



The Grasshopper Trap

By Patrick F. McManus

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The bestselling author of *They Shoot Canoes, Don't They?* is at it again with more of his zany spoofs of *The Great Outdoors*.

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The Grasshopper Trap By Patrick F. McManus Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #247576 in eBooks
- Published on: 1986-09-15
- Released on: 1986-09-15
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

“Patrick McManus is a treasure.” *The Atlantic*

“Everybody should read Patrick McManus.” *The New York Times Book Review*

“A style that brings to mind Mark Twain, Art Buchwald, and Garrison Keillor.” *People*

“Describing Patrick F. McManus as an outdoor humorist is like saying Mark Twain wrote books about small boys . . . the funniest writer around today--indoors or outdoors.” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“McManus captures the innocence most of us lose when we become grown up, and reading him you can't help recalling similar times and events in your own life.” *Booklist*

About the Author

Patrick F. McManus has published novels, plays, and more than a dozen collections of his humor columns from *Outdoor Life* and other magazines. There are nearly two million copies of his book in print, including his bestselling *The Shoot Canoes, Don't They?*; *The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw*; and *A Fine and Pleasant Misery*. He divides his time between Spokane, Washington and Idaho.

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Grasshopper Trap, The The Skunk Ladder

Driving out to the country the other day, my wife, Bun, and I passed the aromatic remains of at least ten road-killed skunks.

"Must be a good year for skunks," I observed.

"Looks like a bad one for them, if you ask me," Bun said.

"I mean there's obviously a large skunk population this year," I sniffed, instantly realizing that I shouldn't have sniffed, because at that moment we were passing another skunk carcass.

Just then a live skunk scurried out in front of the car. I swerved to the left and back to the right, and we managed to screech safely around it. Bun screeches quite often but it was the first time I had screeched in years.

"Goodness, that was close!" Bun said. "What would you have done if you'd hit that skunk with the car?"

"The only decent thing," I replied. "I'd have stopped and buried it in the ditch. I might even have buried the skunk along with it."

"You talk as if you've had a lot of experience with skunks," she said.

"You bet," I said. "Mostly when I was a kid. You mean I've never told you about the skunk ladder? Boy, do you have a treat in store for you!"

"Sorry I mentioned it," she mumbled, possibly in an attempt to conceal her intense interest in the bizarre tale. As I told Bun, my friend Crazy Eddie Muldoon and I were sitting on the Muldoon corral fence one summer afternoon, trying to think of something to do. This was shortly after I had nearly drowned in the creek while testing Eddie's deep-sea diving apparatus, and after we had crashed in our homemade plane during takeoff from the roof of the Muldoon barn, and after our submarine had failed to surface with us in the pond, but before Mr. Muldoon started being treated by old Doc Mosby for a mysterious nervous condition. I recall

mentioning to Eddie that his father seemed to be awfully jumpy that summer, and Eddie said he had noticed it, too, and wondered if it might not be caused by eating vegetables.

Even as we sat on the fence, Mr. Muldoon came by on his tractor and stopped to study us suspiciously.

"What are you two up to now?" he demanded.

"Nothin', Pa," Crazy Eddie said. "Just trying to think of something to do."

Mr. Muldoon shuddered. "Well, when you think of it, you let me know before you start to do it, you hear?"

"Sure, Pa," Eddie said. "I guess what we'll do is go dig in the dirt. We've been talkin' about doin' that."

"Okay," said Mr. Muldoon, shifting his tractor into gear. "Just don't build nothin'!" Then he drove off.

"What kind of hole are we going to dig?" I asked Eddie.

He stared off into space, his face enveloped in that dreamy expression that always accompanied one of his wondrous new ideas. "A big hole," he said. "A real big hole."

Digging the hole occupied us for most of a week. One of the problems with digging a big hole is that it is difficult to know when it is big enough and deep enough. There are basically two kinds of holes dug in the ground: (1) applied holes, such as for posts, wells, mines, etc., and (2) holes for holes' sake. Eddie and I were digging one of the latter. Eventually, the hole was so deep we could barely heave shovelfuls of dirt up over its sides. At that point, Eddie judged it to be finished.

Since Eddie had insisted that we keep the sides of the hole squared up, we had to pull ourselves out of it on a rope, one end of which was tied to a pile of stumps nearby. The stump pile also served to screen our digging activities from the view of Mr. Muldoon, who was cutting hay in a field on the far side of the farm. As Eddie often pointed out, any kind of engineering feat should be screened from the eyes of the engineer's parents.

That way you could concentrate on your work and didn't have to be answering a lot of dumb questions all the time.

We were immensely proud of the hole, and I still don't believe I've ever seen a nicer one. It was so nice, in fact, that Eddie abandoned his view of it as purely an aesthetically pleasing hole and began trying to think of it as practical.

"You know what we could do with this hole?" he said. "We could make a wild animal trap out of it, you know, like Frank Buck does in Africa. We could cover it up with branches and leaves and grass, and wild animals would come along and fall into it. Then we could tame them and teach them to do tricks."

Eddie fairly glowed with enthusiasm as his idea began to take shape. "And then we could start our own circus," he went on. "We could charge people to see our animals do tricks. We might even get rich. Gosh, I bet we could catch a deer or an elk or a bear or a mountain lion or ..."

"One of your father's cows," I put in.

Eddie's glow of enthusiasm faded. "Yeah," he said. "I never thought of that."

Both of us stood there silently for a moment, thinking of Mr. Muldoon staring down into the hole at one of his milk cows. It was unpleasant to think about.

"Tomorrow we'd better fill the hole back in," Eddie said.

"How about tonight? Maybe a cow will fall in tonight."

Eddie pondered this possibility for a moment. "I got it," he said. "There's a big ol' door out behind the barn. We'll drag that down here and put it over the hole." And that is what we did, before knocking off work for the day, secure in the knowledge that the door would save us from the uncomfortable experience of watching his father undergo one of his fits of hysteria.

Early the next morning, Eddie and I headed for the big hole, prepared to start the tedious task of undigging it. As we approached the excavation, a familiar odor reached our nostrils.

"Must be a skunk around here someplace," Eddie said.

"Maybe it's in the hole," I said.

"Couldn't be. We covered it with the door."

Nevertheless, the skunk was in the hole. He had apparently found an open space under the door, slipped in for a look around, and plummeted the eight feet or more to the bottom of the hole. Oddly, he did not seem to be frightened of us. Even stranger, for we did not know that skunks were great diggers, he had hollowed out a

huge cavern under one side, in an attempt to dig his way out of the hole.

"We can't fill in the hole with the skunk in there," I said. "How are we going to get him out?"

"Maybe one of us could drop down in the hole, grab him real quick before he sprays, and then throw him out," Eddie said. "I'll yell real loud so he'll look at me and won't notice when you jump in and grab him and ..."

"I don't like that idea," I said. "Think of something else."

"I got it!" Eddie exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "We'll go up to my dad's shop and build a ladder. Then we'll stick it down the hole and hide someplace while he climbs the ladder. A skunk should be able to figure out how to climb a ladder."

Eddie and I were working on the ladder when his father walked into the shop. "I thought I told you not to build anything," he growled. "What's that?"

"Just a skunk ladder," Crazy Eddie said.

"Oh," his father said. "Well, don't build nothin' else unless you tell me first."

Eddie and I went back out to the hole and stuck the ladder in it. The skunk showed no inclination to climb it, choosing instead to hide in the cavern it had hollowed out. Just then we heard Eddie's father yelling at us: "What did you mean, *skunk ladder*?" We peeked out around the stump pile, and there was Mr. Muldoon striding across the pasture toward us.

"Quick," said Eddie. "Help me put the door back over the hole!"

We threw the door over the top of the hole, neatly hiding it from view. Before we could think of a good explanation for a big pile of dirt out in a corner of the pasture, Mr. Muldoon charged up.

"Now what?" he cried. "Where did that dirt come from? What's my door doing out here?"

He reached down and grabbed the edge of the door.

"Stop, Pa, don't!" Eddie yelled, rushing forward.

From that point on, the actions of the parties involved all blurred together. It is difficult to recall the exact sequence of action, but I will try.

Mr. Muldoon grabbed the door and flipped it off the hole. Then he said, "Smells like a skunk ..." at which time he shot out of sight, leaving his straw hat suspended in the air for perhaps a quarter of a second. (Later, I deduced that Mr. Muldoon had stepped on the edge of the hole, beneath which the skunk had hollowed out its cavern.) A cloud of dust puffed up out of the hole when Mr. Muldoon hit the bottom. Then he yelled several serious swear words with the word "SKUNK!" mixed in with them. Next there were a lot of earthy scrabbling sounds, and Mr. Muldoon came clawing his way up the side of the hole, but the dirt gave way and he fell back in, saying something like "Ooofff!" It is important, perhaps, to realize that all the activity so far had taken place in a span of no more than four seconds. Eddie had meanwhile charged forward, yelling, "Pa, Pa, don't hurt him!" He was standing at the top of the ladder when the skunk rushed up that contrivance and emerged from the cloud of dust. Startled, and not wanting the skunk to reverse ends and spray him, Eddie grabbed the little animal by the head. The skunk started scratching and biting, so Eddie threw it back down in the hole, where its arrival was followed by a savage bellow from Mr. Muldoon, who, to our surprise, then came racing up the skunk ladder himself.

This was the signal for Eddie and me to start running, which we did, and we continued running until the thunderous sounds of Mr. Muldoon's clodhopper boots faded behind us, and still we ran on, finally outdistancing even the nostril-searing smell of Eddie's father.

Eddie eventually made his way home and placed himself under the protective custody of his mother, until Mr. Muldoon's rage subsided into the odd little facial tic that was to remain with him for several months...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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