One beagle superstar provides his owner hours of enjoyment hunting rabbits.

Zekebiscuit

Story By Rich Wagoner
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It was a cold, clear central Illinois morning. My grandfather and I were on a great adventure. Walking together on the family farm watching Sandy running in front of us, I can still remember Granddad saying, "If you want to have a lot of rabbits you have to have a lot of groundhogs."

That probably was the first time I considered the complex idea of the inter-relationship between animals and their habitats. There were lessons to learn that day and rabbit hunting was something I wanted to know everything about. I loved the childhood stories involving rabbits and their impish adventures and was fascinated by the thought of hunting them.

We turned down a snowy valley and watched Sandy cast from side to side with her nose to the ground. Suddenly, as if a bugler sounded from a hidden orchestra pit in the timber, she opened up on a fresh track. Imagine the haunting sound of a lonesome train whistle or the urgent warning of a foghorn in the mist and you are close to hearing what the beagle hound sounds like on a hot trail. I was hooked.

Among upland game hunters, the nose-to-the-ground rabbit-tracking abilities of the beagle make it a great field companion.

Sandy was a great dog, and I shared many adventures with her, chasing everything from rabbits to squirrels, but she can't compare to the Seabiscuit of beagles I met recently. There is a magnificent dog in central Illinois named Zeke that has 300 rabbit notches on his kennel in the first three years of his life. He is a basset-beagle cross owned by Ken Fromm from Pleasant Plains.

Zeke was lying on the front porch when I pulled up. He didn't seem the least concerned about my approach down the long lane of the Fromm-Huff farm, but I knew he was the dog I was looking for. Alert eyes and a squat, muscular body made him look like a canine gladiator reposing before a battle in the arena.

Zeke's arena is a fascinating place in itself. The Fromm-Huff farm is planted in native prairie wildflowers and indigenous plants. The greenhouses and fields produce seeds and "prairie plugs" for commercial use by conservationists and governmental programs working to restore the native flora to the Midwest. Indian grass, rattlesnake master, little and big bluestem, aster, rosinweed, purple coneflowers and gentian cover the farm in an explosive carpet of colors and textures. This is a rabbit wonderland and Ken Fromm is its creator, and master of Zeke.

As I listened to Fromm describe in specific detail the types of plants on the farm, he rattled off Latin names like Cato calling role in the Senate. When I asked where he attended college he replied with a laugh, "Right here on the farm. What I have learned about nature came from books and a lot of personal experience. College was not an option for me. I grew up working on farms owned by family and friends and later got involved in the timber and orchard business, all giving me insights into the wonderful things that grow right under our feet. I just started learning about native plants and pretty soon here I sat in the middle of a hundred acres of restored prairie."

The Fromm-Huff college also was attended by Zeke, who graduated with honors. His roommate is a red-tailed hawk named Homer that sometimes

The central Illinois prairie habitat of the Fromm-Huff farm is a natural magnet for cottontails—just ask the resident expert, a beagle hound named Zekebiscuit.

(Background photo courtesy of Fromm family.)

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History reverses itself at the Fromm-Huff farm, where native prairie plants—once destroyed by pioneer plows—are now a seed cash crop.

waits for Zeke to flush a rabbit and then swoops down and spoils his fun. According to Fromm, Homer's stealing is about the only way Zeke loses a rabbit once he is on the trail.

Zeke started hunting on his own, but as he and Fromm spent time together Zeke learned that to be successful he needed Fromm to shoot the rabbit after the chase.

"There are several misconceptions about rabbit hunting," Fromm pointed out. "Most people think a beagle forces a rabbit to run in a circle. The truth is a rabbit is more comfortable in its own territory where he is familiar with the ground cover. Rabbits don't want to explore new places where they might get caught in the open so they run in a specific area—usually a few acres. A hunter should scout an area before a hunt, picking out a place to stand that looks like a natural funnel or bottleneck for the rabbit to run through. And if you are patient, and stand still, the rabbit will be so intent on the beagle's presence behind him, while avoiding objects in his immediate area, that it might pass within a few feet of you."

I could tell Zeke was a good eater. He is larger than most beagles I have seen. Part of his size might be attributed to his unusual diet. The Fromm-Huff farm has seasonal workers who help in the harvesting of plant seed and Zeke often eats at home—and trots up to the tenant house and enjoys a second meal. Tacos are his favorite food, with a hot dog or two thrown in.

Zeke needs lots of nourishment to run like he does. Nothing—snow, ice or rain—stops him when he is on his appointed duty. His enemies are the coyotes and foxes that share his taste for rabbit. His last bout with a coyote resulted in a tie. They both walked away from the fight deciding neither could win.

But for a small dog like Zeke to run off a coyote is a feat in itself.

Zeke is a beagle superstar but his fame has not gone to his head. He loves children as much as he loves to rabbit hunt, and loves to be petted and adored by his family. And they love him in return.

Beagles are wonderful animals and can provide someone with a small farm a great outdoor experience.

"You don't have to have a lot of land to enjoy rabbit hunting," Fromm assured me. "More people should get involved with beagles. With 5 acres of weeds you can have a ball."

A beagle can provide an opportunity to get outdoors and hunt—on just a few acres. Pick a good place where you think the rabbits will pass and sit and wait. Beagles love to do all the work for you.

Rich Wagoner, an avid outdoorsman who enjoys backpacking and other outdoor sports, resides at Ghost Hollow Ranch adjacent to Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area near Chandlerville.

Ken Fromm reaps a hunter's reward from his fields of native prairie plants. The habitat is choice for rabbits, and Fromm and his beagle hunting partner love to share the bounty.