Defending against burglars at night used to mean guarding the livestock. Where have all the predator hunters gone?

To Hunt a Predator

Participating in a November 1948 fox hunt near Hillsboro in Montgomery County were five successful fox hunters (L to R Johnnie Hamby, Burl Hemken, Otto Hemken, Russell Hemken and Bill Vogel), pictured with local game warden Vic Karolvic. Bill Vogel tells us "fox fur coats and scarves were very popular and stylish at the time." Submitted as a Portraits of the Past.

Story By Joe McFarland

When it comes to predator hunting, the hunter with the greatest advantage today isn't necessarily a human. All high-tech gizmos aside, humans simply aren't equipped with the keenest of predatory senses compared with our wild counterparts. For example, can any human detect the scent of a coyote in the woods at night—from 100 yards away? As for eyesight, even the best human eye can't notice slight movement along a fence row at midnight…yet a coyote might bolt from the moonlight reflection of a gun barrel. The fact is, many of us technology-dependent humans today have trouble noticing what's trotting across the road in front of our headlights. As we chat on cell phones and reach for CDs, our ability to observe nature is fading like a rear-view mirror image.

It seems, in terms of raw skills in nature, many of us have lost our way. But that's exactly what makes predator hunting today a wildly challenging opportunity; it gives us a chance to revive latent abilities and to reconnect with basic skills of our human heritage. What is predator hunting? Years ago, it often meant defending the home front against four-legged burglars—the predators posing threats to livestock and crops. Today, predator hunters still hunt for the furs, as a fine coyote or fox pelt becomes a luxurious possession once tanned properly. But predator hunters today also head out for the fundamental challenge of outfoxing the fox, or calling the canny coyote into range.

"Since wolves have been extirpated, humans are the only predators of coyotes in Illinois," explained Department of Natural Resources Furbearer Biologist Bob Bluett. He said the tremendous, statewide increase in coyote populations during the past several decades stands in sharp contrast to the overall decline in the number of predator hunters.

(Photo by Bill Shacklee.)

Predator hunting during daylight (right) requires near-flawless camouflage. Above: A monster-size raccoon with a gray fox.

This makes predator hunting as accessible as it is challenging. While studies indicate hunters still account for 58 percent of coyote mortality in Illinois farm country, available hunting spots on the outskirts of cities are often left untapped.

How to start? It's not as simple as making a few squeaks on a call and waiting for a gullible predator to walk by. Prepare yourself by checking the current Illinois Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations, where you'll learn, among other things, that the hunting season for coyotes is open nearly year-around. (Restrictions apply during the November and December firearm deer seasons.)

Fox hunting is open from Nov. 10 through Jan. 31 statewide (but also closed during the November and December firearm deer seasons) and the hours are nearly unrestricted. Many predator hunters prefer to hunt during fox season, since pelts are prime and coyotes may also be hunted at night at that time.

"Responses to calls can be enthusiastic," Bluett said. "But coyotes learn quickly from botched shots, offering a wary approach—or cold refusal—the next time around. As the season wears on, hunting during the worst weather winter has to offer can be an effective tactic because empty bellies mean better responses to the promise of an easy meal."

There are few experiences in nature that can increase one's heart rate more than hearing coyotes respond to a predator call at night. Whether using a hand-held coyote call, a rabbit distress call, or electronic versions of either call, once the howling begins from afar, circling, moving closer, the excitement is sure to raise hairs on the neck.

Calling predators into range requires certain basics. A perfectly camouflaged hunter—night or day—has better chances. Pay attention to the wind and position yourself upwind of game trails and anticipated travel routes. Often, predators will attempt to circle downwind before approaching. Make that option difficult by utilizing creeks or other major obstacles as downwind backstops. Know that human scent is virtually impossible to mask, and the path you choose to hike before settling in for the hunt will retain your scent for days.

Once you've selected your strategic position, allow the area to settle before calling. If electronic calls are used, position the call at some distance from yourself, but close enough to keep sight of the target area. While it is unlawful to "shine" for wildlife at night with vehicle lights, the use of portable, hand-held flashlights is allowed for hunters on foot and not in a vehicle.

Owls have been known to swoop down upon callers, so know your target.

Much can be learned about the skills required to be a hunter while hunting for predators. Lesson No. 1: The better predator usually wins.

On December 8, 1937, Springfield subscriber Ray Ackerman caught his first fox, and then had it turned into a fur piece for his mother, Louise H. Ackerman (pictured), for a surprise Christmas gift. Submitted as a Portraits of the Past.

Coyotes are increasingly abundant in Illinois—yet luring one with a call remains a wild challenge.

(Photo by Tom Prang.)