

Outrageously Outdoors



COTTONTAIL EXTRACTION 101

By Steve Gilliland

It was cold and there were several inches of snow on the ground; light fluffy snow as I remember it, the kind that crunches underfoot, the kind in which you can write your name in yellow letters. My neighbor and constant hunting partner Ralph and I were off to the woods. Ralph carried his tattered old 12-gauge

single shot that actually came apart into two pieces (sometimes unexpectedly) to reload, and I carried a .22 rifle. This was back-in-the-day, when every country kid who could hoist a gun and knew the difference between a Hereford and a haystack, hunted rabbits. We were serious rabbit hunters back then. In comparison to the time spent, not many rabbits

were harvested, but we were serious about the ones we got, and that day we knew exactly where our first stop would be.

In the mid 1960s oil was discovered in Morrow county where we lived in north central Ohio, and fly-by-night oil companies came out of the woodwork to drill there. This evidently was prior to regulations governing oil companies' behavior, because many an oil well was abandoned overnight leaving the land owner to clean up the mess, and what a mess it often was. Amidst the rubble and weeds you could find everything from nuts, bolts, tanks and timbers, to a worker who had fallen asleep and just hadn't been missed yet. Unfortunately my dad became the proud owner of one of those messes. Amidst the jumble of tanks and timbers left behind were several long lengths of 6- or 8-inch diameter pipe which dad promptly drug to the opposite corner of the farm and deposited out of sight in the weeds along a fence row. These pipes became cottontail condos in bad weather.

We walked behind the barn and lit out for the far corner of the field hiding the pipes, and, sure enough, one pipe harbored a nice plump bunny. Our normal plan of attack was to position one of us near the end of the pipe, gun at the ready, while the other yelled, threw rocks or jumped up and down on top of it, flushing the rabbit to the shooter. Looking for all the world like Elmer Fudd, Ralph stood near one end of the pipe, the old 12-gauge ready to greet Mr. Wabbit upon his exit. I stomped, kicked, beat, pounded, screamed and shouted, but no bunny emerged. As we scratched our heads and searched for plan "B," a solution so perfect it was frightening thrust itself upon me! "I have it", I announced to Ralph. "I have the perfect solution to our problem."

We kept a loader with a manure bucket on the old John Deere 3010, so after a cold ride back to the pipe, I simply lowered the bucket, guid-

ed one tine into the pipe and began to lift. "This is so easy it ain't fair" I thought, expecting Ralph to shoot at any second. Soon the loader had one end of the pipe about as high into the air as I could safely lift it, and still no rabbit. Suddenly it dawned on us that we hadn't made certain our quarry was still there after returning, giving Mr. Cottontail ample time to vamoose, and now we were quite possibly wrestling an empty pipe. Ralph clamored up the side of the loader frame and peered into the pipe. I was ready to dump the thing into the snow, and chalk it up to stupidity, when Ralph turned toward me with a wild-eyed look on his face and announced that not only was the rabbit still in the pipe, but it had climbed to the upper end! Just our luck; we had either found a vindictive cottontail with 4-wheel drive, or one with an inner ear problem that kept it from recognizing up from down.

Now this had become personal. Not about to be beaten at my own game, I lowered the pipe, drove to the other end, and with the sizzling sound of frying rabbit echoing in my ears, hoisted it high into the air and waited for the outsmarted bunny to tumble out. Still no rabbit; bad sign! Again Ralph clamored up for a look, and again the clever creature had climbed to the high end! How could this be? Was this even a real rabbit, or maybe a robotic bunny run remotely by a rogue group of covert cottontails from a nearby hole? This was before the days of performance-enhancing drugs, so that was out. Back and forth we went with the tractor, first raising one end then the other, always with the same outcome. We wondered when this psycho, overachieving rabbit would finally offer itself up as lunch, and the rabbit probably wondered when Elmer Fudd and his sidekick would just go away and leave him alone. I honestly don't remember how many times this scene played out, but for the sake of my dignity, I hope it wasn't many.

I have seen wild animals pull some unexpected stunts in my day. I've had skunks climb the walls of a cage trap and refuse to come out when I opened the door. I once had an angry red fox clamp its mouth across the toe of my boot and try to shake me like a dead squirrel. Once at the county fair, a monkey from one of the acts was with its owner in the restroom and actually took a bite from my toothpaste tube as I brushed my teeth. But this persistent-bunny-in-the-oil-pipe trick beat all! At this point Ralph and I were so dumbfounded that the darn rabbit could probably have sauntered from the pipe, tipped his hat to us and walked away without a shot being fired. In summary, the game ended with the score rabbits 1, serious rabbit hunters 0. Our spirits broken and our pride wounded, we parked the tractor in the barn, went to the house and fried ourselves up a couple greasy burgers...(Unfortunately, no rabbits were actually harmed in writing this story). **T**

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