

Gopher Bounty

By : Scot H. Dahms

Susie Precht asked me at the 2024 National Trapper Convention in Sioux Falls how I got into trapping. I had to think about this a little bit. In 1986, I started trapping the usual fur-bearing animals when I was fourteen. But that was not where it started. My father did not have much of an outdoor background. We did a lot of fishing when I was younger but hunting and trapping were non-existent. I had been in my grandfather and uncles' fur shed in the winter with stretched furs and traps, but it did not include the direct interaction I was looking for. I thought back to my oldest memories of doing any type of trapping.

Then it came to me, my oldest memory was of checking gopher traps with my grandfather in the rural countryside of the very southwest corner of Minnesota outside of a small farming community called Jasper. This was during the summer. The quarry was the Plains Pocket Gopher most noted for the mounds of dirt they create when digging their tunnels. It would have been in the late 1970s or early 1980s when I was around 10 years old.

Besides removing the ground disturbing rodents from areas where he farmed and baled hay, the added bonus was that a pair of front gopher feet were worth a quarter as bounty. I do not remember if it was a

County or State bounty but remember that grandpa kept the feet in the ash tray of his 1970s blue F250 Ford pickup called "Old Blue." He had given up smoking long ago, so the space was available to hold the valuable commodity. When the ash trap was full, he would turn them in and get payment. If I remember correctly, he got twenty-five cents per front foot or fifty cents a gopher.



Not only would grandpa trap on his property, but we trapped in the county ditches around his farm. He used the wire pincher type gopher trap. Grandpa would excavate out one of the burrows. Usually, the hole would be in the middle of the U-shaped mound of excavated soil. If there were ever questions about where the gopher hole led, he used a wire to probe following the soft dirt that the gopher filled in to his burrow that was dug to the surface to excavate the soil. He would open this hole up and place the trap so the gopher had to go across it to get to the open hole to fill it in. He would stake the traps with an old screwdriver.

The Plains Pocket Gopher lives

a life of darkness in its underground burrows. Any openings to daylight are filled in to keep potential predators from entering its den.

After seeing grandpa's operation and returning to my parents' home in North Central Iowa, it was open season on gophers. There was no bounty in Iowa, but grandpa had said he would turn in the gopher feet I was able to collect for the bounty in Minnesota. Not necessarily legal, but grandpa must not have thought that the quarters from the feet I produced would bankrupt any governmental agencies.

The first problem was that I did not have any traps. My parents rented a house in Rudd and a look in the garage produced six or seven No. 1 long springs. I also found some metal stakes, so was set there.

I did have to learn to set the traps a little differently than the traps grandpa used. The ones he used was more of a body gripper that the gopher had to be between the jaws to be caught. With the No 1 long springs, I had to use them as traditional foothold traps by digging out a trap bed to lay the trap in below the floor of the current burrow. Some of the burrows were so small, I had to remove enough dirt to make sure the trap could close\

Next challenge was transportation. I mowed several yards around town with a riding and push mower, so was able to scout for gophers and get to those areas easily.

The landowners were always receptive to having the gophers removed from their yards.

Once the traps were set, I checked them using my trusty, banana seated Huffy.

I also mowed my father's work building grounds where they stored their vehicles. One area was a Morton building one mile outside of town. This location had very large mounds in the mowed area, so I was really excited to set it. I was not let down as this area produced the largest Plains Pocket Gopher that I had ever caught. I learned there that the size of the mound usually foretells the size of the gopher you were going to catch. This makes sense as a larger gopher needs to remove more dirt from its travel routes to make the burrow large enough for the size of its body.

Even if I did not mow their yard, some little old ladies would ask for my help with yard work. A lot of these jobs were arranged by my parents especially my father as he was a telephone repair man going to numerous locations throughout the surrounding counties. My parents would drop me off in the morning and pick me up in the afternoon. I worked for the day clearing out brush and other issues in overgrown yards often revealing gopher mounds that were usually covered by the existing vegetation resulting in more gophers to trap.

I have to admit that over the summer, I decimated the local gopher population around town and prospects were dwindling to catch more by the end of the summer. I thought grandpa was really going to be impressed with the number I had caught and delusions of grandeur ran through my head of extra bounty awards being given (even

though the gophers were not from Minnesota).

During my routine patrols of town via bike, I found a few gopher mounds in a mowed yard that did not have a house around. I did not know who owned the property, so could not ask, but though that any landowner would appreciate me catching the gophers on their property. So I pedaled my bike home and got two traps, a couple of stakes and my trusty piece of wire. I pedaled my bike back and unloaded next to the gopher mound.

I took out my wire and started probing the mound. I found the pathway and cleared the dirt out. The hole was a smaller one, so I had to dig out a little more to bed the trap below the floor of the burrow and to make sure the trap could close. I had set the trap in place and my hand and arm were a considerable distance underground when I heard a voice behind me.

Unnoticed by me, a man had come out of the house across the road. He had walked up behind me as my back was toward the road and his house. He asked what I was doing and I could only guess what he thought I was doing with my arm so far underground. I removed my arm and turned toward the voice to see a man with a very inquisitive look on his face. I said I was trapping gophers. His response was an excited and high pitched "GOPHERS?" He referenced that I needed to leave and take my traps with me. I explained that the gophers were making the mounds that he was hitting with his mower. He did not care, so I pulled my trap and pedaled home.

Just as I got home, my mom was just getting off the phone. She had a call from that landowner and the amount of time it took me to pedal home gave him enough time to tell my mom all about me digging up his yard. Mom did explain to him

that I was really trapping gophers and really meant no harm. She explained that I thought I was trying to help.

Mom reinforced that I always need to get permission no matter where I am going to trap, even if I think that I will be doing them a favor as not all people think like me. She was right and I often remember this story when getting permission to trap. Also, I do not recommend misrepresenting any catch to be able to get bounties from another geographical region or catching in or out of certain seasons or any other misrepresentations of the sort.

My grandfather passed away in 2008 and his farm was sold in the spring of 2024. Luckily, before it sold, my mother was able to get a couple of grandpa's traps for me. One was a Newhouse 2 ½ with the teeth filed down to make it legal. The other was one of grandpa's pincher gopher traps. I wonder how many gophers that one trap took?

Submitted by:

Scot Dahms

**PLEASE
ADVISE ME
WHEN YOU
WANT YOUR
AD TAKEN
OUT OF THE
TRADING
POST.
THANK YOU**