



PREDATOR FREE 2050  
TUIA TE TAIAO

# A guide to the humane killing of small pest mammals from live capture traps

Before committing to live capture trapping, you should familiarise yourself with your obligations under the [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#).

The method and procedure for killing trapped animals needs to be decided in advance of setting live capture traps and must be appropriate to the site where the trapping will take place. The people checking traps should have personal protective equipment (PPE) on hand at all times, including gloves and hand sanitiser/cleaning solution. Those doing the killing must be competent, meet any necessary legal requirements (for example, for firearms use), have the right equipment and understand their responsibilities.

Under section 12 of the Animal Welfare Act, it is illegal to kill an animal in such a manner that the animal suffers unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress. This means that, for example, the drowning of animals is a prosecutable offence due to the prolonged suffering caused. Understanding which methods are considered humane will help ensure that the method used is legal and animal welfare remains a top priority.

**Anyone who is likely to find the killing methods outlined in this guide physically difficult or upsetting should not be tasked with checking live capture traps.**

Department of Conservation ranger checking a live capture trap. Photo: Department of Conservation



Department of  
Conservation  
Te Papa Atawhai



# Humane killing methods and procedures

## Blunt force trauma

This involves striking the animal on the head with a hammer, bar or stout club to destroy the central region of the brain.

It should only be attempted by people who are confident and strong enough to ensure death in a small number of blows (ideally 1–2) to minimise suffering to the animal. **Do not attempt this method if there is any doubt of success.**

If you are using cage traps, it may be preferable or necessary to use the shooting method instead, as safely removing the live animal from the cage trap and restraining it to be able to deliver blunt force trauma may not be feasible.



Brushtail possum. Photo: Alan Cressler

### For possums

1. Wait until the possum is stationary (at least momentarily) before striking it. If the possum's front leg is held in the trap and the tail is easily accessible, some trappers have found that holding the possum firmly by the tail and stretching it out makes it easier to hit the target area, as the leg in the trap provides a counterforce. If the possum is caught by the back leg, it will be able to turn, so the trapper will need to take extra care and be quick.
2. Heavily strike the top of the head/cranium with a hammer (square-on), metal rod or heavy club to render the possum unconscious.
3. Confirm unconsciousness.  
*This can be done by testing the blink response – touch the eye gently; the eyes should be fixed and glazed (not blinking). The animal should also not be rhythmically breathing.*
4. Once the possum is unconscious, position the head over a solid surface (for example, a root or rock) and deliver additional blows to the head until the skull is compressed.

5. Confirm death.

*The central region of the brain should be destroyed and the possum, when lifted, should bleed in a continuous stream from the skull and/or ear. Alternatively, bend the head back to expose the throat and cut across the throat with a sharp knife to sever all major blood vessels.*

**Note:** You will also need to check possums for back riders and pouches for young. These should be killed humanely using the same method as above for back riders or by crushing the skull for pouch young.



Feral cat. Photo: Alan1951 – Adobe Stock

### For feral cats

In most cases, shooting will be the only feasible option for killing cage-trapped feral cats. Blunt force trauma should only be used for feral cats caught in leghold traps when shooting is not practicable/allowed.

A live feral cat in a trap can be difficult and dangerous to handle, so it should be approached confidently and quietly. It is a good idea to get gear organised out of the cat's line-of-sight first to minimise disturbance to the cat and reduce the chances of it pulling out of the trap.

The procedure is the same as for possums above.



Hedgehog. Photo: Steve Pilkington

### For hedgehogs

1. It will usually be necessary to uncurl the hedgehog to expose the head. This can be done by positioning the animal on its side and then placing a foot on the spines and skin on the upper half of the body and pressing firmly downwards, forcing it to uncurl.
2. Once the head is exposed, render the animal unconscious by heavily striking the top of the head.
3. Place the head over a solid surface (for example, a root or rock) and deliver additional blows to the head until the skull is compressed.
4. Confirm death as per the instructions for possums.



Ship rat eating snail. Photo: Ngā Manu Images ©

### For rodents

If a rodent is caught in a cage trap and needs to be killed, it will most likely need to be transferred from the trap into a suitable bag (for example, a thin canvas or hessian bag) so it can be restrained and killed by blunt force trauma. Rats that have been live caught as non-targets in leghold traps (intended for larger pests) are usually immobilised by the trap.

1. If a bag is used to restrain the animal, ensure that you can confidently locate the head.
2. Place the head over a solid object (for example, a root or rock) and strike the head until it is compressed and the brain is crushed.
3. Confirm death. You will need to remove the animal from the bag to check for signs of life.

*To ensure that death is certain, the central region of the brain should be destroyed.*



Stoat with chick. Photo: David Hallett

### For mustelids (stoats, ferrets and weasels)

Mustelids caught in cage traps are best killed by shooting, as this would usually be the planned option when using cage traps. However, some live capture traps like Holden™ traps (designed for targeting ferrets) have solid walls, so shooting is a less suitable method. Additionally, ferrets are sometimes targeted by leghold trapping and mustelids are occasionally caught in leghold traps targeting possums or feral cats.

Note that trapped mustelids can also be transferred into a bag (for example, a thin canvas or hessian bag) so that they can be restrained and killed by blunt force trauma.

The procedure is the same as for possums, but additional steps are needed if using a bag:

- Ensure that you can confidently locate the head before striking a blow.
- You will need to remove the animal from the bag to check for signs of life when confirming death.

## Shooting

**Ensure that the user holds a firearms licence for the type of firearm being used or is being actively supervised by a licence holder.**

A .22 rimfire rifle is effective and recommended for use where feasible. High-powered air rifles can be used in some circumstances, but the user must hold a firearms licence or be over the age of 18. For feral cats, a .22-calibre 800 fps rated air rifle using heavy (for example, 18-grain) round-nosed or pointed pellets is effective. Low-powered air rifles have insufficient power to humanely kill possums, feral cats or ferrets.

Before choosing shooting as a method, be aware of site factors in the surrounding area. Ground that is stony or rocky is prone to ricochet and so a potential hazard to the shooter and others in the area. Shooting is also not an option in urban areas or places of human settlement. For further guidance, refer to Te Tari Pūreke Firearms Safety Authority's [7 rules of firearms safety](#).

### For possums, feral cats and ferrets

1. *If the animal is in a leghold trap:* Wait until the animal is motionless. If taking a frontal shot, aim the rifle at the centre of the head slightly below a line drawn midway between the ears. If shooting from the side, aim behind the ear so that the shot passes through the brain towards the opposite eye.

*If the animal is in a cage trap:* Aim as above, taking the shot from as close as possible (for example, 3–5 cm from the head).

2. If using an air rifle, apply a follow-up shot immediately after the initial shot as a safeguard.
3. Confirm death by ensuring that there is no blink response (gently touch the eye – it should remain fixed and glazed if unconscious) and breathing has permanently stopped and/or by using the confirming methods for blunt force trauma above.

### For rats, hedgehogs, stoats and weasels

Shooting may not be practical for killing these smaller animals when they are caught in live trapping operations. However, a shot to the head as described for possums, feral cats and ferrets will humanely kill any of these.

## More information

Department of Conservation. 2024. [Practical guide to trapping. 3rd edition. \(PDF, 5.6 MB\)](#)

National Pest Control Agencies. 2015. [A4.1 Leghold traps: a guideline for capturing possums, ferrets and feral cats using leghold traps. \(PDF, 8 MB\)](#)

### Frontal shot

Aim at the centre of the head slightly below midway between the ears.



### Shot from above

Aim between the ears, ensuring that the shot passes through the centre of the brain.



### Shot from the side

Aim behind the ears so the shot passes through the brain towards the opposite eye.



Diagram of shot placements for possums, feral cats and ferrets.  
Image: J Aitken