Standard Operating Procedure

Dry pitfall trapping for vertebrates and invertebrates

SOP No: 9.3

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Prepared for:
Department of Parks and Wildlife's Animal Ethics Committee

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SOP No 9.3 Dry pitfall trapping for vertebrates and invertebrates

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1 Purpose

Pitfall trapping is one of the most widely used methods for studies of species occurrence, to examine spatial distribution patterns, compare abundance in different habitats, to study daily activity rhythms and in community surveys (Wildlife Advisory Group, 2003). It is also a tool used in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to indicate the potential impact that development may have on the biodiversity of an area (Thompson et al., 2007), due to the non-selectiveness of fauna trapped. Pit trap size has great impact on the catch success and influences the interpretation of relative abundance (Thompson et al., 2005).

The advantages of pitfall trapping over alternative trapping methods are that it is cost effective method that is practical and inexpensive, there are no moving parts that could injure animals during operation, it is safe for staff to operate, and it can collect large numbers of animals (although usually non-selective in the species trapped).

This standard operating procedure (SOP) provides advice on the use of pitfall traps for the non-lethal trapping of vertebrates and invertebrates.

2 Scope

This SOP applies to all fauna survey and monitoring activities involving the use of pitfall traps undertaken across the State by the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW). It may also be used to guide fauna monitoring activities undertaken by Natural Resource Management groups, consultants, researchers and any other individuals or organisations. All DPaW personnel involved in monitoring using pitfall traps should be familiar with the content of this document.

This SOP complements the Australian code of practice for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes (The Code). The Code contains an introduction to the ethical use of animals in wildlife studies and should be referred to for broader issues. A copy of the code may be viewed by visiting the National Health and Medical Research Council website (http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/). In Western Australia any person using animals for scientific purposes must be covered by a licence issued under the provisions of the Animal Welfare Act 2002, which is administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia.

Please note: Projects involving wildlife research require a licence to take (i.e. capture, collect, disturb, study) fauna for scientific purposes (Reg 17) under the provisions of the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950. Other licences may also be applicable and care should be taken to ensure that the appropriate licences and permits are adhered to when planning any project. All projects involving the use of pitfall traps for capture of vertebrates and invertebrates also require approval by the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee.

3 Definitions

Animal handler: a person listed on an application to the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee that will be responsible for handling animals during the project.

Drift fence: a length of short fence which runs across the centre of the pit(s). Animals encounter the fence and follow it to the pitfall. Pitfall traps can be set up with or without drift fences. A drift fence increases the probability of capturing animals.

Pitfall trap: a hole in the ground in which a plastic bucket or PVC tube is placed so that the lip of the bucket or tube is level with the ground surface. Animals fall into the trap and cannot get out due to the unscaleable surface and the depth of the bucket or tube. Pitfall traps are most useful for invertebrates, small mammals (e.g. pygmy possums, honey possums, rodents), frogs and reptiles.

Pitfall traps can be used in three ways:

1. Animals are trapped accidentally as they forage along the ground and fall into a trap.
2. Animals follow a drift fence into the trap.
3. Animals are attracted to bait used to attract certain species or groups of animals (this method is **not recommended** for use in Western Australia as it increases the likelihood of ant invasion).

4  **Approved Trap Types**

**Plastic 20L buckets:**
Plastic buckets with snap on lids (30cm diameter, 40cm deep) are the most common type of pitfall trap used for monitoring and in the Western Shield Fauna Monitoring Program (Figure 1 and 2).

**PVC tube:**
PVC tubes may be used (at least 15cm diameter, 40cm deep). A piece of flywire (or similar) should be placed on the bottom of the tube to prevent animals burrowing to where they cannot be seen and retrieved.

Other types of containers (e.g. glass/plastic jars) may be used as pitfall traps and should be clearly described in study plans and applications to the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee. For example, smaller containers may be used if invertebrates are being targeted. **Please note – under no circumstance is preservative to be placed in the trap.** Wet pitfall trapping is a non-standard procedure requiring special approval.

Pitfall traps should contain suitable shelter for captured animals, and may have drainage holes to reduce flooding, and a raised roof to provide shelter from the sun and direct rainfall (see Section 5.1 for details).

![Figure 1: Pitfall trap made using a 20 L bucket with foam meat tray shelter provided. Photo by C. Freegard/DPaW](image1)

![Figure 2: Pitfall trap with drift fence. Photo by C. Freegard/DPaW](image2)

5  **Procedure Outline**

### 5.1 Installing pitfall traps

(a) Pitfall trap locations (e.g. transect vs. grid, number of traps) will be determined by the purpose of the study. Maps showing vegetation types and access routes may assist with trap placement.

(b) To install a pitfall trap:

1. Measure the depth and width of the bucket or PCV tube.
2. Dig a hole that is deep enough to allow the container to fit in it.
3. In sandy, well-drained soils, the bottom of the trap should allow for water drainage. This can be done by drilling three 3mm-diameter holes into the base or replacing the base with wire gauze. However, in areas prone to waterlogging or excessive soil water movement, holes may facilitate flooding of pitfall traps and are not recommended.
4. Place the container in the hole.
5. Fill the soil in around the container ensuring the lip of the container is level with the ground surface. Soil needs to be compacted around the rim to avoid it caving in over time.
6. Suitable shelter should be provided (e.g. foam food trays with one corner cut out, leaf litter, a thin layer of soil for fossorial reptiles) in the bottom of the trap. A raised roof made of bituminised paper can be placed over the top of the trap to prevent rain directly falling into the trap and provide shelter from the sun.
7. Once all the traps have been dug into the ground, run the drift fence (33cm high and partially buried) constructed from aluminium fly-wire mesh (self-supporting) or nylon fly-wire mesh (will need wood and/or wire pegs for support) along the transect through the middle of the pitfall traps.

Examples:

A pitfall trapping grid consisting of three lines spaced 40m apart, with each line consisting of 5 traps spaced 20m apart. This grid layout forms the centre of the integrated trapping grid that incorporates pit, cage and Elliott traps that have been used during the Kingston Timber Harvesting Study and Operation Foxglove. It is used for monitoring changes in population densities and movements of small to medium sized vertebrates.

Forest Check also uses a similar integrated trapping grid incorporating pitfall traps. Details of the project and the trapping design may be found in Robinson (2006).

(c) Traps must be set so that they are not readily visible from roads to avoid public curiosity and possible interference. Pit traps are a long-term fixture and, therefore, more likely to be detected over time. It is better to have these much further from roads than other traps which are only temporarily present (a minimum 50m from the road edge).

(d) Trap locations must be marked with flagging tape, labelled and numbered. A GPS reading for each trap is also recommended and is required for long-term monitoring sites (e.g. Western Shield monitoring). Permanent monitoring trap sites should also be marked using a numbered dropper post. The location information for permanent monitoring transects and their trap points should be recorded on datasheets and in a database.

5.2 Opening pitfall traps

(a) Traps should contain a form of shelter in the bottom, such as a food foam tray, leaf litter, egg cartons, to provide moisture and cover for any animals that have fallen in.

(b) Pits should be closed if there is excessive rain or heavy rain is forecast. Avoid trapping in extreme weather conditions (hot, cold or wet) by planning ahead and monitoring long-range and daily weather forecasts. Dry conditions are a particular threat to frogs and wet conditions are a particular threat to small mammals.

(c) Before the trap is left, it is important to check that it is all set up correctly and secured.

(d) Ants, beetles, centipedes and scorpions are often captured in pitfall traps and can aggravate or kill vertebrate species that are trapped with them. If an ant nest is noticed close to a trap, do not place a trap there or close the trap if already placed.

(e) It is recommended that traps are set for a minimum of three consecutive nights (preferably four to five nights). All traps must be accounted for before and after each trapping session.

5.3 Checking pitfall traps

(a) It is vital that extreme care is taken when checking traps in case venomous animals are caught inside. It is best to use a stick to check for venomous snakes and invertebrates before putting hands in. Gloves or padded tongs can be used to remove potentially harmful animals; however, particular care needs to be taken not to injure them due to reduced dexterity.

(b) Traps must be checked and cleared as determined by the nature and biology of the species
being targeted (and potential by-catch species) in association with the environmental conditions characteristic at the site. Traps need to be checked more frequently throughout the day if weather conditions are of concern for target or potential by-catch species such as mammals, capture rate is high or the combination of species trapped results in unacceptable trap deaths through predation. If traps are to remain open overnight at a site where nocturnal small mammals may enter traps, a trap checking round must occur early morning within 3 hours of sunrise. Traps must be closed if weather conditions become extreme (e.g. extreme heat, rain, cold) or a high number of trap related injury or deaths occur (e.g. if frogs are entering traps and dehydrate before traps are checked). All animal handling should be done by (or under the guidance of) trained personnel.

(c) All traps must be accounted for during each day’s trapping. Personnel undertaking the trapping must keep tallies of traps to ensure that all are inspected, closed or removed as appropriate. This is the responsibility of the person in charge at the survey location on the day.

(d) Any invertebrates in the pitfalls must be removed daily and released a reasonable distance away from the pitfall trap, unless required as voucher specimens.

(e) The presence of ants in the trapping area can lead to detrimental impacts on captured animals. Surface insecticide (e.g. permethrin based products like Coopex ®) can be applied around traps to discourage ants. Surface insecticides should never be used inside traps and should not be used routinely as they can be harmful to trapped animals, particularly frogs and reptiles. Powder and spray forms are available however extreme care must be taken to ensure that no free standing liquid droplets remain when using the spray form as absorption/ingestion can be lethal to frogs and reptiles. Always read the MSDS of chemicals before use. If ants become highly attracted to the trapping area remove the traps and relocate them to a more suitable position.

(f) A range of appropriate handling bags must be carried when approaching a trap to ensure efficient removal of trapped animals.

(g) Trapping data should be recorded on an appropriate trapping datasheet and database.

(h) At the end of trapping all pits must be removed/filled in or closed. When closing pitfall traps, personnel must ensure that lids are secure and cannot come off other than by human interference. Cover with sand and/or rocks to weigh down the lid and reduce potential UV exposure and fire damage.

(i) Personnel in charge of the survey or monitoring activity are responsible for ensuring all pitfall traps are securely closed.

5.4 Removing pitfall traps

(a) All traps must be counted out upon setting traps and counted in when removing (filling in) traps. Personnel undertaking the trapping must keep tallies of traps to ensure that all are removed and that there are no traps left behind.

(b) Remove flagging tape etc. from area

5.5 Animal handling

(a) Techniques for removing animals from traps vary depending on the species of invertebrate, mammal, reptile or amphibian involved and the experience and skills of personnel. General advice on handling animals is contained in SOP 10.2 Hand restraint of wildlife. All removals of animals should be done by (or under the guidance of) experienced personnel.

(b) Depending on the mix of animals in the pitfall trap, removal must be quick and as efficient as possible, with the least amount of stress.

(c) Personnel undertaking trapping should be equipped with a trapping field kit and animals should be processed as quickly and efficiently as possible so that stress is kept to a minimum.

(d) Use handling bags appropriate for the species and length of containment as advised in SOP 10.1 Animal handling/restraint using soft containment.

(e) If an animal is injured during trapping or handling, treat any superficial wounds with low irritant
antiseptic (e.g. Betadine®) (refer to SOP 14.2 First aid for animals).

(f) If an animal is seriously injured, refer to the flowchart in SOP 15.1 Humane killing of animals under field conditions in wildlife management to make the decision on whether or not to euthanase or seek veterinary care.

(g) Captured animals must be released at point of capture, a few metres from the pitfall trap (unless the purpose of the trapping is for translocation, specimen collection or other approved reasons). Animals must be released, or reach an alternate endpoint approved by the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee, within 24 hours of capture. Animals should be released at a time when they are normally active and caution taken to reduce exposure to risks such as predation i.e. nocturnal animals should be released in the early morning or kept until late afternoon before release at the point of capture.

### 6 Pitfall Trap Care and Maintenance

(a) Traps must be maintained in good working order.

(b) Traps should be removed and filled in if they will no longer be used, or securely covered if they will be used again. Plastic lids to traps deteriorate when exposed to sunlight and should be completely covered with dirt between trapping sessions. Covering lids also provides some protection from fire. Pitfall traps must be checked as soon as possible after a fire, to ensure that none of the traps are open. Neglect will lead to unnecessary deaths of animals and could lead to prosecution of responsible personnel under the Animal Welfare Act 2002.

(c) When pitfall traps are removed or are being moved between sites, they must be cleaned and disinfected, especially when used in areas affected by dieback (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*).

(d) Any damaged traps/drift fences requiring attention need to be noted and repaired or replaced before subsequent use.

(e) Spare lids for pitfall traps should be kept available and carried in the field when closing pitfall traps.

### 7 Level of Impact

Pitfall trapping has a low to moderate level of impact on animals.

Potential animal welfare impacts of pitfall trapping include:

- Trauma (e.g. accidental injuries inflicted during hand capture).
- Hypothermia.
- Hyperthermia.
- Dehydration.
- Starvation.
- Distress (caused by confinement, discomfort, social isolation, separation of mother and young, exposure to predators, ants, etc.).
- Death through predation.

If the pitfall traps are properly monitored and preventative actions are utilised then the impact should be low and only short-term.

### 8 Ethical Considerations

To reduce the level of impact of dry pitfall trapping on the welfare of animals, there are a number of ethical considerations that should be addressed by monitoring personnel throughout projects involving these procedures. DPaW projects involving dry pitfall trapping will require approval from the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee and, where appropriate, the following ethical considerations must be adequately covered in any Application for Approval to Undertake Research Involving Vertebrate Animals.
8.1 Handling time

To ensure minimal stress to the animals they should only be handled for as long as required to identify them and to collect any necessary measurements (usually no more than five minutes). They must be released (or reach alternate end point) within 24 hours of capture. If trapping honey possums (*Tarsipes rostratus*), consider offering sugar water to lethargic individuals prior to release.

8.2 Frequency of trapping

Consideration should be given to minimising the frequency of trapping to achieve the goal of the activity with reduced impact on animals. Pitfall trapping can greatly impact the wellbeing of animals by disrupting their feeding, foraging and defending territory activities. This is particularly relevant to small mammals such as honey possums which, due to their small size, are at risk of death if prevented from feeding on consecutive nights.

8.3 Trap placement

If possible, pitfall traps should not be placed in the vicinity of ant nests. Ants are known to distress and kill trapped occupants of pitfall traps.

Consider the likelihood of water runoff draining into the pit as well as the likelihood of underground water levels causing problems. Placing pitfall traps in low-lying areas where they are likely to fill with water and drown occupants should be avoided.

8.4 Time animals spend in traps

Traps must be checked and cleared as determined by the nature and biology of the species being targeted (and potential by-catch species) in association with the environmental conditions characteristic at the site. For example, reptiles in arid environments are well adapted to high temperature conditions and are most active mid to late morning. Trap checking in this instance should be adapted to concur with this and take place late morning to avoid prolonging the confinement of trapped animals throughout the afternoon. By ensuring traps are cleared by midday, the risk of remaining active animals entering traps will be reduced (most animals will be sheltering during the hottest part of the day). Traps need to be checked more frequently throughout the day if weather conditions are of concern for target or potential by-catch species such as mammals, capture rate is high or the combination of species trapped results in unacceptable trap deaths through predation. If traps are to remain open overnight at a site where nocturnal small mammals may enter traps, a trap checking round must occur early morning within 3 hours of sunrise. Traps must be closed if weather conditions become extreme (e.g. extreme heat, rain, cold) or a high number of trap related injury or deaths occur (e.g. if frogs are entering traps and dehydrate before traps are checked).

8.5 Unexpected deaths

If unexpected deaths (e.g. through predation or dehydration) or euthanasia occur then it is essential to consider the possible actions that could be taken to prevent further deaths. For projects approved by the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee, unexpected deaths or euthanasia must be reported in writing to the Animal Ethics Committee Executive Officer on return to the office (as per 2.2.28 of The Code).

8.6 Shelter

Always provide shelter, such as leaf litter, foam food trays, egg cartons, in the bottom of pitfall traps to offer protection for the animals against heat, cold and wet environmental conditions. Shade covers over pitfall traps may be required in hot areas to reduce midday pit temperatures or in wet conditions.

8.7 Hygiene

All handling bags/equipment should be kept clean to minimise risk of disease/contamination, etc.

8.8 Breeding season

Avoid trapping in breeding seasons where lactating females may be separated from dependent young
or when there is an increased likelihood of injury or separation of dependent young. However, many species breed throughout the year making it impossible to avoid trapping animals at sensitive times. If captured, lactating females should be released as soon as possible.

8.9 Weather
Avoid trapping in extreme weather conditions (hot, cold or wet) by planning ahead and monitoring long-range and daily weather forecasts. Close pitfall traps if the weather is too extreme during a monitoring period.

9 Competencies and Approvals

DPaW personnel, and other external parties covered by the DPaW Animal Ethics Committee, undertaking dry pitfall trapping require approval from the committee and will need to satisfy the minimum competency requirements detailed in Table 1. This is to ensure that personnel involved have the necessary knowledge and experience to minimise the potential impacts of pitfall traps on the welfare of the animals. Other groups, organisations or individuals using this SOP to guide their fauna monitoring activities should also meet these competency requirements as well as their animal welfare legislative obligations.

It should be noted that details such as intensity of the study being undertaken will determine the level of competency required, and Table 1 provides advice for basic monitoring only.

Table 1: Minimum competency requirements of Animal Handlers of projects using pitfall traps to capture vertebrates and invertebrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency Category</th>
<th>Competency Requirement</th>
<th>Competency Assessment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wildlife licences</td>
<td>1.1 Licence to take fauna for scientific purposes (Reg 17) OR 1.2 Licence to take fauna for educational or public purposes (Reg 15)</td>
<td>Provide SC (DPaW personnel only) or SF licence number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide TF licence number</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal qualifications and course certificates (Note: Suitable levels of skills/experience can substitute for formal training requirements)</td>
<td>3.5 TAFE qualifications in fauna management and handling OR 3.7 CALM Mammal Conservation Course (1992-1995) OR 3.8 CALM/DEC/DPaW Fauna Management Course (1997-)</td>
<td>Provide course year, TAFE facility</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Provide course year</td>
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<td>Provide course year</td>
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<tr>
<td>General skills/experience</td>
<td>5.1 Relevant knowledge of species biology and ecology</td>
<td>Personnel should be able to correctly identify the likely species to be encountered in pitfall traps for the site/s being studied. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and/or consultation of field guides and other literature. Estimated total time in field: Minimum 1 year involved in similar projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency Category</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fauna survey and capture skills/experience</td>
<td>6.1 Experience in setting and use of live traps - cage, Elliott, pit, Bromilow AND 6.3 Training and experience in trap hygiene, disease transmission</td>
<td>Personnel should be confident at hand capture of the range of species likely to be captured. This experience is best obtained under supervision of more experienced personnel. Estimated total time in field: Minimum 1 year involved in similar projects. Personnel should be familiar with hygiene procedures. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and/or consultation of literature. Estimated total time in field: Minimum 1 year involved in similar projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal handling and processing skills/experience</td>
<td>7.1 Experience in handling terrestrial mammal fauna AND 7.2 Experience in handling terrestrial herpetofauna</td>
<td>Personnel should be confident at handling and restraint of the range of species likely to be captured. Personnel should be able to correctly identify the likely species to be encountered in pitfall traps in the area. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and/or consultation of literature. Estimated total time in field: Minimum 1 year involved in similar projects. Personnel should be familiar with reptile identification methods such as scale counts. Staff should be confident at hand capture of the range of species likely to be captured. Personnel should be able to correctly identify the likely species to be encountered in pitfall traps in the area. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and/or consultation of literature. Estimated total time in field: Minimum 1 year involved in similar projects.</td>
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10 **Occupational Health and Safety**

First aid kits should always be carried in vehicles. You must be aware of your own safety and the safety of others as well as of the animals during handling.

It is recommended that a job safety analysis is undertaken prior to undertaking any monitoring using pitfall traps at your site. This safety analysis should include the following considerations.

10.1 **Animal bites, stings and scratches**

Removing animals from pitfall traps can result in injuries to handlers from the animals. Spiders, scorpions and other invertebrates may be disturbed when checking pitfall traps and can inflict irritating stings or bites. All injuries (even superficial ones) should be appropriately treated as soon as possible to ameliorate possible allergic reaction, prevent infection and promote healing.

If DPaW personnel or volunteers are injured, an “Incident and Near Hit Notification” form must be completed and forwarded to DPaW’s Risk Management Section.

10.2 **Snake bite**

Personnel should be aware that when working in the field there is the possibility that venomous snakes
may be encountered. Field personnel should be aware of the treatment for snakebite and carry appropriate pressure bandages. Stout, ankle-high boots should be worn with long trousers.

10.3 Zoonoses

All personnel must take precautions to minimise the risk of disease transmission to protect themselves, their families and wildlife populations. There are a number of diseases carried by animals that can be transmitted to humans (i.e. zoonoses such as Toxoplasmosis, Leptospirosis, Salmonella). Advice on minimising disease risk is contained in SOP 16.2 Managing disease risk in wildlife management.

10.4 Allergies

Some personnel may develop allergies when they come in contact with animal materials such as hair and dander, or if bitten by invertebrates. Personnel known to develop allergies should wear gloves when handling animals and long-sleeved pants/shirt.

Personnel with severe allergies associated with animals, with immune deficiency diseases or on immunosuppressant therapy should not engage in the handling of wildlife.

11 Further Reading

The following SOPs have been mentioned in the advice regarding use of pitfall traps. It is recommended that the following SOPs and further reading are also considered when proposing to undertake pitfall trapping.

SOP 10.1 Animal handling/restraint using soft containment
SOP 10.2 Hand restraint of wildlife
SOP 14.2 First aid for animals
SOP 15.1 Humane killing of animals under field conditions in wildlife management
SOP 16.2 Managing disease risk in wildlife management


12 References


