

# A tale of a reluctant trapper

Jamie startled me awake in the middle of the night. She nonchalantly informed me, “You have something in your trap.” We peered shoulder-to-shoulder into the backyard. The moon illuminated a rectangular silhouette just off the back steps. Sure enough, the live trap I had set was tripped. The trap door was slammed shut, and the skunk we had been after for weeks was locked inside.

Great, now what?

Admittedly, I hadn't played the scenario completely through. When we decided the skunk had to go, neither one of us wanted it dead. We settled on live trapping the beast and transporting it elsewhere. The live trap we borrowed was pretty simple, essentially a big wire box with a place to set bait (we settled on cat food) and a tripping mechanism to trap the unsuspecting critter.

I figured my chances of getting sprayed would be reduced if I covered the trap. I designed a cardboard lining that would prevent the skunk from locking eyes with its reluctant trapper. I also planned to throw a blanket over the entire contraption to further calm the animal.

After we confirmed the trap was tripped, I tried to slip back to sleep. “You're not leaving that poor skunk in there all night?” Jamie asked.

This is one of those questions husbands will recognize as more of a statement of fact. I woke up my youngest son Joshua and we headed for the backyard.

Josh has a keen interest in all animals, and he loves to observe them. Just the evening before he was bellied up to the front windows watching a pair of fox kits working their way through the yard. He demanded I wake him up if the skunk



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was caught; he wanted to supervise the proper release of the animal.

We approached the trap slowly. The back porch light confirmed our observation. The trap was occupied. I nervously crept towards the box. I unfurled an old blanket over the trap, trying not to startle its tenant. I tucked the entire mass under my arm. The weight of the skunk startled me as he slid against the walls of the trap. We worked our way slowly to the bed of our truck and slid him inside. So far, so good. The skunk hadn't sprayed, hadn't snarled, hadn't hissed: all was going according to plan.

We decided that we would take him for a ride. No sense in releasing him a few blocks from home. We drove through Cloquet looking for a suitable place to set him free. We ended up at the Scanlon park-and-ride. It was almost 4 a.m. We parked and worked quickly to lower the skunk from the tailgate. We positioned the trap just a few feet from the edge of the tall grass. We hoped he would calmly waddle off in that direction. Josh backed away hoping to film the release.

My mind raced trying to recall how to open the trap. As with anything mechanical, I was clueless. I straddled the trap, trying to decipher the puzzle. Luckily the skunk was calm and hadn't released its stench. After taking inventory I reached a startling conclusion. With my right hand, I would have to reach down

and push the door inward. This would allow the skunk to make its escape, but it also meant it would brush against my hand in the process. I wasn't thrilled about this plan.

With trepidation, I bent forward over the front of the trap. My hand worked to release the aluminum door. I tried to commit. I failed. My heart pounded as I thought of the skunk latching onto my hand as a parting gift.

I gathered myself determined to free my captive. I pushed hard on the trap door, lifting it high atop the cage. The weight inside the trap shifted. Like a rocket, a blur shot from the trap. It was not a mopey skunk shuffling into the darkness — it was a cat shot from a cannon! The fastest, most wild-eyed feral cat I will ever encounter was halfway to Barnum by the time I exclaimed to Josh, “It was a cat!”

Josh laughed, wide-eyed. “What did you expect?” He quipped. “You put cat food in there.”

We still have a thriving skunk population in our neighborhood. Or maybe they just frequent our yard? I'm pretty sure they den up under our front porch. Each night our cats line up on one side of the living room window and the skunks on the other, and curiously they paw at each other. The skunks somehow know they're safe. The cats are more suspicious.

*Bret Baker is a lifetime resident of Cloquet. He is a proud husband, father, educator and outdoorsman. Bret began guiding fishing trips when he was 16 years old. Today, in his 40s, his passion is to introduce people to the tremendous outdoor adventures available in our region.*

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## Controlling runoff at home can be easy

Last week, I was able to attend a two-day workshop on stormwater practices geared towards teaching the best ways to inspect and maintain green stormwater infrastructure.

No doubt, the workshop is tailored to a niche community which I happily take interest in but understand that many others do not. This meant getting deep into the weeds about various runoff management devices and techniques that help us alleviate the problems with uncontrolled runoff while also examining the nuances between different installations. Throughout this workshop, three simple points were reiterated as the foundational consideration whenever we implement a practice: rate, quantity and quality.

Storm runoff has three influencing factors: the rate at which it flows, the quantity of water and water quality. If you're hung up on the difference between rate and quantity, imagine the difference in trying to empty a bathtub of water through a straw and fire hose. You'll move the same amount of water far slower through the straw than the fire hose. We want that. In fact, our goal in



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tackling rate, quantity, and quality is to create spaces that collect, reduce, and improve the incoming water.

Following this sequence, collection is the first stage in the process. We collect it so we can do something else with it and ultimately keep it from going down the storm drain.

Next is reduction, which is achieved by providing time for infiltration, evaporation or uptake by vegetation. Simultaneously, we have improvement as pollutants are reduced by filtering, settling, plant uptake and chemical breakdown when stored in the structure.

We can see all this in action by observing a structure like a rain garden during a rain event. Water will be directed into the depressed area and hopefully collect a one-inch rain event from whatever source its meant to handle (maybe a roof or driveway). When stored, it will start infiltrating into the soil and

being wicked up by plants or porous debris like mulch. Cleaning is had by filtering from the soil, settling of debris suspended in the water, and uptake of otherwise polluting nutrients by vegetation. When all is said and done, entering runoff may never leave the garden or it may spill over the edge but at a slowed rate and cleaner than it would have been otherwise.

All this is achieved by simply creating a properly sized depression in the ground with some functional and pretty plants. Similar effects can be seen if you reroute a drain spout into your grass or if you install a rain barrel. Planting a tree in your yard also dramatically reduces runoff and greatly improves infiltration rates.

Managing stormwater on your property doesn't have to be complex and might be achieved from some simple renovations. Feel free to reach out to our office or me to learn more.

*Chris Gass is a Minnesota Green-Corps member with the Carlton Soil and Water Conservation District whose columns will focus on environmental topics and stewardship, particularly in cities and towns.*



Funding for water restorations in the St. Louis River comes from the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Fund, the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative with oversight by the U.S. Environmental Protection, and the St. Louis River/Interlake/Duluth Tar Superfund Site settlement. *Minnesota DNR photo*

## Plenty of work left on St. Louis River

Minnesota Department  
of Natural Resources

Work on an extensive habitat restoration project will take place this summer in the St. Louis River estuary, where the river enters Lake Superior.

The two-part project will restore 240 acres of coastal wetland habitat in the upper St. Louis River estuary, a wetland complex between Duluth and Superior. The Kingsbury Bay and Grassy Point project areas were identified in 2013 as two of 17 sites located in the St. Louis River “Area of Concern” in need of habitat restoration. Construction is expected to begin in June.

“The two projects could be done separately, but treating them as one large project creates efficiency in construction, allows us to reuse excavated soil and materials, and ultimately reduces the impacts for nearby neighborhoods,” said DNR St. Louis River project coordinator Melissa Sjolund. “Together, they make one of the largest habitat restoration projects in DNR's history.”

Three habitat restoration projects have already been completed in the St. Louis River AOC by the DNR and partner agencies. Restoring Kingsbury Bay and Grassy Point will bring the St. Louis River AOC one step closer to being removed from the binational list of most impaired regions on the Great Lakes.

Restoration of Grassy Point requires the removal of 177,000 cubic yards of wood waste that was deposited into the river from two historic mills that were built on stilts over the water. The mills are no longer at the site, but the wood debris — up to 16 feet deep in locations — remains 120 years later, and continues to impair fish and invertebrate habitat. The site restoration includes removing invasive narrow-leaved cattails and creating a new isthmus of

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land to shelter the restored wetland from wave action.

A mile-and-a-half upstream, the Kingsbury Bay project will include the removal of 173,000 cubic yards of excess sediment deposited there by upstream erosion and a 2012 flash flood. The project will restore coastal wetland habitat, create open water, and improve recreation for boaters and anglers. The clean sediment removed from Kingsbury Bay will be reused at Grassy Point to cap areas of wood waste that are not feasible to remove, create upland habitat islands with native trees and plantings, and reestablish healthy aquatic plant and wildlife communities.

Funding for the \$15 million project comes from the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Fund, the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative with oversight by the U.S. Environmental Protection, and the St. Louis River/Interlake/Duluth Tar Superfund Site settlement.

Anyone interested in receiving project and construction updates should visit <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/st-louis-river-restoration/index.html>.