

Beach Trapping at VieKoda

We landed the de Havilland Beaver and taxied up to the beach near a friend's cabin in VieKoda Bay on the northwest corner of Kodiak Island. I was scheduled to be there for three weeks to watch the cabin and look after their two German shepherds (Oskar and Yuri) while the owners took a trip 'Outside' to visit family. I was looking forward to some time away from town and was especially excited to be trapping in a new spot. The owner had mentioned that he had seen several otters and had lost a few chickens to foxes over the summer months. Otters had even gotten under their cabin on occasion.

bought the VieKoda property.

I unloaded my gear and traps and reloaded the plane with the departing owners' baggage. I was given a quick familiarization tour, waved goodbye and watched the plane taxi out and depart. Finally, I was on my own in VieKoda. I hauled my goods up to the cabin via the 4-wheeler and wagon and commenced to make myself comfortable. Once I had my gear stowed in the cabin and a cup of hot tea down, I was ready for some trap work. Caution was necessary because I had Yuri and Oskar to consider and I certainly didn't want to pinch any dog toes. I was told I could leave them tied up all



I was somewhat familiar with the area because I had visited the previous owner a few years earlier. He began trying to sell the place back in 2006 while I was working in Afghanistan. I saw an ad for a remote property in Alaska while surfing the internet from my hut at Camp Lagman. Stephen and I began an e-mail conversation that lasted until I left Afghanistan and moved the family from Missouri to our new home on Kodiak Island. As much as I would have liked to, I couldn't live in a remote spot because my wife needed to be near a hospital for employment and our son was still in high school. Alas, we ended up in town and I became friends with a local bush pilot who eventually

day if necessary, but they were such great dogs to have around I found this hard to do. I quickly discovered I could ruin my arm throwing the stick for these two. They would tear off in hot pursuit and fight over who would carry it back. Quite often, each dog would have one end of the stick and would run back with it in tandem. This was great fun for me and the dogs!

I had noticed quite a bit of otter activity on the way up from the beach and set out with a few #330s to have a closer look. There was one small problem. There seemed to be otter sign almost everywhere and I couldn't find any really ideal spots where I thought they would hit every time through. I settled on a spot

Bay and "Digger" by Steve Neff

where a trail through the grass led under a small spruce tree maybe four foot in height. Under the low-hanging tree limbs, the grass was all matted down and I could stake down a #330 right at the edge of the limbs and camouflage it quite well with the grass. I also set out a couple of Victor #3s in likely otter travel lanes.

I had along an old double long-spring of unknown manufacture that was lent to me by a policeman friend back in Kodiak. It had belonged to a relative of his who used to trap coyotes back in Nevada years ago. He wanted me to give it a try so I made a fox set in a likely spot, covered the trap and headed back to the cabin with the dogs.

Yuri, the older female was a very well-behaved dog and I could count on her to listen and stay clear of trap sets. Oskar on the other hand was a young male just brimming with uncontained enthusiasm and would tear off in every direction looking for anything he could chase. It seemed that deer were his favorite targets for a good run. I'm not a fan of dogs running deer, especially during the winter months when they are most vulnerable. I reluctantly decided I'd have to keep them tied up when I went out to check traps.

There was another "otter palace" maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile up the beach. There was an obvious haul-out spot on the cliffs where traveling otters would climb up out of the salt water. This was a tough spot to place a trap. Due to the cliff-like nature of the site, I could not climb down from above without risk of a bad fall and access from below would require a climb which would only be possible during low tide. I took the low tide approach. This spot had the additional benefit of being close to the cabin and I could simply exit the cabin, walk a short distance to the cliff face and check the trap with my binoculars. Anchoring a trap turned out to be a real issue here. This was solid rock covered with only small patches of the thinnest grass and topsoil. Beach otters can be difficult, but I devised an anchor with a 40 pound rock that I was able to tie up tight with #9 wire. I figured any otter that could make good his escape towing a 40 pound rock was probably not one I wanted to mess with in any case. I guarded one likely hole with a #330 and also managed to hide one leg-hold trap in a depression and cover it with grass.

Since I had tied up the dogs, I figured I'd put in a dirt hole set along the path to the cabin where I'd seen some fox sign. My plan was to have a stick throwing and fetching session each morning at the cabin before heading out to check traps. I'd simply trip the trap at the fox set every day if I didn't catch anything overnight, because it was too close to the cabin for comfort. This turned out to be an interesting affair. First morning out to check traps, I found the dirt hole trap already dug up and tripped. It appeared there was a trap-educated fox in the vicinity. I just left the trap as I found it and moved on.

It was a windy and noisy day with all the trees moving and waves crashing on the beach. I thought I might have heard a faint, odd noise (like a chain rattling) before reaching the next trap location. I dismissed it as just another strange sound due to the wind. Next up was the #330 under the spruce where I found a large male otter had charged into the trap from the trail side. I placed the otter in the basket, remade the set and carried on.

When I reached the double long-spring set, I made an alarming discovery. I could see that the trap had been sprung but it was also gone. It appeared that while



Big otter to start things off

making the set and keeping an eye on the dogs I had pounded in the trap anchor and neglected to attach the anchor to the trap. This was a rookie mistake to be sure, but a real cause for concern since it was not my trap. It was just then that I realized the possible significance

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of that faint rattling sound I'd heard earlier. With no snow on the ground to aid in tracking, I looked around for any obvious sign and then backtracked to where I thought I had heard the noise. Sure enough, there was a nice red male fox hiding under a large spruce tree with the missing trap. He knew I was there and had just hunkered down and let me walk past earlier. Now that I was backtracking and looking around very carefully, he lost his nerve and bolted from under the tree. Fortunately for me, there were a host of salmonberry bushes around to stymie his escape. The mystery was solved and I retrieved and reset the trap – this time making sure it was securely attached to the anchor.

Back at the cabin, I stashed the otter and fox in the shed and turned the dogs loose for another run about. I retrieved my binoculars and checked the otter traps at the “palace” but found no activity. I skinned out my morning catch and split a little firewood with intermittent breaks to throw the stick. I finished with the firewood and while putting the tools away, I noticed a chirping sound I hadn't heard before. It seemed to be coming from down on the beach somewhere. A quick check with the binoculars revealed an otter caught at the “palace”. This guy was securely fastened in the #330 (a classic “suitcase” catch), but he was quite alive and barking. Fortunately, it was still low tide so I made a hasty trip to the beach and added another otter to the day's catch.

I had a plan for the trap-wise fox I had fondly dubbed “Digger.” For each of three consecutive nights I'd reset

the same trap, cover it the same way and place some more bait in the dirt hole. Each morning, the trap was sprung and the bait gone. On the fourth night, I remade the same trap and covered it as before, but I also carefully bedded and covered a couple of clean #3 coil-spring traps on either side of the hole and again added fresh bait. The fifth morning, I found a beautiful cross fox waiting for me. “Digger” had been fooled!

I enjoyed many hikes and endless hours throwing the stick for Yuri and Oskar. Viokoda is a beautiful place when the weather is cooperative and a real challenge when the weather turns bad. It was great to have such a tight and cozy cabin to return to each day after checking



“Digger” is caught!

traps and exploring. My plans to trap Viokoda this year have been hampered by health issues, but I'm looking forward to returning there soon.

‘Til the next time – watch your topknot and good luck on the ‘line!

Calendar of Events

December:

- 1 - Interior ATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Mushers Hall
- 8 - SCCATA Christmas Potluck, 6pm @ Hillcrest
Church of Nazarene COMMUNITY ROOM - 2000
Muldoon St. (Parking & Entrance behind bldg.)

January:

- 5 - Interior ATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Mushers Hall
- 12 - SCCATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Musher Hall on Tudor

February:

- 2 - Interior ATA Meeting, 7 pm

Dog Mushers Hall

- 9 - SCCATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Musher Hall on Tudor
- 27 - SCCATA Fur Auction
- 28 - SCCATA ADF&G Hide and Horn Auction

March:

- 1 - Interior ATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Mushers Hall
- 5 - SCCATA Fur Auction
- 8 - SCCATA Meeting, 7 pm
Dog Musher Hall on Tudor
- 19 - Interior ATA Fling
- 19 - Interior ATA Fur Auction
- 20 - Interior ATA Fur Auction