

Tough lesson

Pet owner learns hard way that SW Va. farmers are using cyanide coyote traps

■ **Federal trapping** program has long history of controversy in the West.

By **STEPHEN IGO**
sigo@timesnews.net

BIG STONE GAP — Rufus and Cody were a pair of canine pals who loved their romps together in the woods.

And so it was on April 24 when Gary Tucker took his dogs to the large tract of woodland he owns on Wallens Ridge. When they didn't return, Tucker waited for his best friends until 3 a.m.

Something was wrong but Tucker would be surprised to discover what that was.

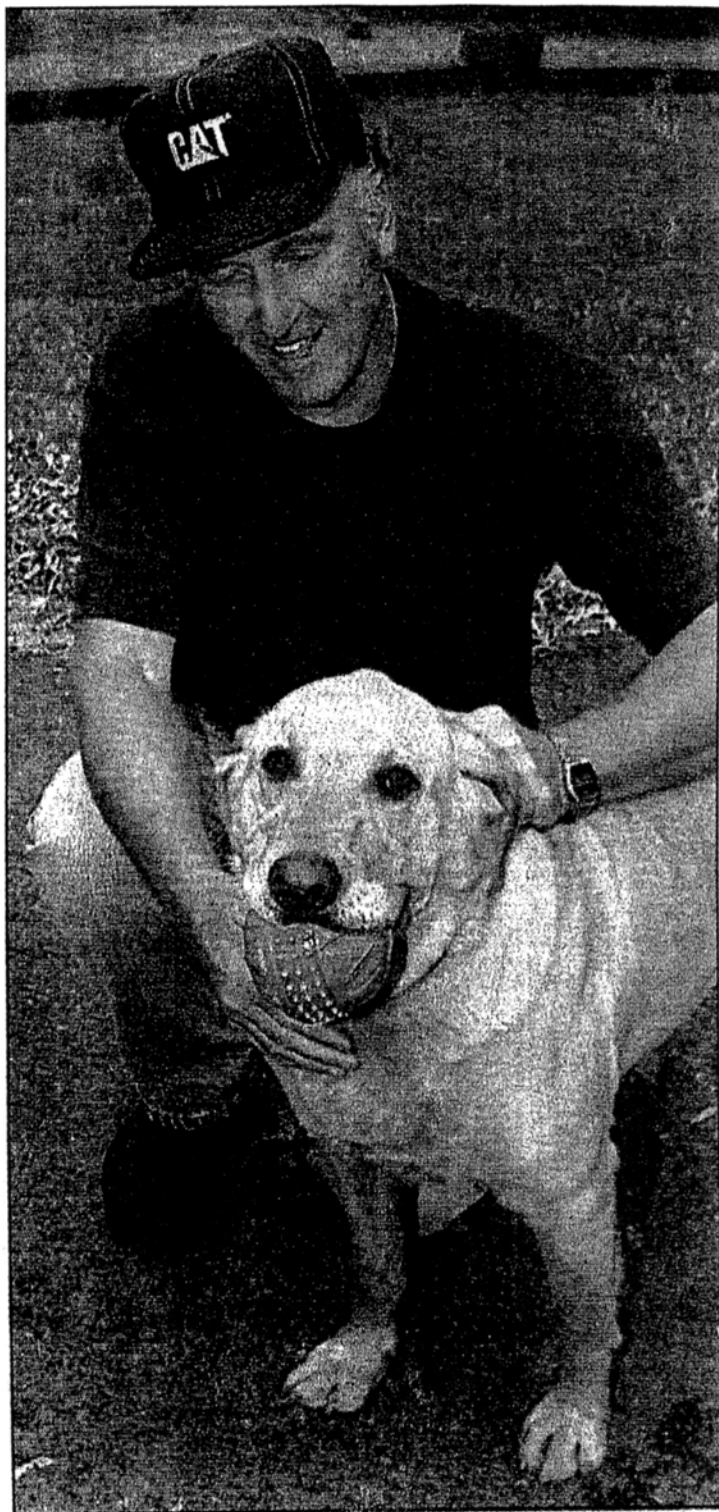
At dawn, Tucker returned to his property and found a very sick Cody. Two days later he would find the body of Rufus, along with the carcasses of one other dog and six coyotes, scattered around a deadly device.

Called the M-44, the device is a poison trap primarily used to destroy coyotes. It has been in use, and has been the subject of controversy, in western states for many years. When an animal tugs on the bait, a spring-loaded ejector in a hollow stake spews a lethal dose of sodium cyanide into the animal's mouth.

That is what killed Rufus. And what Tucker believes came close to killing Cody. Perhaps Cody licked his dying or dead pal. Or maybe Cody was standing very close to Rufus when the cyanide trap was sprung.

Tucker believes he got a tiny dose of the poison after he petted and handled Cody the next day.

"I was glad to find him and rubbed his face. I could tell his eyes and face were swollen up," Tucker said. "And, he licked me. And then I no-



Terry Ketron — tketron@timesnews.net

Big Stone Gap's Gary Tucker pets his dog, Cody, who survived a cyanide coyote trap that claimed Tucker's other dog.

Please see PET, page 2A

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Continued from page 1A

ticed a burning feeling ... not a bad burn but like a sunburn."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Division of Wildlife Services' assurances to the contrary, Tucker said that "Cody got (the cyanide) on him and then I got it on me."

It was two days later that Tucker finally discovered the fate of Rufus — and an education in the M-44 — located on a nearby farm.

"I try to keep things in perspective," he said. "If a farmer has a problem with coyotes and needs to use this device ... I wouldn't use them but if they are going to be used, then notify the neighbors and the community where these things are.

"I'm not in any way saying it is not a necessity ... maybe it is. I don't know. But everybody needs to be notified about these poison traps, and where they are being used. I'd still have my dog if I knew about it."

Efforts to contact federal officials Tucker himself has talked to were unsuccessful on Friday. But literature Tucker has obtained indicates there are a host of regulations involving the use of the M-44, including notifying neighbors and even local hospitals.

"Why keep it a secret?" asked Tucker's wife, Yvonne. "You worry enough about kids

and pets and shouldn't have to wonder" when and where M-44s might be in use.

"It was a terrible experience is what it was," she added. "He was more than just a dog."

Everyone who has ever owned a dog knows what Yvonne means.

And there is a chance, however remote, that humans can be harmed as well. Nancy Zeirenberg of Wildlife Damage Review in Arizona said from 1985 to 1995 more than 20 people have been accidentally poisoned from M-44s.

Practically all accidental poisonings were to federal employees handling the devices. But three were civilians who stumbled on the devices and got too curious.

Zeirenberg said M-44s have been used for about 30 years in western states, and their threat to pets and children is a long-standing controversy. But as coyotes migrated east, the devices have followed.

"We're just beginning to hear complaints from the eastern states," she said.

For Gary Tucker, the loss of Rufus is more than something to complain about.

"To me the biggest loss is the dog," he said. "Rufus was just some kind of dog and we all miss him."