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by Charles Darwin

# Trapping Agony

**I**T IS A COMMON OBSERVATION that cases of brutality to horses, asses, and other large quadrupeds, are much less frequently witnessed now than they were some time ago. This is no doubt owing to the general increase of humanity, and to these animals being now under the protection of the law. An English gentleman would not himself give a moment's unnecessary pain to any living creature, and would instinctively exert himself to put an end to any suffering before his eyes; yet it is a fact that every game preserver in this country sanctions a system which consigns thousands of animals to acute agony, probably of eight or ten hours duration, before it is ended by death. I allude to the setting of steel traps for catching vermin. The iron teeth shut together with so strong a spring, that a pencil which I inserted was cracked and deeply indented

by the violence of the blow. The grip must be close enough not to allow the escape of a small animal, such as a stoat or a magpie; and therefore when a cat or a rabbit is caught, the limb is cut to the bone and crushed. A humane gamekeeper said to me, 'I know what they must feel, as I have had my finger caught.' The smaller animals are often so fortunate as to be killed at once. If we attempt to realise the sufferings of a cat, or other animal when caught, we must fancy what it would be to have a limb crushed during a whole long night, between the iron teeth of a trap, and with the agony increased by constant attempts to escape. Few men could endure to watch for five minutes, an animal struggling in a trap with a crushed and torn limb; yet on all the well-preserved estates throughout the kingdom, animals thus linger every night;

**Charles Darwin, 19th-Century naturalist who revolutionized biology with *Origin of Species*, published this appeal against trapping in the 'Gardeners' Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette' of August 1863.**

and where game keepers are not humane, or have grown callous to the suffering constantly passing under their eyes, they have been known by an eyewitness to leave the traps unvisited for 24 or even 36 hours. Such neglect as this is no doubt rare; but traps are often forgotten; and there are few game keepers who will leave their beds on a cold winter's morning, one hour earlier, to put an end to the pain of an animal which is safely in their power. I subjoin the account of the appearance of a rabbit caught in a trap, given by a gentleman, who, last summer witnessed the painful sight many times. 'I know of no sight more sorrowful than that of these unoffending animals as they are seen in the torture grip of these traps. They sit drawn up into a little heap, as if collecting all their force of endurance to support the agony; some sit in a half torpid state induced by intense suffering. Most young ones are found dead after some hours of it, but others as you approach, start up, struggle violently to escape, and shriek pitiably, from terror and the pangs occasioned by their struggles.' We naturally feel more compassion for a timid and harmless animal, such as a rabbit, than for vermin, but the actual agony must be the same in all cases. It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the suffering thus endured from fear, from acute pain, madened by thirst, and by vain attempts to escape. Bull baiting and cock fighting have rightly been put down by law; I hope it may never be said that the members of the British Parliament will not make laws to protect animals if such laws should in any way interfere with their own sports. Some who reflect upon this subject for the first time will wonder how such cruelty can have been permitted to continue in these days of civilisation; and no doubt if men of education saw with their own eyes what takes place under their sanction, the system would have been put an end to long ago. We shall be told that setting steel traps is the only way to preserve game, but we cannot believe that Englishmen when their attention is once drawn to the case, will let even this motive weigh against so fearful an amount of cruelty.