

Mrs. Tull ✓

*Conservation Magazine Article.*by D. F. Switzenberg
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With the upland bird season of 1946 now in the realm of history, many hunters are reporting having seen and sometimes killed foxes during their days afield. Such reports are an annual occurrence, but have been especially numerous during the past few years when foxes reached an all time high in Michigan. The fact that many persons thus have the opportunity of observing foxes for the first time, once again calls attention to a troublesome problem that has been of much concern to game administrators, not only in Michigan but in practically all states within the red fox's range. While foxes may have reached the peak in 1945, the fact remains that they are still with us in considerable numbers. Sportsmen, particularly pheasant hunters, are therefore much concerned as to the effect the current high fox population may be having on their sport, and often wonder why the Conservation Department is not taking more drastic and more obvious means of combatting this "menace."

Before we try to answer this question by entering into a discussion of control methods, it might be worthwhile to review briefly the present fox problem, the circumstances which brought it about, and something of the early history of the fox in Michigan. In other words, "let's look at the record."

Actually the fox problem is not a new one. Even as far back as 1836 red foxes were known in the state. Bela Hubbard, an early historian and naturalist in Michigan, writing to a friend in 1887 says, "the fox has not been extirpated from these parts at the time of my first residence. I saw in 1836 in the sandy land of Springwells (2 miles from the west limits of Detroit) several fox holes, and could hear the bark of the inmates, but sly Reynard kept himself concealed. Master John, one of my young neighbors, who showed them to me, thinks they all terminate in

an extensive apartment -- the social parlor of the clan. Quite recently a red fox established a hiding place under the portico of my house, from whence he made destructive raids to the hen-roosts." Sounds pretty much like some of the stories we hear today, doesn't it? The fox's existence in 1881 in at least two of the southern counties, Washtenaw and Saginaw, was mentioned in histories of those two counties published in that year. Many old settlers have vouched for the red fox's occurrence in Michigan before the turn of the century.

The Conservation Department's first records go back to the Biennial Report of 1897 which says, "It is reported that foxes are increasing rapidly and that they kill a great many partridge and other game birds and rabbits". Subsequent reports continue to mention their increase, until about 1924-1925, when they apparently reached an "all time high" for that period. In the following year they began to decline and by 1929 were reported scarce. The 1929-1930 Biennial Report says, "Foxes are very scarce in most localities owing to extensive trapping and den hunting." Pointing out the fox's value as a ~~fur~~ animal, it further states, "Many trappers and hunters argue that the fox is one of the most important game and fur animals. Agitation for protection of foxes when their fur is unprime seems to be steadily gaining momentum as the number of these animals continues to decrease." Can it be that we shall ever again have need for such a measure? By 1933 reports of increases began to be heard, and by 1937 the animal was well on the way to the population peak which it occupies today. Just what ^{caused} this present high in fox populations is difficult to determine, but it doubtless resulted from a combination of many factors. High cycles in rodents and rabbits may have contributed to the upswing. Lack of hunting and trapping due to war conditions and to low fur prices may have helped also. And certain cyclic phenomena, which are as yet little understood, possibly played a part in present high numbers.

With the increase in foxes, complaints began to filter in to Department field headquarters that chickens, ducks, turkeys, and even occasional lambs and pigs were being taken. When pheasants and grouse began to decline, and more especially last year when pheasant hunting was poorer than in many years, many sportsmen became alarmed and demanded that immediate action be taken to alleviate the situation. The fact that we now had a situation in which our outstanding game bird was scarce, at the same time that a most "notorious" predator was abundant, naturally caused many persons to put two and two together and place full blame upon the fox. The fox can hereby be given a clean slate because we recognize that it does take its toll of game birds at times, particularly during the spring months when its food demands with young in the den are heaviest. We have endeavored, however, to point out that it is only one of the several factors involved in the fate of our game birds and animals, and not the controlling factor some people seem to believe. Unquestionably we now have too many foxes for the good of everyone. Such high populations are of benefit to no one, not even the fox hunter, who complains there are so many that it is impossible to track them effectively. Moreover, this present abundance has probably contributed to the present low market price for fox fur. Under these circumstances they should be controlled until their numbers reach a point compatible with the interests of the people concerned. The question then arises, just how can foxes be most effectively and economically controlled.

As a step in this direction, in 1943 the state legislature appropriated \$20,000 to be used on whatever form of control the Conservation Commission thought would be most effective. After careful consideration of all the facts involved, the Commission decided in favor of the present Trapper-Instructor system. This system employs the services of nine trapper-instructors who operate in every part of the state. Their principal duties are to meet with farmers' and sportsmen's groups and

give instructions in the trapping of marauding animals. They also investigate individual damage complaints and instruct the complainants in trapping so that they may be better prepared to handle the trouble if it occurs in the future. In extreme cases, or where the complainants are physically unable to trap, the trapper-instructors will do the trapping themselves. The trapper-instructor system is considered sound from the standpoint of good wildlife management and control, in that it tends to eliminate those animals actually doing the damage. Farmers and sportsmen having local predator problems are urged to contact the trapper-instructor in their District by calling either their nearest District Headquarters or the Conservation Officer stationed in that county.

Through the utilization of trapper-instructors many persons have learned to trap foxes, and have learned that outwitting "wily Reynard" is not as difficult as it was formerly believed. In the past fox trapping has been surrounded with an aura of mystery, and the old-time fox trappers were often looked up to in their communities as persons of superior powers. The fact is it has been amply demonstrated that anyone who is capable of using good common sense and takes the trouble to study the ways of the fox can learn to trap them. Many have done so and have gathered a tidy little income in the process. In recent years a number of trappers have complained that under present low fur values, trapping is not profitable. However, a glance at the records of many trappers shows that although the price of fox pelts is extremely low as compared with the "good old days", averaging in fact less than \$5.00 for a prime pelt last year, many have reaped a good profit on their investment in spite of unfavorable market conditions. This was made possible by the fact that they were able to take a comparatively large number of animals which partially offset the reduced value of the individual pelts. Many trappers have taken upwards of one hundred foxes in a single season of a few weeks, and at an average price of \$3.00 a fairly sizeable profit should have been realized. From the standpoint of man-power involved, trapping

is undoubtedly the most effective form of control yet devised. If it were carried on by more people over the entire state it could do much to reduce our surplus fox population. Admittedly higher fur prices might be a spur to more widespread trapping, but until the whims of milady are again turned to a preference for long-haired furs, or until the men who control the fur trade find new uses for fox furs, it is too much to expect that a rise in prices will take place in the near future.

For many years the Conservation Department has advocated and encouraged fox hunting, not only because of its value as a control measure, but also because it constitutes an exciting and invigorating off-season sport. In the past 2 or 3 years many sportsmen's clubs have held organized drives in which an area of land, usually one or more sections, is surrounded and driven, and the foxes which are forced out of the area are shot by hunters stationed along the boundaries. Other versions of the drive method have been tried, but they are all similar in that a given plot of ground is worked over by a comparatively large number of hunters. This method is in contrast to that of still hunting or trailing in which a trail is picked up and followed either by tracking on snow or by using dogs under either snow or bare ground conditions. The latter usually employs fewer men and is more successful from the standpoint of manpower involved, especially if well-trained fox hounds are used.

Another form of hunting, though less prevalent in Michigan, is hunting with horses and hounds, in which the hunter follows the quarry on horseback. This type of hunting, or chase as it is aptly termed since the victim is not usually killed but saved to run again, recalls the old English form in which the participants were gaily bedecked in red coats and other fancy paraphernalia. To a disciple of the chase, fox hunting in this manner constitutes the "sport of kings", and all other kinds of hunting, fox or otherwise, pale by comparison. While the chase by horses and hounds is an ancient and honored sport, and still has a few devotees in Michigan, it is of little or no value as a control measure for the reason stated above.

Still another kind of hunting is "belling." For this a good mellow-toned cow bell is needed. After a fresh track is located, the hunter carrying the bell follows the track until the fox is either jumped or the tracker is pretty sure that one is a short distance ahead. At this point the bell is unsuffled and run heartily as the tracker follows along the trail. The fox, being possessed of overpowering curiosity, usually pauses to find out what all the noise is about. In the meantime, the other member, or members, of the hunting party, always located downwind from the victim, waits until the latter slinks into gun range, and then lets loose with "both barrels." Strange as this kind of hunting may sound to many people, it actually works under the right weather conditions and if properly handled.

Other forms of fox control have been carried out with varying success. One is the digging out of dens and removal of the young. While this eliminates a relatively large number of foxes before they have any possible opportunity of doing harm, it is fraught with many complications from the standpoint of sound control and management. In the first place it fails to destroy the breeding adults, which unless they are later trapped continue to raise another litter next year. Furthermore, since the young are removed before they are of any value for their fur, a valuable fur resource is lost. It is from the legal angle that the greatest difficulty arises. Many do not realize that according to state game laws the dens of protected fur-bearing and game animals may not be disturbed. In many cases it is not possible to tell the den of a fox from that of the protected animals, and vice versa. Thus there is always the danger that one who digs out a fox den may run into trouble with the law. To prevent this, any person who is interested in digging out a fox den for the purpose of predator control should first consult his local Conservation Officer or District Headquarters in order that it may first be definitely established that the den is unquestionably occupied by foxes and not by a protected species.

A form of control which is both illegal and unwise from the standpoint of good wildlife management is the gassing of dens or poisoning of the occupants. This

has been done in the past not only in Michigan but in many other states, but has been largely abandoned by wildlife administrators because of the impossibility of its being effectively and safely handled on a large scale without danger to other wildlife, to pets, and to livestock.

The question of bounties has also been considered at some length, and all the evidence we have been able to gather still indicates that bounties as a form of predator control are ineffective, wasteful, and subject to unlimited fraud. Many counties which formerly paid bounties have become convinced of their high cost and ineffectiveness, and have abolished them entirely.

As a matter of fact, while man can do much to remedy the current fox problem, the real solution will most likely be brought about by nature itself. When a wildlife species stands at its peak population it is "flirting with danger" to a marked degree. While we have as yet little evidence that disease has had a pronounced effect on fox populations in Michigan, conditions are still ripe for an epidemic, and unless these surplus animals are eliminated gradually by man or otherwise, the possibility of a drastic reduction remains. Indeed, man's attempt at regulating wildlife numbers are puny when contrasted with the highly efficient and often ruthless means employed by nature. In the meantime, the fox is still here; there are probably too many of them for the good of most of us, and we have a wildlife resource which can and should be utilized to the limit in the form of recreation through hunting, and financial gain through both hunting and trapping.