



Mike Martell wields a bear snare

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

# Un-Bearable

Mike Martell's crusade to stop Oregon from trapping bears to death

**"M**y passion and love is hunting hounds," Mike Martell says. He spent 42 years as a houndsman chasing "bears, cougars, everything."

For years he used his hounds to haze bears out of southern Oregon vineyards, until it became illegal to hunt cougar and bear with hounds in this state. Martell didn't always kill the bears his hounds chased. The goal was to get them out of the wineries where, he says, one bear can eat its weight in grapes — and that can be 400 or 500 pounds — in a night. Bear damage to trees can hurt timber production, too, he says.

Now he says bears are trapped instead, and suffer before being killed.

Martell says he's got more in common with conservationists than he does with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) when it comes to hunting. The Sweet Home resident has taken his show on the road, he says, with a painful-looking steel bear snare in hand, to criticize the way agencies such as ODFW and the USDA's Wildlife Services indiscriminately and often cruelly kill the animals he loves to chase.

"For the lack of a better word," Martell says, "I've had a gutful."

He brings with him two snares, one that's new, and one that was nearly shredded by a bear's desperate struggles to free itself. The snares are triggered by a metal trap that springs up and flings the loop around a bear's limb. The metal loop is fastened up high, so the bear can't leverage it loose. Martell says the bear will fight the snare instead, digging the fraying metal cord deeper and deeper into its limb. He cheerfully offers to let people drop the loop around their own wrists to get an inkling of how that might feel.

Current Oregon laws have no check requirement for black bear traps, so a bear can be caught and suffer for days before the trapper returns to shoot it. Or if the snare catches a different animal instead of the bear it is set for, that animal suffers and often dies.

If he were to haze or even kill a bear with hounds, Martell says, a hunter can make sure he gets the right bear — he can take his dogs right to the tree that's been damaged to pick up the scent. The only bears he's ever had to kill, which is rare, "I waited til I had the culprits," he says.

Ballot Measure 18 in 1994 banned the hunting of bear and cougar with hounds and, Martell argues, has ironically led to more bears being killed indiscriminately.

Martell has pulled together numbers to back up his claims. According to his data from the 2010-2011 seasons, Wildlife Services killed 663 bears, landowners and their agents killed 290, ODFW killed 114 and the Oregon State police killed eight. Of those 1,075 bears killed, 31 were classified as "unknown." From 2005-2009 his data shows Wildlife Services killed 744 bears and 42 of them were also unknown, meaning it's not clear if the bear was a female, male, a cub or "sub adult." The last, according to Martell, is pretty much an older cub.

He questions why so many "unknown" bears are killed, and how many cubs and young bears are killed without being reported. "One unknown animal is one animal too many," he says. "I'm sick and tired of snares."

Martell says when it comes to trapping, "a bear steps in a trap, a bear gets shot. A sow with cubs steps in it, they all get shot."

ODFW released its draft Black Bear Management Plan in March. This is the first update to the plan since 1998, and it was released after southern Oregon conservation group Big Wildlife threatened to sue ODFW for failing to update the plan. Big Wildlife believes the numbers of bears in Oregon are dropping due to overkill by sport hunters and the killing of "nuisance" bears.

Martell says, "This is not management; this is slaughtering animals," adding, "If this is game management, I'll eat my hat."

Oregon's spring bear hunting season started April 1 and runs through May 31. Last year 488 bears were reported to ODFW as killed by hunters during spring season.

Comments will be taken on the plan through the June 7-8 ODFW meeting in Salem. It is available at [wkly.ws/1a0](http://wkly.ws/1a0) and comments can be emailed to [ODFW.comments@state.or.us](mailto:ODFW.comments@state.or.us)

*Predator Defense, a local conservation group not affiliated with Martell — it is in fact against hunting with hounds — will be bringing a husky mix named Bella to Ninkasi's "Pints for a Cause" Monday, May 14. Bella lost her leg in a government snare in a national forest.*

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