



OUTDOOR PASTIMES of an AMERICAN HUNTER

By Theodore Roosevelt



3—WOLF COURSING

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ON April 8, 1905, we left the town of Frederick, Oklahoma, for a few days' coyote coursing in the Comanche reserve. Lieutenant General S. B. M. Young, U. S. A., retired, Lieutenant Fortescue, U. S. A., formerly of my regiment, and Dr. Alexander Lambert of New York were with me. We were the guests of Colonel Cecil Lyon of Texas, of Sloan Simpson, also of Texas and formerly of my regiment, and of two old-style Texas cattlemen, Messrs. Burnett and Wagner, who had leased great stretches of wire-fenced pasture from the Comanches and Kiowas; and I cannot sufficiently express my appreciation of the kindness of these my hosts. Burnett's brand, the Four Sixes, has been owned by him for 40 years. Both of them had come to this country 30 years before, in the days of the buffalo, when all game was very plentiful and the Indians were still on the warpath. Several other ranchmen were along, including John Abernethy of Tesca, Oklahoma, a professional wolf hunter. There were also a number of cow-hands of both Burnett and Wagner; among them were two former riders for the Four Sixes, Fi Taylor and Uncle Ed Gillis, who seemed to make it their special mission to see that everything went right with me. Furthermore there was Captain McDonald of the Texas Rangers, a game and true man, whose name was one of terror to outlaws and violent criminals of all kinds; and finally there was Quannah Parker, the Comanche chief, in his youth a bitter foe to the whites, now painfully teaching his people to travel the white man's stony road.

An Ideal Camp.

We drove out some 20 miles to where camp was pitched in a bend of Deep Red creek, which empties into the Red river of the south. Cottonwood, elm and pecans formed a belt of timber along the creek; we had good water, the tents were pitched on short, thick grass, and everything was in perfect order. The fare was delicious. Altogether it was an ideal camp, and the days we passed there were also ideal. Cardinals and mocking birds—the most individual and delightful of all birds in voice and manner—sang in the woods; and the beautiful, many-tinted fork-tailed fly-catchers were to be seen now and then perched in trees or soaring in curious zigzags, chattering loudly.

In chasing the coyote only greyhounds are used, and half a dozen different sets of these had been brought to camp. Those of Wagner, the "Big D" dogs, as his cow-punchers called them, were handled by Bony Moore, who, with Tom Burnett, the son of our host Burke Burnett, took the lead in feats of daring horsemanship, even in that field of daring horsemanship. Bevin's had brought both greyhounds and rough-haired staghounds from his Texas ranch. So had Cecil Lyon, and though his dogs had chiefly been used in coursing the black-tailed Texas jackrabbit, they took naturally to the coyote chases.

Finally there were Abernethy's dogs, which, together with their master, performed the feats I shall hereafter relate. Abernethy has a homestead of his own not far from Frederick, and later I was introduced to his father, an old Confederate soldier, and to his sweet and pretty wife, and their five little children. He had run away with his wife when they were 19 and 16 respectively; but the match had turned out a happy one. Both were particularly fond of music, including the piano, horn and violin, and they played duets together.

General Young, whom the Comanches called "War Bonnet," went in a buggy with Burke Burnett, and as Burnett invariably followed the hounds at full speed in his buggy, and usually succeeded in seeing most of the chase, I felt that the buggy men really encountered greater hazards than anyone else. It was a thoroughly congenial company all through. The weather was good; we were in the saddle from morning until

night; and our camp was in all respects all that a camp should be; so how could we help enjoying ourselves?

One Huge Prairie Dog Town.

The coursing was done on the flats and great rolling prairies which stretched north from our camp toward the Wichita mountains and south toward the Red river. There was a certain element of risk in the gallops, because the whole country was one huge prairie dog town, the prairie dogs being so numerous that the new towns and the abandoned towns were continuous with one another in every direction. Practically every run we had was through these prairie dog towns, varied occasionally by creeks and washouts. But as we always ran scattered out, the wonderfully quick cow ponies, brought up in the country and spending all their time among the prairie dog towns, were able, even while running at headlong speed, to avoid the holes with a cleverness that was simply marvelous.

During our hunt but one horse stepped in a hole; he turned a complete somerset, though neither he nor his rider was hurt. Stunted mesquite bushes grew here and there in the grass, and there was cactus. As always in prairie dog towns, there were burrowing owls and rattlesnakes. We had to be on our guard that the dogs did not attack the latter. Once we thought a greyhound was certainly bitten. It was a very fast blue bitch, which seized the rattler and literally shook it to pieces. The rattler struck twice at the bitch, but so quick were the bitch's movements that she was not hit either time, and in a second the snake was not merely dead, but in pieces. We usually killed the rattlers with either our quirts or ropes. One which I thus killed was over five feet long.

By rights there ought to have been carts in which the greyhounds could be drawn until the coyotes were sighted, but there were none, and the greyhounds simply trotted along beside the horses. All of them were fine animals, and almost all of them of recorded pedigree. Coyotes have sharp teeth and bite hard, while greyhounds have thin skins, and many of them were cut in the worries. This was due to the fact that only two or three of them seized by the throat, the others taking hold behind, which of course exposed them to retaliation. Few of them would have been of much use in stopping a big wolf.

A Famous Wolf Hunter.

Abernethy's hounds, however, though they could not kill a big wolf, would stop it, permitting their owner to seize it exactly as he seized coyotes, as hereafter described. He had killed but a few of the big gray wolves; one weighed 97 pounds. He said that there were gradations from this down to the coyotes. A few days before our arrival, after a very long chase, he had captured a black wolf, weighing between 50 and 60 pounds.

These southern coyotes or prairie wolves are only about one-third the size of the big gray timber wolves of the northern Rockies. They are too small to meddle with full grown horses and cattle, but pick up young calves and kill sheep, as well as any small domesticated animal that they can get at. The big wolves flee from the neighborhood of anything like close settlements, but coyotes hang around the neighborhood of man much more persistently. They show a fox-like cunning in catching rabbits, prairie dogs, gophers and the like. After nightfall they are noisy, and their melancholy wailing and yelling are familiar sounds to all who pass over the plains. The young are brought forth in holes in cut banks or similar localities.

Within my own experience I have known of the finding of but two families. In one there was but a single family of five cubs and one old animal, undoubtedly the mother; in the other case there were 10 or 11 cubs and two old females which had apparently shared the burrow or cave, though living in separate pockets. In neither case was any full-grown male coyote found in the neighborhood; as regards these particular litters, the father seemingly had nothing to do with taking care of or supporting the family. I am not able to say whether this

was accidental or whether it is a rule that only the mother lives with and takes care of the litter; I have heard contrary statements about the matter from hunters who should know. Unfortunately I have learned from long experience that it is only exceptional hunters who can be trusted to give accurate descriptions of the habits of any beast, save such as are connected with its chase.

An Unwelcome Bedfellow.

Coyotes are sharp, wary, knowing creatures, and on most occasions take care to keep out of harm's way. But individuals among them have queer freaks. On one occasion while Sloan Simpson was on the round-up he waked at night to find something on the foot of his bed, its dark form indistinctly visible against the white tarpaulin. He aroused a friend to ask if it could be a dog. While they were cautiously endeavoring to find out what it was, it jumped up and ran off; they then saw that it was a coyote.

In a short time it returned again, coming out of the darkness toward one of the cowboys who was awake, and the latter shot it, fearing it might have hydrophobia. But I doubt this, as in such case it would not have curled up and gone to sleep on Simpson's bedding. Coyotes are subject to hydrophobia, and when under the spell of the dreadful disease will fearlessly attack men. In one case of which I know, a mad coyote coming into camp sprang on a sleeping man who was rolled in his bedding in the effort to get at him. Two other men hastened to his rescue, and the coyote first attacked them and then suddenly sprang aside and again worried the bedding, by which time one of them was able to get in a shot and killed it.

All coyotes, like big wolves, die silently and fight to the last. I had never weighed any coyotes until on this trip. I weighed the 12 which I myself saw caught, and they ran as follows: Male, 30 pounds; female, 28 pounds; female, 36; male, 32; male 34; female, 30; female, 27; male, 32; male, 29; young male, 22; male, 29; female, 27. Disregarding the young male, this makes an average of just over 30 pounds. Except the heaviest female, they were all gaunt and in splendid running trim; but then I do not remember ever seeing a really fat coyote.

An Early Morning Start.

The morning of the first day of our hunt dawned bright and beautiful, the air just cool enough to be pleasant. Immediately after breakfast we jogged off on horseback, Tom Burnett and Bony Moore in front, with six or eight greyhounds slouching alongside, while Burke Burnett and "War Bonnet" drove behind us in the buggy. I was mounted on one of Tom Burnett's favorites, a beautiful Kiowa pony. The chuck wagon, together with the relay of greyhounds to be used in the afternoon, was to join us about midday at an appointed place where there was a pool of water.

We shuffled along, strung out in an irregular line, across a long flat, in places covered with bright green wild onions; and then up a gentle slope where the stunted mesquite grew, while the prairie dogs barked spasmodically as we passed their burrows. The low crest, if such it could be called, of the slope was reached only some 20 minutes after we left camp, and hardly had we started down the other side than two coyotes were spied three or four hundred yards in front.

At a Breakneck Run.

Immediately horses and dogs were after them at a headlong, breakneck run, the coyotes edging to the left where the creek bottom, with its deep banks and narrow fringes of timber, was about a mile distant. The little wolves knew their danger, and ran their very fastest, while the long dogs stretched out after them, gaining steadily. It was evident the chase would be a short one, and there was no need to husband the horses, so every man let his pony go for all there was in him. At such a speed, and especially going down hill, there was not the slightest use in trying to steer clear of the prairie dog holes; it was best to let the veteran cow ponies see to that for themselves. They were as eager as their riders, and on we dashed at full speed, curving to the left

toward the foot of the slope; we jumped into and out of a couple of broad, shallow washouts, as we tore after the hounds, now nearing their quarry.

The rearmost coyote was overtaken just at the edge of the creek; the foremost, which was a few yards in advance, made good its escape, as all the dogs promptly tackled the rearmost, tumbling it over into a rather deep pool. The scuffling and splashing told us what was going on, and we reined our horses short up at the brink of the cut bank. The water had hampered the dogs in killing their quarry, only three or four of them being in the pool with him; and of those he had seized one by the nose and was hanging on hard. In a moment one of the cowboys got hold of him, dropped a noose over his head, and dragged him out on the bank, just as the buggy came rattling up at full gallop. Burnett and the general, taking advantage of the curve in our course, had driven across the chord of the arc, and keeping their horses at a run, had seen every detail of the chase and were in at the death.

In a few minutes the coyote was skinned, the dogs rested, and we were jogging on once more. Hour after hour passed by. We had a couple more runs, but in each case the coyote had altogether too long a start and got away; the dogs no longer being as fresh as they had been. As a rule, although there are exceptions, if the greyhounds cannot catch the coyote within two or three miles the chances favor the escape of the little wolf. We found that if the wolf had more than half a mile start he got away.

As greyhounds hunt by sight, cut banks enable the coyote easily to throw off his pursuers unless they are fairly close up. The greyhounds see the wolf when he is far off, for they have good eyes; but in the chase, if the going is irregular, they tend to lose him, and they do not depend much on one another in recovering sight of him; on the contrary, the dog is apt to quit when he no longer has the quarry in view.

An Al Fresco Dinner.

At noon we joined the chuck wagon where it stood drawn up on a slope of the treeless, bushless prairie; and the active round-up cook soon had the meal ready. It was the Four Sixes wagon, the brand burned into the wood of the chuck box. Where does a man take more frank enjoyment in his dinner than at the tail end of a chuck wagon?

Soon after eating we started again, having changed horses and dogs. I was mounted on a Big D cow pony, while Lambert had

a dun-colored horse, hard to hold, but very tough and swift. An hour or so after leaving camp we had a four-mile run after a coyote, which finally got away, for it had so long a start that the dogs were done out by the time they came within fair distance. They stopped at a little prairie pool, some of them lying or standing in it, panting violently; and thus we found them as we came stringing up at a gallop.

After they had been well rested we started toward camp; but we were down in the creek bottom before we saw another coyote. This one again was a long distance ahead, and I did not suppose there was much chance of our catching him; but away all the dogs and all the riders went at the usual run, and catch him we did, because, as it turned out, the "morning" dogs, which were with the wagon, had spied him first and run him hard, until he was in sight of the "afternoon" dogs, which were with us. I got tangled in a washout, scrambled out, and was galloping along, watching the country in front, when Lambert passed me as hard as he could go; I saw him disappear into another washout, and then come out of the other side, while the dogs were driving the coyote at an angle down toward the creek.

Pulling short to the right, I got through the creek, hoping the coyote would cross, and the result was that I galloped up to the worry almost as soon as the foremost riders from the other side—a piece of good fortune for which I had only luck to thank. The hounds caught the coyote as he was about crossing the creek. From this point it was but a short distance into camp.

Again next morning we were off before the sun had risen high enough to take away the cool freshness from the air. This day we traveled several miles before we saw our first coyote. It was a huge, gently sloping stretch of prairie, which ran down to the creek on our right. We were traveling across it strung out in line when the coyote sprang up a good distance ahead of the dogs. They ran straight away from us at first. Then I saw the coyote swinging to the right toward the creek and I half-wheeled, riding diagonally to the line of the chase. This gave me an excellent view of dogs and wolf, and also enabled me to keep nearly abreast of them.

A Three-Mile Run.

On this particular morning the dogs were Bevin's greyhounds and staghounds. From where the dogs started they ran about three miles, catching their quarry in the flat where the creek circles around in a bend,



From Photo by W. Sloan Simpson

THE BIG D COW PONY