

THE RANCHMEN'S WAR ON VARMINTS

WHERE CALIFORNIA'S CATTLE, SHEEP AND POULTRY ARE RAISED. EVERY OWNER MUST KNOW THE HABITS AND SIGNS OF MOUNTAIN LIONS, COYOTES AND BOB CATS, AND JOIN WITH HIS GUN AND TRAINED DOGS IN THE DETERMINED SLAUGHTER



IN THE RANCH COUNTRY THE DOGS ARE TRAINED FROM EARLIEST PUPPYHOOD

By Marion Pearson

DISTURBANCE was in the air. A stone rolling noisily downhill was sufficient to send the band of sheep scurrying across the road, where they huddled together under a dripping oak until the snapping of a twig sent them back again in a frenzy of fear.

One of their fellows, a fine big thoroughbred, was stretched rigid on the slope of the embankment with his head and shoulders pointing downhill.

A blinding mist had settled over the country after the heavy downpour of the night before, and had it not been for the panicky condition of the flock the sharp eyes of Jim Runyon would have missed the important message that lay almost at the feet of his horse.

With intent and expectant eyes, Runyon peered about until the carcass of the sheep caught his gaze. In a moment he was off his horse and stooping over the dead animal. To his experienced eye its position showed that it had met with a violent death. The body was still warm. There was no sign of wound or blood, but then the rain had been heavy enough to have washed away all trace of the latter.

Runyon drew his knife and made a long lengthwise slit in the throat of the sheep, and then he found what he expected. The sharp fangs of the stranger had gone straight through the jugular vein.

The stranger was a coyote. He was a giant among his fellows, and cunning and strong in proportion. Now in the fall, when he was paying his annual visit in the neighborhood, terror reigned among the sheep and wrath and despair among their owners. His presence meant a carnage of sheep and lambs. He had a mania for slaughter. For several weeks now he had led a career of rapine on the ranch, making the most audacious raids. So cunning was he that the most cleverly laid trap failed to attract him into its clutch.

It was his mad joy to herd the sheep for two weeks at a time before making a big killing. The instinct of the shepherd dog in him found expression in the midnight hours, when he would round up the drowsy sheep and drive them furiously up and down hill; now enveloping them in a hurricane of motion, and then dancing and barking in front of the band and goading them to madness with sudden rushes.

As the first streak of dawn showed on the horizon he would make a final rush and scatter the sheep in every direction. Then creeping slyly up to one of them, with a sudden spring he would seize it by the throat with such force that the animal would turn a complete somersault, invariably landing with its head and shoulders lying down hill.

The killing was done in a second, and then the coyote, true to the habits of his kind, would tear open the body of the victim between the shoulders and feast on the heart and lungs. No other part of the carcass would be

touch. Should the selection for his meal be a lamb, then the tender stomach was laid bare and the curdled milk within lapped up.

Night after night during the long winter this coyote spent his time in herding sheep, not always the same band nor in the same locality. At the end of two weeks, usually after a heavy rain, the frenzy to destroy came upon him, and then he was a whirlwind of fury, killing one after another until 10, 20, 30 sheep were added to his score.

This morning, as Jim Runyon was satisfying himself of the presence of the stranger on his ranch, he knew that he was not the only sheepman that day in Mendocino county who was making a rueful guess as to the number of sheep that had been sacrificed the night before to satisfy the hunger and blood thirst of the varmints that infest the county. The stranger was the only one of the many coyotes that made his living during the winter by killing sheep. He was particularly feared on account of his ferocity and mad desire to kill.

He was called the stranger because he had dropped suddenly upon the sheep ranches in Mendocino county two years ago. None of the ranchmen in any of the surrounding counties had ever suffered from his raids. His presence on a ranch always marked an unusual number of sheep found dead within a short radius just after a storm, with no wound on the carcass save the bite that cut into the jugular vein.

By this find Jim knew it was time to be up and doing—to get together the dogs for the final tracking down of this menace to his flocks. For, in common with all sheepmen in northern California, the dogs formed an important factor of his ranch life.

Ever since the first of April the hounds had been penned up; all through the scorching summer shut up in the narrow confines of the corral and fed on bread made of middlings, kour milk and soda—just enough to keep them in condition, their condition being gauged by the appearance and disappearance of certain bones of their anatomy. No common dogs, these, but carefully bred Kentucky fox hounds, trained to run varmints only—the trailing of a deer or any other animal save that of a beast of prey, an offense for which the severest punishment is given. Varmint, he it understood, is the colloquial name for beasts that prey on livestock and poultry.

The storm that had begun the night before Runyon's discovery of the stranger's presence on the ranch broke out again about mid day. It gradually strengthened, ending in a steady downpour which lasted until about 3 o'clock next morning. By 7 o'clock the sky had been washed clear of every cloud. The sun was out and the cold, frosty morn-

ing air made ideal weather conditions for the tracking of the coyote.

A frenzy of unrest was upon the dogs. The first rain of the season found them with every muscle and nerve alive with the instinct that there was life abroad different from the life that had been throughout the long drowsy summer.

Runyon's appearance in the corral was greeted with a chorus of yelps and barks. They were mad to have their liberty again. Juno was the only one that could be trusted to keep her head after being freed. She was the recognized leader of the hounds, so swift and sagacious was she.

It was necessary to couple the others in order to control them at all. In spite of this handicapped confusion reigned, each dog pulling and straining at the couplings in order to satisfy his individual desire for direction.

Juno was steady. She lost no time in running ahead of the horsemen, sniffing eagerly at every bush and stone in search of the track she knew she was expected to find. She had gone some distance when a long drawn deep toned howl from her brought up the rest of the pack at top speed. She had uncovered the scent at the base of a pile of giant boulders. Here the hounds were quickly uncoupled and each one did his best to find which way the scent led. Juno had begun to circle the pile, when suddenly her nose shot to the ground and she was off with a yelp of satisfaction. The pack answered her call, its cry ringing and swelling as it dashed after her across a stretch of open country, the men speeding on behind.

At the bottom of a long ridge of chemical flanked hills the dogs plunged into the thicket, crashing through the pathless underbrush, reaching the crest while as yet the men were skirting the base looking for a space clear enough to follow. The baying of the dogs grew fainter and fainter, until all sound from them had ceased. They had gone beyond hearing.

At the top of the divide the men dismounted and strained every nerve to catch any sound that would give them a clue of the way the dogs had gone. The horses knew what was going on. They, too, stood in a listening attitude, with ears forward. A blast from Runyon's horn brought no answering cry. Twenty minutes went by, when a vagrant breeze wandering up the hill brought a faint baying from some distance to the north.

There was no path leading down the thickly wooded declivity, but Runyon, trusting to his woodman's instinct, picked his way through the underbrush, followed by the men, until they approached a point where the slope terminated in diverging canyons. The baying came from the ravine to the left, and from there it led the men out into the open country. Then came the roughest kind of rough riding, up on to the highlands and down into deep

brush choked gullies, climbing, sliding and struggling through chemical and over boulders, guided by the faraway yelping of the dogs.

Now the chase drew them into the bed of Dry creek, which they recklessly forded in spite of the swift current, which almost swept the horses from their feet. Then jumping and scrambling on to the embankment on the other side and spurring their horses over the slippery rocks, they reached the mesa beyond.

Suddenly from a ravine to the south came an echo of a wild chorus of barks and yelps. The hounds were working there in the brush. The men knew by the frantic excitement among the dogs that the coyote was not far distant, and made ready to shoot should the bottom of the canyon just in time to see on the shaggy gray green of the opposite slope a tawny streak. It was lost again behind a rocky excrescence. Again it came into view. The coyote, with a long, easy lope, was making for the top of the ridge.

The hands of the men flew to their guns. Although the beast was far beyond gunshot, they knew the sound of the firearms would encourage the dogs, who were beginning to show signs of fatigue. Their tongues were lolling out and their hides heaving with the strain of the chase. Hour after hour had gone since Juno first uncovered the scent. The sun was dropping fast and blue shadows were creeping into the ravines.

The only chance now was to force the coyote into a run. His easy lope was putting him far ahead of the dogs. Agitating the men spattered the wall of the canyon with shot from their guns. Then a triumphant din from the bounds rose from the brushy depths. The coyote's gait had broken. It was the sign that at last he had "lost his head" from the shooting and was in a panic. Now, instead of the easy trot, the animal was running, and the dogs were making up rapidly yard by yard the distance between themselves and their prey.

By this time the coyote had reached the top. From there it was a downhill dash, with the pack at his heels, the clamor growing all the while. The men were in close pursuit, although the going was difficult through the thick entanglement of brush. At last a clear space at the bottom of the ridge showed the end of the chase.

Backed against a smooth boulder that rose from the bed of the creek, pivoting on his hind legs, whirling and guarding and snapping from side to side, dripping blood from a score of wounds, the coyote was at bay. From every side the dogs made frantic efforts to close in, dashing and plunging at him, clipping their teeth into his flesh wherever they could get a hold. His throat was what they wanted, but the creature's marvelous quickness and agility was protecting that from an attack in any direction.

All at once, in the thick of the fight, Juno withdrew from the pack a little to the left of the coyote. Suddenly there was a streak of white. She had shot over the heads of the pack and her sharp teeth buried themselves in the animal's back, riding it into the brush, where it kills by biting through the neck. It eats enough to satisfy its hunger and then covers the remains with leaves, going back night after night until every bone is scraped clean.

For years the most unceasing warfare has been carried on in the north against these varmints. Every ranch has its collection of steel traps and pack of hounds. The traps are used during the dry months, when the lack of moisture on the ground makes trailing by the dogs an impossibility. In

READY TO TAKE UP THE COYOTE'S TRAIL



In these northern counties of California the broken country makes the herding of sheep under the watchful eyes of dog and shepherd an impossibility. The ground is cut with gullies, brush and boulders, so that every sheep must have a large area on which to browse in order to get a living. Under these conditions the sheepmen must resort to other means than shepherd and collie to protect their flocks from the wild animals, whose lust for blood and taste for the choicest beef and mutton cause such damage. Panthers, coyotes and wildcats are the "varmints" most common in these counties. Each one has its own peculiar method of killing.

The panther selects its victim, usually the largest "buck"—the range name for ram—it can find, drives it into a gulch, worrying it along by pulling out with its claws at every few yards tufts of wool from the animal's back. Once in the gulch he springs upon his prey, biting it through the back of the neck and crushing in the head. He often kills as many as eight or ten bucks before finding one to his taste for a meal. When his hunger is appeased, he buries what remains of the carcass and returns at his leisure to finish it. The panther does his killing at night and when his meal is over he goes to sleep upon some high ridge where the rays of the morning sun will strike him.

The wildcat attacks by springing on the animal's back, riding it into the brush, where it kills by biting through the neck. It eats enough to satisfy its hunger and then covers the remains with leaves, going back night after night until every bone is scraped clean.

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Sonoma county the extermination has been almost complete. The presence of a bear or panther on a ranch creates a sensation, while that of a coyote causes a stir from one end of the county to the other, leaving only the wildcat in that locality to worry the sheepmen.

Of these beasts of prey the coyote is the most hated and despised. All his cleverness, cunning, williness, strength, agility and speed, even the splendid fight he puts up when brought to bay, is nothing but pure "cussedness" in the mind of a rancher.

In Lake county he has driven out the sheepman and his flocks. In Mendocino county a bounty of \$5 is offered for every coyote killed within its limits. In addition to this the owners of sheep tax themselves in proportion to the size of their flocks and add, the amount to the bounty, running the prize up to over \$30. As a consequence of this there are men in Mendocino county who give all of their time to hunting, and their dogs, traps and guns have done much to reduce the ranks of these varmints.

A coyote usually has a certain range of country which is home to him, and outside of this he rarely strays. His haunt is in some rocky ridge, the cracks in which extend to unknown distances. From here he comes forth at night and leaves tribute on the rich land about him. In summer the coyote does little or no killing of sheep, as there are plenty of squirrels about to satisfy his hunger, but when the first note of winter is sounded these little creatures become very scarce, and then the raids on sheep begin. He never kills during a storm, but waits for a lull in the downpour, or else after it is completely over.

On leaving his cave the first thing he does is to visit the "registration bureau." This may be a pile of rocks, or a stump of a tree, or a pile of sun and wind dried bones. Here he stops, leaves his scent and gets the news of the day, for every coyote in the coun-



MENDOCINO RANCHERS OUT TO STOP THE RAIDS OF A MOUNTAIN LION



SKIN OF A CATTLE KILLING MOUNTAIN LION



A BOB-CAT KILLED AFTER MANY KILLINGS

ry, true to his strongest instinct, never fails to register when in the vicinity of one of these bureaus. This is his method of spreading the news, and any one of these varmints visiting there warns who there been there before him, hence he came and which way he is going.

While this registration serves as a protection to the coyote, it also proves to be his undoing, for the foxhound, bred to be his natural enemy, has learned also to read the news at these "bureaus" and loses no time in setting out in pursuit of his prey.

It is because of this fine nose that the foxhound has been selected by the sheepmen to aid them in tracking down the coyote. One of these dogs, when he is well trained, can take a sniff of the morning air and get from it news of every animal that has been abroad in his vicinity during the night. With his nose to the ground he can tell just what living creature has crossed his path within some hours before—whether it be a man, deer, coyote, bear or panther. He knows just which scent he must follow in order to please his master. He knows that to trail a deer is a most disgraceful proceeding, and no good, well behaved foxhound ever allows himself to be found in the company of any foolish young puppy who, through ignorance or strong headiness, is silly enough to take up such a track. Should he be attracted by the barking of such a puppy into the vicinity of the crime he immediately becomes virtue rampant and retreats as fast as he can, as he has learned not only to avoid evil, but also all appearances of it. He knows that a blast of his master's horn means "return immediately." When he brings the quarry to bay he strains every nerve and fiber to kill it or to keep it from getting away until the hunter comes to finish the chase with his gun. A particularly pertinacious foxhound has been known to keep a huge wildcat tread for three days in the hope that his master would finally come up.

The advent of a litter of puppies in the corral, particularly if they be of untainted pedigree, is looked upon as an important event in ranch life, and while they are still in their sporting and romping days, the most careful plans are being laid for their training, so that they will not prove to be a smirch on the family escutcheon. When a puppy is old enough he is taken out on the chase with the other dogs, one of which, a particularly sagacious hound, is selected as his tutor. To this one he is coupled, remaining so throughout the chase. Should the game be one of the smaller varmints, such as a wildcat, the puppy is given his first chance to run alone. When the quarry is treed by the older hounds it is shot in this way, or otherwise slightly wounded—just enough to give it only half a chance to escape after it drops to the ground. The young dog is then uncoupled and, of course, has the time of his life in following up the cat. This part of the training is gone through again and again until he can be trusted to keep his head from start to finish. When that time comes he takes his place among the other dogs and at the end of the hunt his merits and demerits are discussed by the men of the ranch and his reputation spreads from one end of the county to the other.