only one way into the trap...the inclined throat or funnel, which they quickly find and enter. Leaving the trap is highly unlikely due to the design of trap throat, or flattened funnel, which is the only entrance and *potential* exit. Turtles will usually try to swim out at the surface, or at the bottom, neither of which is a viable exit strategy. Trying to leave by swimming or crawling back through the narrow end the throat is a virtual impossibility, possibly excepting the smallest and perhaps luckiest of Chelonians. Escape is highly improbable, and statistically insignificant.

The relatively small appearance of the trap throat is misleading. It will stretch considerably, as a large turtle will easily push its way in as the throat expands commensurately in order to allow entry. I've caught up to 80 pound Alligator Snapping Turtles (*Macrolemys temmincki*) in these traps, although the traps will catch larger turtles as well.

Since the top of the trap is above the waterline, the turtles have easy access to air, so there's no need to check the trap too frequently, and regardless of how long they stay in, they cannot escape...as a general rule.



How to order:

This particular trap model is desirable because of the 1" mesh, which captures smaller turtles too. Small turtles are just like small weeds...they grow up to be much larger problems. The 1" mesh model is more expensive, but is also more effective. Order the optional "Black Netcoat" treatment too. Don't skimp on this! This is an asphalt-based net preservative which extends the usable life of the net to at least one lifetime, if not longer. It protects against abrasion, strengthens the webbing, makes the trap much easier to handle...especially when liberating the detainees, and it offers additional UV protection to the nylon netting, which is naturally UV resistant. The dull black color also makes the net much easier to camouflage. Properly cared for, this is a lifetime investment, even when left outside during the warm months, year after year.

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Rigging the trap:

The trap requires only a couple of simple modifications before use;

- 1) Stretch the trap out on land until fully extended, as shown in the illustration. Secure with stakes or tie-offs.
- 2) Disconnect or cut the throat lines **at the rear of the net**, which secures the throat to the rear of the net. See illustration.
- 3) Get two small stainless steel or brass dog leash clips which are sufficiently large to clip onto the metal hoop, Use the type of clip with a flat spring which snugs up against the inside of the hook.

- 4) The more expensive “button-type” clip will hang up on the netting during the liberation phase of turtle trapping. This flat-spring type of clip functions just like a weedless fishing hook, which is the point of using it here. A small karabiner may be used instead, but needs to be small enough to slip effortlessly through the 1” mesh, and fairly strong.
- 5) Attach the dog leash clips or karabiners to the most rearward (3rd) metal hoop, and tie the throat lines on them, using only enough tension so that the throat is fully extended with no sag or play. It should look just like the illustration, except that the lines are tied to the hoop now. The net should be positioned so that the flat axis of the throat is parallel to the ground, and the clips will be attached to the hoop at the 9 o’clock and 3 o’clock positions. **This trap orientation is maintained throughout because of the turtle’s cross-sectional shape, and the way it will enter the net.**
- 6) Snap a medium-size karabiner through all the netting at the outside of the rearward end of the net. This will function as the ring to anchor the rear stake. Think nipple ring... Using a karabiner protects the netting from abrasion, and makes it easier and quicker to set up and take down the trap.
- 7) **Bait Box:** Make a bait box from a 1 quart, round Tupperware container with a tight, snap-on, or screw-on lid. Attach a small eyebolt with a nut and washer in the center of the lid. Drill the sides and bottom of the container full of 1/4 holes so that it resembles a tea infuser. Attach a karabiner to the eyebolt, and another to the rear (3rd) hoop of the trap at the 12 o’clock position. Cut a 12” piece of medium-duty chain, and snap onto each karabiner. (*I just happen to love karabiners!*) What you should have at this point, is a bait box suspended from the rear (3rd) hoop at the back of the trap, about halfway down from the top of the trap. The chain acts as a weight, so that the bait box doesn’t move around too much. The purpose of the bait box is so that the first few turtles don’t eat all the bait and render the trap useless until it is re-baited.

baiting the trap:

Most freshwater turtles in the US are carnivorous or omnivorous, which greatly simplifies things as far as enticing them to enter a trap. Almost any meat bait can be used. Fish is best, especially oily fish such carp, buffalo, or drum. Fat carries the flavor for turtles too, and makes a better and longer-lasting scent trail than less oily species. Be sure to include the viscera. Chicken necks are a favorite, probably because they’re easily obtainable and not very messy, and will work adequately. Bait combinations are OK, and what freshwater turtle could possibly resist a ‘Surf-n-Turf’ meal of carp AND chicken necks?? If using fish, chop them in a few large pieces, in order to initially release a greater volume of scent. It is not necessary to use decomposing bait, as that will occur naturally, and in very short order. Place the bait in the bait box, attach to the rear hoop, and prepare to get all excited and dripping wet!

Setting the trap:

Since these turtles are most actively feeding between dusk & dawn, late afternoon is a good time to set the trap. At this point, you're ready to go except for two trap stakes. Half-inch rebar makes excellent anchor stakes, and bending one end into an elbow makes for easy insertion in all but the hardest mud pond bottom. In case of hard mud bottoms, leave the ends straight and use a hammer. A 4' length is usually sufficient, unless the mud is soft and deep, which may require a longer anchor stake.

Traps are set in the shallow end of the pond or lake. The water must be deep enough to completely submerge the throat, but shallow enough to allow a few inches of the trap to remain above the waters' surface so that the captured turtles can breathe. This requires an operational water depth of approximately 18" to 27".

Aim the open end of the trap toward the middle of the pond or lake. Push the rear stake in the mud at a slight angle, away from the trap. Clip to karabiner. Pull the trap until it becomes fully elongated and taut. Drive the front stake in also at an angle away from the trap, keeping the stake around three feet away from the trap's front. Pull the front ropes banjo-string tight and tie off to the stake.

The objective here is to have the trap stretched as tightly as possible, which gives it the necessary functional rigidity. After this step, try to push the hoops into the mud a bit by wiggling them while simultaneously pushing them down in the mud. This is done to keep the trap from "rolling" and getting off-axis when full of turtles. In extremely rare cases, a third stake may be needed, and can be utilized by driving it alongside the middle hoop, and clipping it with a karabiner, but in most normal situations, the mud bottom, coupled with a very tightly stretched trap, will prevent "rolling".

That's it! You're done. Go have a few self-congratulatory beers and check the trap around mid-morning the next day.

What the fuck do I do now??

It's 9:00 AM the next morning, you've walked down to the lake, and your trap seems alive! It's wiggling and shaking, and sending ripples everywhere. This is where the real fun begins...for so many reasons.

You probably thought you were going to get one or two turtles...right? Ha! In a mature pond of an acre or more with suitable habitat and a decent Chelonian population, you can easily catch several dozen or more turtles the first night...sometimes a whole lot more! A typical Southeastern US pond mix will be mostly Sliders, some Snappers, and the odd Mud & Musk...

In the 1980's, I used to run a daily trapline in South Georgia of around 30 traps, trapping both ponds & rivers, and there were many times I could hardly drag the trap out onto the bank, it was so full of turtles...Yellow-Bellied Sliders, mainly...

At any rate, you should have thought this out well before now, and figured out what to do with your catch. I'm going to leave you to grapple with that issue while I tell you how to remove the turtles safely...then you're on your own.

Unclip the rear anchor stake. Slip the front ropes over the front stake, and drag the trap well onto the bank, pulling it by the anchor lines.. Unclip the throat clips from the metal hoop. Being very mindful of your fingers, and toes---hopefully you're not barefoot? Grab the rear hoop, and lift it up quickly as high as you can.

This causes the unclipped funnel to suddenly reverse directions, (prolapses) and it now functions as a pouring spout with everything in the trap now dumped on the ground conveniently...right on your feet.

The turtles will scatter, with most of them headed back to the water at a surprisingly fast clip, with Softshells leading the pack, because they hold both the land and underwater speed records. This is why you need to address post-trap containment well beforehand. A pickup-truck bed is perfect for a dumping and sorting a medium to large single catch, and a large tub may suffice for smaller catches, but you really never know what's going to happen, which is part of the fun! Just be prepared, especially on 2 acre lakes and up.

Generally speaking, it's not a good idea to reach inside the trap and attempt to remove turtles individually, especially if you have Snapping Turtles & Softshells, or even large Sliders...all of whom will be extremely irritable and chock-full of attitude and defensive aggression.

It's also a good idea to refresh oneself on safe turtle-handling techniques, since Snapping Turtles, Softshells, and Sliders all require different handling methodologies. Or simply learn the hard way by a process of elimination??

What am I going to catch in my turtle trap?

Check your range map first to narrow down the choices, but here's a somewhat comprehensive listing of North American genera which can be successfully trapped by this method, and are likely to be found in ponds and non-riverine lakes. The following are either carnivorous or omnivorous.

Chelydra

Macrolemys (primarily river and stream habitat)

Apalone

Kinosternon

Sternotherous

Chrysemys

Trachemys

Deirochelys

While all members of the genus *Pseudemys* are herbivorous, and are at least potentially hazardous to aquatic plant operations, they're almost exclusively riverine dwellers. *Trachemys* (Sliders) are usually the most problematic species in this regard.

I've caught alligators over 6 feet in these traps while set for turtles, and they work great on Hellbenders (*Cryptobranchus*) as well. Frustrated Cottonmouths and Water Snakes will occasionally be found lurking around these traps in early morning, although they can usually get in and out with ease and are seldom found inside...but one never knows...

Trap security & Clandestine trapping:

In some cases, it may not be prudent to broadcast trapping activities. While nothing is theft-proof, these traps can be rendered fairly invisible to the casual passerby...especially if they've been factory-coated with the black "Netcoat" preservative. Under normal circumstances the anchor rods do not need to be below the waterline as depicted in the illustration, but should be if visibility is a problem. A leafy branch can be secured to the top of the trap with...you guessed it...karabiners...or some twine. Other than being spotted setting the trap, the trap is the most vulnerable the next day when it's doing the wiggling thing and sending out telltale ripples, so the answer to this is to remove the turtles as early in the morning as is possible.

Good luck!