

TEACHING TIP: THE BAITED TRACKING BOX.

by Dillon J. Finan

By utilizing the art of tracking a nature observer can witness the interrelationships between animals and their environment. The observer follows the steps of the animal witnessing the world through the animal's eyes, experiencing the life of the animal. A good tracker knows the animal's behavior, diet, and moods. To reach a thorough understanding of tracking the observer must first learn to see tracks and identify them. A baited tracking box is an invaluable tool for learning the basics of tracking. The baited tracking box is simply a eight foot by eight foot sand box with bait placed in the middle. The bait attracts a variety of animals whose tracks are preserved in the soft sand. The tracking box helps students appreciate the variety of animals in their area, allowing students to learn about animal tracking in a controlled environment.

Materials:

- Four eight foot 1<by>6 cedar boards.
- 1000 pounds of sand.
- One four foot 2<by>4.
- A three foot, one inch wooden dowel rod.
- Scraps of plywood & scraps of 2<by>4s.
- Ten 2 inch screws & ten 1.5 inch screws.
- Drill, One inch drill bit, saw, screwdriver, shovel, rake.

Building the Baited Tracking Box:

The Tracking Box: Dig a 8' x 8' square trench six inches deep. Set the cedar boards in the trench at ground level. Fill in around the boards with dirt, and pack tightly. You should now have a framed in section of ground. Dig out the inside of the frame about 1 to 1.5 inches deep. Fill in the box with one thousand pounds of sand. Make the sand box level with the ground around it. Use a rake to keep the sand smoothed out for track collecting.

The Bait Pole: Make a 2' x 1.5' table top, out of scrap plywood, and screw the small tabletop on top of the four foot 2<by>4, using the scrap 2<by>4s as braces. 1.5' down from the table top drill a one inch hole through the center of the 2<by>4. Put the one inch wooden dowel rod through the hole so half of it sticks out on one side of the 2<by>4 and the other half sticks out on the other side. This dowel is used for hang different types of bait above the ground. Set the pole eight inches in the ground in the center of the tracking box.

Types of bait: Choice of bait depends on the animals you wish to attract. Peanuts and suet attract a wide variety of herbivores and omnivores. I have heard deer cannot resist ginger root, but nothing has touched the ginger root hanging from my bait pole. Bird seed mixes will attract rodents of varying sizes. Fish and/or fresh road kill will attract scavengers and carnivores. Stay away from manufactured foods, with the exception of suet, to avoid

creating a drastic change in the animals' diet.

How to bait the box: I would suggest baiting for herbivores at first. Place peanuts and suet balls on the table top and scattered around on the ground around the pole. Hang some ginger root and a suet pole from the one inch dowel rod. Be patient with the box. At first only a few species of animals with a high tolerance for human contact will visit the box such as raccoons, opossums, squirrels, deer, and wild turkey. As the local animals gain familiarity with the tracking box a few rare surprise visitors will begin to appear.

Suet Recipes

1. 2.5 cups of peanut butter, 0.5 cups of honey, 1 cup of mixed bird seed, 0.5 cups of dried fruit. Place all the ingredients in a bowl and mix thoroughly.
2. Sausage and/or bacon grease mixed with sunflower seeds.

The suet can be rolled into balls or smeared on a pole with numerous one inch holes drilled into it.

After a couple months of baiting herbivores and omnivores, leave the box without bait for 3-4 weeks. Then place fresh road kill on the table top and hang whole fish from the one inch dowel rod. Place some fish on the ground around the pole as well. At first, the fish and roadkill will lure mostly scavengers like vultures, crows, and opossums. With patience, many other types of visitors will discover the box.

When should I bait? Baiting at any time of the year will be effective. I feel August through November are great months to bait. Many animals are foraging heavily during these months to prepare for winter, and the bait will be a welcome supplement to their diet. Especially if you bait with foods high in fat like peanuts and suet.

One word of caution: Pay close attention to the visitors of the tracking box, and if nocturnal animals visit the box during the day or animals display peculiar behavior, then stop baiting the box for a while. *The goal is to study tracks and observe wildlife by supplementing their diet, not creating animals dependent on your food source.* Read about identifying rabid animals before creating a tracking box. Rabies can affect all mammals including humans. Some signs of rabies include but are not limited to: nervousness, aggression, and abnormal behavior (nocturnal animals out in daylight, wild animals exhibiting no fear of humans etc...) If a rabid animal visits the tracking box call the local game warden, and stop baiting the tracking box. In the event of a bite by a rabid animal clean the wound thoroughly, get immediate medical attention, and report the incident to local authorities.

A baited tracking box can put you in contact with many local animals. The tracking box is intended for people interested in studying animal tracks and signs. Please remember to treat animal visitors with respect, and they will provide much knowledge and joy. Through tracking we can enter the lives of many animals. These lives tell stories of the cycle of nature allowing us to view the earth as the animals we are. Happy tracking!