

Outdoors

Predator-calling season begins now

This is the prime time of year for calling predators. The carnivores are lean and winter-hungry, and young varmints from last year will fall all over themselves trying to get to a squealing-rabbit call. A little later on, as the females get closer to whelping time, they get harder to fool, but for now, calling can be exciting sport.

The other day a fellow told me, with surprise in his voice, that he'd actually heard a coyote howl in the night. There was a day when a single coyote yip anywhere in the Hill Country would have caused the summoning of everybody from the CIA to the Delta Force. That was when the region was largely given over to sheep and goat ranching, and the ranchers did pretty much exterminate the coyotes and strenuously resisted any re-colonization by the varmints.

Those days have gone. Sheep and angora goats no longer represent the major local industry, and — while the older ranchers haven't exactly fallen in love with predators — not much money is spent on "controlling" them any more.

So, coyotes are coming back to the Hill Country. A good friend of mine who runs a little bunch of meat goats up on Kelly Creek, had noticed the disappearance of one after another of his baby goats.

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John Wootters

He walked his fence lines, set some snares, and caught two adult coyotes. Later, he called up and killed two more. Now his baby goats get to grow up.

Which brings me to the subject of predator-calling, one of my favorite sports. I've been doing it since back when nobody believed you really could call up a fox, bobcat, coyote, etc. with a toy whistle.

In those days (late '40s-early '50s), we had to learn everything the hard way, since there was no written information of a how-to nature on the subject.

The adventures I've had in the process would fill several whole editions of this newspaper. I've called up ringtails, badgers, illegal aliens, farm dogs, raccoons, hawks, owls, game wardens, cows, foxes, bobcats, ranchers, coyotes, skunks, burros, mountain lions, whitetail deer, mule deer, jaguarundis, ocelots, house cats, African leopards, wild dogs, civets, and various small antelopes, and who



Photo by John Wootters

Wootters' favorite predator-calling target is the stealthy bobcat, much more common than most people believe.

knows what all else. You just never know what will show up when you go out at night and make a noise like a wretched rabbit.

These days, I call mostly during daylight hours. You may not see as many varmints as at night, but you see them a lot better (and maybe closer).

I no longer shoot predators, having accounted for my full quota many years ago, and now go calling just to see and photograph the critters. The bobcat is my favorite, and is a species with which I seem to have a magic touch. Somehow, I can call bobcats when I'm not even thinking about them and where there aren't

supposed to be any, and I'm not sure I could tell you why.

They do require much more patience than coyotes. They usually come slowly and stop often, so many novice callers get up and walk away from a bobcat they called but never noticed. Cats are much harder to spot in daytime than at night (when their eyes give them away), and one can almost crawl into your hip pocket unseen if your lookout isn't sharp enough.

At night, cats are far less light-shy than any type of dog-animal, and they almost seem to ignore human scent. They often come straight upwind to a call, something



Photo by John Wootters

Except when seeking a specific, rogue animal, the author does his predator hunting with a camera these days, and considers a picture like this portrait of a coyote a true trophy.

not even a senile coyote would dream of doing. But cats dislike leaving cover, even at night, a fact you might take into consideration when deciding where to call.

Coyotes that haven't heard the call before may actually charge the sound, coming at a dead run across bare open ground without a second thought. At night, the moving shadows in brush from a spotting light seem to spook them, so it's best to set up in more open areas than for cats.

I always seem to run out of space just when I get really wound up on pet subjects. Dope on types and tech-

niques of calling for the various species, lights and equipment, tricks and tips, etc., will have to wait for another column — but it'll be worth waiting for.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."