

For this month's Parkside we have got input about what it's like to run a trapline in our Northern Forest from Doug Mercer and John Lowry—two of MIRO's most dedicated trappers.

What got you interested in trapping? Doug often used to run along the ridgeline from the top of the Wainuiomata hill to Eastbourne. He was saddened that there was almost no birdsong. On one run about 12 years ago, he came across a couple of trappers and they told him about MIRO. A few months later he joined up. Soon after that, on an introductory walk with Gail Abel, he learnt a lot more about the Park and the on-going efforts to restore it, including trapping, pest and bird monitoring, and the revegetation efforts out at the Parangarahu Lakes. After that, John accompanied Doug on his trapline and soon graduated to taking on a couple of lines that had become available. John sees trapping as a good way of keeping fit while at the same time helping the Park to recover from the impact of pests, especially possums. While a number of MIRO trappers work alone, many, like Doug and John, pair up so that you have good company and can share the workload.

Is it hard work? What skills are required? John doesn't see trapping as hard work, although it does require a reasonable level of fitness. The traplines follow the terrain, which can be quite steep in places—some follow walking paths and others just go straight up the hillside. MIRO trappers work with various types of traps including Possum Masters and DOC200s, so training is required to maintain and set these. DOC200s require particular care as the mechanisms in these can be dangerous if not handled safely and treated with respect. Doug has found that the main skill necessary for trapping is common sense, especially for being alone out in the forest.

How much time does it take? Most traplines in the Park are checked monthly, but because John and Doug are keen to keep fit, they check their lines fortnightly. These days catch rates are quite low, but if you are catching a lot there is motivation to check the traps more often. A trapline can take between 2 and 5 hours to service, depending on where in the Park it is and how many trap sites there are (usually at least ten).

Do you catch much? What do you catch most? Doug points out that traplines on the fringes of the Park tend to have a steady stream of possums from outside trying to invade it, while lines well inside the Park have much lower numbers. The only pests we are really trying to catch are possums, stoats and weasels. In Doug's twelve years of trapping, he's caught hundreds of possums, one weasel, and no stoats. The main catch is rats, whose numbers vary greatly due to environmental factors, such as beech masting, but without any expectation that we are controlling numbers. The purpose of the rat traps is to remove any rats in the vicinity that might interfere with our possum or mustelid baits.

Do you get used to handling dead things? John points out that fresh catches are the best for handling purposes, and you do get used to clearing the traps. However, after a week or so catches are not much fun to handle due to decay and bug activity, so protective gloves are definitely required.

Is trapping a rewarding volunteer activity? John finds that it is very satisfying to know you are helping keep the pest population in check, to the point where he now does volunteer trapping for three other pest control groups in the region. Doug too has found trapping to be a hugely rewarding outside activity that can be done with others and where you can meet new people and learn a lot about the local environment.

Do you think trapping is making a difference? Doug and John definitely think it is—over the years they have noticed that the vegetation has recovered considerably from the ravages of the possums and the missing birdsong that got them to join MIRO in the first place is returning. They also come across a lot of locals walking the tracks who tell them how much better the bush and trees look and how the bird activity has increased.

What would you like to see our park look like in 10–20 years' time? If the deer and pigs are sufficiently controlled, and with advances in pest control technology, Doug can envisage the Park's ecosystem returning to its former glory within the next few decades. His house backs onto the Park and he's looking forward to being woken by kiwis calling sometime in the next few years!



John and Doug setting a possum trap

Interested in helping MIRO? Email: info@miro.org.nz

Interested in taking on a trapline at Baring Head? Email: tim.trengrove@gmail.com