Larry Fairman tagging Rattlesnake canyon mule deer

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By Jack Ryan

Larry Fairman, a Montana State University student in forestry, is a good hand at solving puzzles. But this season he is confronted with a real stopper: How do you get a wild Rattlesnake canyon mule deer to walk up and put on a necklace?

Larry has been trying to find an answer to that one as a part of his graduate studies in game management. Under the direction of Dr. R. D. Taber, he has been setting up tagging snares along game trails in the wild back country up the Rattlesnake in Western Montana.

The way he does it is this: he takes an elastic collar arrangement with some colored plastic ribbons on it; sets it up in a game trail with a fishline trip cord; conceals the evidence as best he can, and then waits for a deer to come stick his head in it.

Once in awhile, the necklace works, and there goes one mule deer, bounding through the brush, wearing a collection of ribbons that will look chic in the animal Easter parade. The ribbon colors are varied so that watchers can follow the movements of an individual deer.

Getting the deer to don the dingus is only part of the problem. There's always the possibility that some unsuspecting woodsman may come walking down trail and -- boing! -- find himself collared! Occasionally some helpful citizen stumbles onto one of the snares and assumes it's some kind of illegal trap. Fairman has found his handiwork draped on a tree limb with a nasty note from the volunteer conservationist who found it.

What Fairman knows, as he patiently re-drapes the snare, is that the

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necklace is considerably more humane than the usual method of tagging big game animals -- luring the animal into an actual trap and attaching an ear tag. There's another consideration. The Rattlesnake mule deer range is both rough and tough, and it would be almost prohibitively expensive to set up trapping operations.

Larry Fairman, who hails from Springfield, Missouri, is taking a whole year for his deer study project, leading toward a master's degree in game management. If he can get the necklace fully perfected, he will not only be able to spot an individual deer, he will be able to tell what other members of the herd the animal trapis around with, and he will be able to spot daily and seasonal movements.

End result: better understanding of an important, big game animal.