



# THE TRAPPER

**S**queaky is going nuts. The Chihuahua/Jack Russell mix is yipping and squealing, front paws clawing the driver's side window as the pick-up truck drifts to a halt in the middle of a cow pasture. The object of Squeaky's excitement is a red fox. The fox eyes Squeaky with sullen amber eyes, as if to say, 'why don't you come a little bit closer, Squeaky, and I'll tell you a secret.' But Squeaky's no dummy. He continues his taunts from the protection of the pick up. Besides, he knows the fox can't catch him; the fox himself is caught in a trap.

Steve Colvin of Eheart, smelling faintly of fox himself, casually opens the driver's side door, gets out and fetches a metal catch-pole, similar to what an animal control officer would have. He approaches the fox, which tries to keep as much distance as possible between them despite the fact that one forepaw is held fast. In a practiced move, Colvin slips the wire loop over the fox's head, tightens it, grabs the fox's tail at the base, and holds him while he opens the trap with his foot.

He carries the fox to the back of his small pick up. From several wire cages, eleven pairs of amber eyes stare back more in defiance than fear. Steve points to the animal's forepaw. "He's been in that trap all night and today, and look, no foot damage." A closer inspection reveals that indeed, although some of the fur is rubbed clean, the exposed skin is not broken. "If I catch a cat or a dog, you know anything I shouldn't, I can release it unharmed." Steve carefully opens the cage lid and stuffs the fox in with his cellmates.

"That's the best thing they come up with...just trying to be more humane," says Colvin of what's known as the "pad jaw" trap. The jaws are smooth, not jagged, and they are coated with hard rubber, not bare metal. They are designed to hold the animal's foot just above the paw at the "wrist."



Steve Colvin uses his own gloved hand to test a "pad jaw" trap. This fox latches onto the catch pole and won't let go. Steve Colvin says he's been bitten a few times by foxes.

Photos by Phil Audibert



It's time to bait and reset the trap. Steve dons heavy rubber gloves to mask his own scent. He quickly digs a small hole at about a 45 degree angle in the turf. In the hole he tosses a piece of corn cob no bigger than a walnut. It has been anointed with a secret homemade scent that his father, the legendary Randolph Colvin taught him. He grabs a spray bottle and squirts the edge of the hole with "fox urine." The trap is now baited.

Time to reset it. He opens the jaws and gently lifts the trip pad and sets the opened trap in a shallow depression to one side of the bait hole. He deliberately tests the trap on his own gloved fingers, proving the padded jaws do what they are intended to do, which is to hold, not maim. He resets it again, gingerly places a small piece of fine mesh screen over the trip pad, and covers everything with finely sifted soil. The trap is ready for its next occupant. By law it must be checked within 24 hours.

The trap is secured by a small cable anchored deep in the ground. "It's real hard to pull out of the ground, so people can't steal it," says Steve. On it, rolled up on a piece of copper is Steve's name and address. State law. It is also state law that no one is to disturb that trap other than the owner.

Steve climbs back into the pick-up, lights a cigarette, and continues to the next trap site. Squeaky sitting on his lap, intently stares out the window. Not long ago, hunting season started. According to the Game Commission, there are 40,000 licensed hunters in the state. There are also about 1100 trappers. For them, the season has started as well.

Steve Colvin is driving around a farm in the lower end of Orange County. "It's fox heaven down through here," he marvels.

"I've trapped this farm, me and my Dad, for 20 years and these are the healthiest fox you'll see anywhere...What I catch here is a moderate amount of big, healthy, beautiful fox. If I wasn't trapping, you'd see those with no fur on their tails, eyes matted up, dying," from sarcoptic mange and distemper.

Steve will stay two to three weeks in this area between Henry's Store and Spotsylvania Courthouse. Every day he burns up a full tank of gas checking his trap line. "It takes me seven hours no matter how fast I go or what I catch, it's seven hours and probably 20 square miles, probably 120 traps."

Using a catch pole, Steve Colvin snares the fox. He uses his right foot to release the fox from the trap

Photo by Phil Audibert.

On this particular day in early November, the weather is perfect. Steve takes a season high 14 foxes. But he is quick to point out "a rain-storm or a snowstorm will mess me up for a week or two. I don't hardly sleep right now because this weather is perfect. Temperature is right. Foxes are moving. I've got to catch as many as I can before the weather gets bad." And indeed, the next day his take is seven; the day after that, four. Time to move on to another territory. He won't come back here till this time next year.

Up until this latest development with the fox pens, Steve's season for taking live fox would normally last six months, from September through February. Now he will take fox and other fur bearing animals for pelts. The rest of the year (See Fox Pens and The Big Bust), he traps on his nuisance permit. "My main business right now is nuisance calls, whether it's a skunk in the foundation of a house, or ground hog, sometimes it might be a coyote that's killed some lambs or calves, beavers doing damage. I get several calls a week...That's what keeps me busy during the summer."

And he used to raise mice, rats and rabbits for "snake feeders," but he got out of that because "I got tired of city people...they'll have a \$10,000 snake and won't want to pay \$1.50 to



## Fox pens and the big bust-

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, law enforcement officers conducted a coordinated raid of Virginia's 41 licensed fox pens. All but six were shut down for a variety of infractions, some major, some minor. Criminal charges are pending.

It was all part of an undercover multi-state investigation and sting into the sale of foxes and coyotes that had been trapped in western states and transported to southern states from Alabama to Virginia. This investigation has been going on since 2006!

A "fox pen," is an enclosed area where hunting dog owners can train their hounds to pursue live foxes. In Virginia, these facilities range in size from as little as 100 to as many as 900 fenced-in acres. The closest one to us is in Louisa County. Fox pens appeal more to pick up truck foxhunters than to horseback foxhunters. These guys usually hunt at night and have bumper stickers that read, "When the tailgate drops, the B.S. stops." They pay the pen owners by the hound to chase live foxes inside the enclosure, and they sometimes compete for trophies as to who has the best hound.

"It's a big sport," says Steve Colvin, whose license allows him to catch foxes alive and sell them to the fox pens. "It gives guys a place where they can run their dogs, they're not trespassing; their dog is not going to get hit on the road, or be treated inhumanely. It's monitored by the Game Commission. They've got plenty of habitat; they dig holes; they push down timber and make brush piles; so it's fair chase."

Anyway, until just a little while ago, Steve sold foxes to these guys for \$50 a pop. His license also states that he may not keep foxes in captivity for more than seven days. And so, once a week, the fox pen owners would come to his home to pick up the foxes, which he had fed, watered, and inoculated for parasites and infection. On the night of November 12, he says Game Warden, Kenny Dove came to inspect his place (no violations) and to supervise the release of all the foxes he had in captivity...38 total, worth \$1900. "I lost money for the fox pen owner's mistake," he says bitterly. And now he is going back to trapping foxes for pelts, "for less money and a whole lot more work." A red fox pelt will bring \$18, which is less than what his father sold them for 30 years ago.

Meanwhile, there are 38 foxes running around free in Eheart. "It's an awful lot of fox to put into the habitat," says Steve Colvin ruefully.



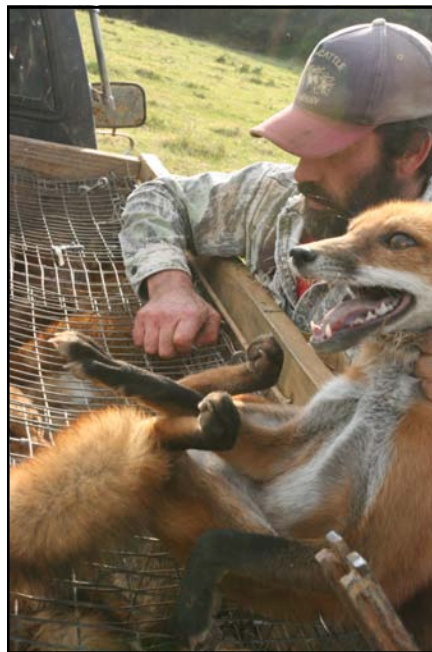
feed it.” He stops to light a cigarette and adds, “That’s a weird bunch of people, man.” Besides, Steve Colvin is not all that yippy skippy about snakes. “Constrictors,” he shudders, “Man, I’ve seen snakes as big around as a volley ball.”

The big question: is he depleting the wild fox population? He claims not. “We’re blessed. Central Virginia’s got more game than anywhere I’ve ever been,” he says, adding it’s taken him a long time to learn to trap successfully. “You can be the best in the world, but Mother Nature is real good at protecting herself. You don’t get them all. There’s always a couple of old reds. They’re smart. They’re my seed fox for next year...You don’t ever want to catch ‘em all or try to catch ‘em all.”

Almost on cue, we pull up to another trap. Squeaky is silent. There’s nothing here. But the trap is sprung. Right next to it is a calling card...a pile of fox scat, a kind of thumbing of the nose at the human adversary.

Steve Colvin smiles ruefully. “What left here is a smart healthy educated fox that will produce mine for next year...I’ve had them throw the trap and leave it on the trap... A fox is no dummy. It ain’t that they’re the smartest, but they’re real sly and slick.” He resets the trap. “Don’t be greedy,” he cautions. “Let mother nature be able to produce for itself.”

We drive into a creek bottom and Squeaky starts yipping. Sure enough there’s a small raccoon in the trap. Steve releases it because it is prior to November 15<sup>th</sup>, the official beginning of furbearing trapping season. This coon will live to see another day, although Steve says “they’re over populated and they’re disease carriers...They need to open the season and kill out a lot of coons.” If what you see dead on the road is any indicator, Steve Colvin is right; there is no shortage of raccoons.



A red fox joins others in the cage on the back of Steve Colvin’s truck. Note that the animal’s forelegs are undamaged by the more humane “pad jaw” trap.

Has he ever encountered a rabid animal? “Not to my knowledge. I’ve never seen one that I would think to be rabid. I’ve seen some coons that may have been, but it could also have been distemper.” He admits that he’s been bitten by foxes a few times (they hang on and won’t let go), but so far he hasn’t been acting any stranger than he normally does, and he definitely not frothing at the mouth...yet.

And so, if trapping season hasn’t started yet, what is Steve Colvin doing with 14 live foxes in the back of his truck? “I’m on a live permit from the Game Commission to take these foxes alive. And they go to an enclosure and people pay to train their hounds, a fox pen.” That is, until November 11<sup>th</sup>, when the fox pens were busted (See Fox Pens and the Big Bust).

Putting a positive spin on trapping is a P.R. man’s nightmare. Some people despise Steve Colvin... see him as anathema. Others praise him for rendering a service to area farmers and landowners. “There are so many people out there who dislike what I do,” Steve realizes, adding, “I have to feed my family. I have to make a living.”

Some counties, such as Loudon and Rappahannock have banned trapping altogether. Of the mounted foxhunters in our



## The Fur Man

Many of us remember the Fur Man...the big strapping pioneer guy with the full beard. Randolph Colvin died in 1984 of a rare disease at the age of 48. But in the world of trapping, he lives on. His likeness is on the cover of a Department of Game and Inland Fisheries publication called the *Virginia Trapper’s Manual*. He is also honored in the October 2006 Edition of the *The Virginia Trapper*, a publication of the Virginia Trapper’s Association. The article is entitled “As Good As They Come.” And did you know that there is a Virginia Trapper’s Hall of Fame? Randy Colvin is in it along with eight other inductees.

His son Steve, who mirrors his father’s likeness, full beard and all, is the fourth generation of Colvins to ply the trapper’s trade. Great grandfather, Nathaniel Colvin, first came to this area as a Railroad Supervisor in Somerset. He trapped on the side. “That’s all I knew growing up,” says Steve, who still uses his father’s traps, saying “There wasn’t an animal out there he couldn’t out smart.”

Concerning trapping’s negative image, he says “I’m always afraid that somebody’s going to see something that they think is so bad and wage war on us. That’s my biggest fear.” He adds, trapping helped “found this country...your great granddaddy trapped and killed something and ate it, trust me.”

Concerning poachers who trespass and trap without a license, Steve says, “I don’t think it’s a whole lot.” He notes that the Virginia Trappers Association used to claim several thousand members. Now it’s down to 600-800. “But I see a comeback coming, but it’s a lot of young kids who weren’t lucky enough to have the knowledge of a good trapper. So, they’re not doing the correct things. Or they don’t realize that it’s serious how it may affect another trapper if he does a bad job...There’s the wrong people teaching them.”

For Steve, trapping is something of an obsession. “Every day, no matter what day it is, even Christmas morning, I got a trap set somewhere.”

area, who, by the way, only chase foxes and don’t kill them, Steve says, “I just stay out of their way; they stay out of mine. We’ve got a good relationship. I respect that they love to fox hunt as much as I love to fox trap.” And there is a little bit of “I’ll scratch your back if you’ll scratch mine,” between the two adversaries. “The trapper, the fisherman, the English fox-hunter, if they do not unite, they will lose their rights,” foresees Steve. “I see a time coming where my daughter; it will be ille-



gal for her to own a trap.”

The problem is the trap does not discriminate between the coyote, the fox or the housecat. Steve has even caught a Great Horned Owl in one of his traps. He released it, of course, and since the advent in the late 1980's of the “pad jaw” trap, the damage done to domestic pets and protected species has diminished. “I’ve caught a pet and you know, you just have to listen,” says Steve of the tirades that have been launched at him by outraged pet owners. “The pet owner is going to be upset. They don’t realize what a (“pad jaw”) trap is. They don’t know that it’s not hurting their little pet. They think it’s killing it. So, they’re upset. I just listen to it and show them that it’s not harmed.”

Pressed again on the question of depleting the fox population, Steve responds that he’s helping small game species such as rabbits, squirrels and small birds, adding “I’m busier than I’ve ever been due to development. The animals are losing their homes. There’s more animals than there is land for them to inhabit...The same people who don’t want you to trap or kill anything are the same ones who clear ten acres and put a pretty house on it, where they maybe could have saved an acre or two just for habitat. It’s going to be a time where one acre of habitat is going to mean a lot to these animals. If you don’t have habitat, you won’t have healthy animals.”

Just about then, we pull into a planned residential community near Lake Anna. This is the other side of Steve’s business...nuisance calls. He has signed a contract with the homeowners association board (it was not a unanimous vote) to get rid of the beaver. Beavers are highly destructive. They gnaw down acres of saplings, change the courses of streams, build dams and cause flooding.

Steve slips out of his bib overalls and into waders. “Beavers are pretty easy to catch,” he says confidently. He checks his traps around the entrance to a huge den, built within 100 feet of the community’s marina. He pulls out a juvenile and a 60-pounder. “These things are heavy,” he grunts as he loads



All in a day’s work, Steve Colvin carries two beavers back to his pick up truck which already has 14 live foxes in the back.

Photo by Phil Audibert

them into a plastic backpack basket. Upstream, he partially dismantles two dams and pulls out another juvenile. He’ll take these dead beavers home and sell the pelts for \$22 each, “but to skin and dry a beaver is a whole lot of work.” He’ll hire a guy to finish the dam demolition work.

Back in the truck, headed for home, Squeaky sitting in his lap, the huge tires on his small pick-up singing on the asphalt. The sun is sinking fast. It will be a couple of hours yet before he’ll sit down to dinner. There are beavers and foxes to skin and dry, “It don’t get no better,” he exalts. “I’ve got the best job in the world. I’m out in the country, not in a big city, not punching that time card. Ain’t nobody telling me what to do.” Unless, of course, it’s the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

## THE COYOTE



Photo by Phil Audibert

You can sometimes hear them on clear windless moonlit nights...a sound so primal, so fear-inducing, it’ll send shivers down your spine. It is the high yip and howl of a pack of coyotes celebrating and announcing a kill. The call will often be answered by others miles away.

Like it or not, the coyote is here and here to stay. Steve Colvin has caught 22 coyotes since September 1<sup>st</sup>. That’s more than he caught all of last year. “You cannot stop them by any means,” he says dead serious. “Poison, shooting, trapping, bomb them, you blow up the whole country and coyotes will come out of the rubble. There’s no way to stop them.”

The effect is far reaching. “They’re hard on people’s domestic pets. It’s just too big a predator for the farmer and the habitat to withstand.” Not only are they killing lambs, calves, deer, rabbits, and small birds, they’re killing foxes. And foxes are my living,” explains Colvin. “The coyote is destroying my living. They kill out the fox. They find their den and kill them all. And then they move them out. The coyotes will have the best territory. That red fox is not going to stay there. He’s going to make him move to a worse place...I’ve seen foxes’ dens right on the edges of people’s yards.”

And of course there is the damage to livestock. It is here that Steve sees an opportunity. “That’s going to make my career...coyotes. I’m going to have a job, forever. And it’s only going to get better.”

What’s the solution? “I think the county needs to step up ahead of time and...come up with a bounty. That encourages hunters, makes people aware they’ll get a few bucks to shoot that coyote. A bounty will help.” He also says the public should be educated about this new predator. “You see one out there 200 yards, you’ll think, German Shepherd, somebody’s dog. But there’s a few things, characteristics of their ears and tail. If we get people educated on that, we might help them kill more.”

The biggest coyote he caught weighed 62 pounds. He was pulling down 100 pound calves! The coyote is “just a different animal...they learn so fast. You’ve got one shot to catch ‘em; if you make a mistake, it’s over. Don’t plan on getting another chance.” And they’re fast too. “Fast and tough. People tell me they’ve shot ‘em and knocked ‘em down, they get up and run and you never find ‘em.”

This past summer, Steve studied this predator. He’s learned that if you are anywhere upwind of a coyote, forget it. Some hunters have had luck using a rabbit squeal as a lure. “I’ve toned way down. I use a mouse squeaker. I’ve called coyotes with a mouse squeaker that I could barely hear myself. It’d be, no way, nothing coming. The next thing you know...” He makes a stealthy walking motion with his fingers.

“For a man to go out and call a couple of coyotes in a day, he’s really doing something. But that’s going to get easier as we get more populated...They’re here to stay and there’s going to be way more...waaaayyyy more.” As Steve Colvin sees it, there’s only one positive regarding the coyote...the feral cat population. Feral cats have wreaked havoc on small mammals and birds. “But the coyotes love them.” The problem is they love everything else as well.