

Fox Trot

Hungry predator poses for year-end shot

By Dick Ellis

'Tis the season for predator hunting. With deer hunting and waterfowling over and most small game seasons grinding to a halt, coyotes and fox become targets for hunters not yet ready to case the shotgun or rifle. Sometimes it's personal. Some hunters don't mind cutting a notch or two on a local coyote population given more and more credit for preying on fawns, in particular in these years of low deer numbers and all predators under the hunter's microscope.

I too have been asked by a Rock County landowner where I have hunted wild pheasants for more than a decade if I would hunt coyotes there as a personal favor. An array of domestic livestock and pets from ducks to lambs and goats to rabbits and geese that walk her property have taken big hits close to the farmhouse from coyotes that must first learn to fear man if they are ever to pass up such easy meals.

Hunters instill that fear. I have also never pulled the trigger on a coyote. I shoot only what I eat, but have always enjoyed taking the camera and following the predator hunts when my friends or readers who do chase coyotes and fox extend the invitation. A personal plea from a landowner, though, may change that thinking. At the very least, I will extend the invitation to those same friends and again follow the hunt. I do



The writer called this red fox into a photo the day after Christmas in suburban New Berlin. The fox ran 100 yards to a distress call before stretching high from a ravine for a better look at 35 yards. (Ellis)

know there are few bigger thrills for a hunter than misleading any wild animal by imitating its calling in mating season or the calls of its prey.

In Grant County several years ago, I called turkeys for Todd Cook of Beaver Dam. I am less than adequate at many things that

require expertise in the field, most notably in the angling world, but I have enjoyed more than my share of success at calling turkeys with a diaphragm (mouth) call. With "Cookie" next to me, I called a coyote within five feet of our stand before the predator discovered its mistake and skedaddled for the

Mississippi River hills.

"The coyote and fox season ends February 15th," said my friend Arnold Groehler via cell phone from the ice of Horicon where he ran his daily trap line. "You can hunt them at night. Some of the best times to hunt them are on cold, calm nights a couple

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hours before dawn and a couple hours after sunset when a distress call can be heard over a great distance. Some serious hunters use electronic calls with a 50 foot remote with something like a decoy or stuffed rabbit out at a distance that will offer a good shot."

Groehler said that rifles like a .222 caliber that offer high velocity and flat trajectory in open country or shotgun loads like BB or smaller buckshot in tighter terrain provide a quick kill. The further out a killing shot can be taken, he said, the better to the animal's wariness.

"A coyote can pick up the movement like a hunter shifting a firearm to the shooting position," Groehler said. "Predator hunters are in tune to wind direction and many will use a scent cover too like skunk scent when they hunt."

On December 26, I used my mouth calls and a camera to "hunt" for the perfect coyote or fox shot in the heavily populated New Berlin area where I live. Both species are common in the Milwaukee suburbs. Where I live in Waukesha County, large woodlots, farmland and brush shrouded ravines and field edges separate neighborhoods. Gray squirrels and rabbits are prevalent, making the area a natural draw for predators always on the move for a relatively easy meal.

"The red fox prefers open areas with edge covers such as brushy fencelines, field forest edges or wooded stream and lake borders," stated one internet site after I googled "Wisconsin Red

Fox. "It is also found in residential suburbs, but tend to stay out of industrial and commercial areas."

According to several internet sources, a male red fox will travel an average of nine miles each night to find a meal and prey availability plays an important role in red fox habitat selection. During winter months, shifting snow conditions influence that availability but throughout the year the fox adapts and feeds on mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, invertebrates and plants. In southern Wisconsin, the main prey species of the red fox is the cottontail rabbit.

Red foxes are nocturnal according to the sites and as Groehler said, are most active at dawn and dusk, but with reduced amounts of nocturnal activity during the spring and summer. When hunting small mammals, the red fox will use mainly sound to locate a meal and then use a tremendous jumping ability to capture the prey. According to one site, a red fox will even attempt to nap near a burrow in which prey escaped and wait for it to re-emerge.

I was able to call in a fox for a dozen photos in a wooded ravine at mid-morning December 26 before he "busted" me at 35 or 40 yards. Turkey calls did nothing, although we have a very high number of wild turkeys wandering New Berlin. The skinny, (he gained weight on film) apparently young fox came in to a distressed squirrel squeal and chatter that I



A red fox works its way down a wooded ravine in New Berlin the morning after Christmas to investigate the writer's distress call. The coyote and fox season runs into mid-February. (Ellis)

did without the aid of an actual call. I could see the fox for almost 100 yards coming hard and it was apparent he was hoping for an easy meal. We had a nice stare-down through the camera lens before he "realized" his mistake and left for safer pastures.

If you're wondering if this success is common for me, the answer is "no". Failures trying to capture a story probably out-

weigh the successes. But when success is found, like a somewhat rare photo, then the story...interviews and internet research... sometime evolve around the photo that's already in the bag. I'll take them how they come.

See you next year. *OWO*

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