



# Chasing BLUETAILS

*Hunting marsh rabbits  
can be a difficult, dirty  
challenge that's worth  
every moment*

WITH BEAGLES IN DUPLIN COUNTY'S LOWLANDS

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T errial White inched through the sweetgum saplings. His battle-scarred boots shuffled through the interwoven barrier of briars and vines first, followed by knees and thighs protected by brier-proof pants. Despite the difficulty of progress, he made little noise. He did not want to alarm the rabbit that might be slipping his way.

Finding a narrow opening, he waited with his shotgun halfway to his shoulder. The beagles were approaching. He could hear their bawling and their wagging tails rattling the bushes. However, the brush was so dense he could see neither hide nor hair of the diminutive hounds.

A pack of hounds and a pack of hunters descend upon the lowlands of Duplin County in search of marsh rabbits, also known as bluetails.



Members of the Horsemen Hunting Club have the club's name and various mottos embroidered on their caps and hunting coats. Members and guests for this trip include (left to right) Donnell Picket, Bernard Bullock, Josh Barber, Jack Barber, Phillip Barber, Case Barber, Terrial White and Giovanni Brizula.



Suddenly, a rabbit appeared. White quickly dispatched it and hurried to where it lay. An instant before the beagles arrived, he hoisted a rabbit, shoulder-high, shouting repeatedly, "Dead Rabbit! Dead Rabbit! Hey-Yuh! Hey-Yuh!" Several dogs leaped up, growling and snapping at it.

"Whether you hit the rabbit or not, you had better get to the spot where you shot before the dogs," Terrial said. "If the rabbit falls flat or skids into the brush, you aren't going to know you hit it. If the beagles find the rabbit before you do, there won't be enough of it to take home."

In the denseness of a Duplin County lowland, hitting a running rabbit is always a crapshoot. Often as not, the rabbit is moving so fast that the hunter cannot even get off a shot. A side bet to the gamble is what species of rabbit the shot may have bagged. It could be a cottontail, or more likely, a bluetail, like the one Terrial was holding.

"Most of the rabbits we get now are marsh rabbits," he said. "The percentage has increased because we have more bottomlands to hunt than fields."

"We" is the Horsemen Hunting Club. Along with the club's name, their motto, "Strictly Rabbits," is embroidered on brier-abraded, sun-faded caps and hunting coats of steadfast club members.

The club began about 30 years ago, when five rabbit hunters who began hunting family farms near Chinquapin became known as the 5 Horsemen. Over ensuing seasons, one original member, James "Slick" Vines, passed away. The remaining four original members are President Roland Boney, Secretary-Treasurer Terrial White, Belton Herring and Donald Ray Carroll. Since then, others have joined, so the number 5 no longer applies.

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Many members and guests hunt a weekend or two each season. Others, like Terrial, hunt several days each week. It once was not unusual to have 30 hunters show up on a Saturday morning with five or six beagle packs totaling more than 50 "head" of dogs. A Saturday hunt these days typically hosts a dozen hunters and 30 beagles. This hunt, on Friday, January 10, 2020, began with eight hunters and two packs totaling 15 beagles.

"We welcome kids, anytime," Terrial said. "But kids today always seem to have something else to do. When I was a kid, all we did was hunt rabbits. There weren't many deer. Now, deer hunting is one of the main problems. A lot of people hunt deer and deer hunters don't

want us hunting rabbits on their property until after deer season. Beagles running rabbits might hurt their deer hunting luck."

### A SHOT IN THE ROUGH

The hunters let loose their beagles on Philip Barber's deer hunting lease near Wallace. Barber's sons, Josh, 17, Jack, 16, and Case, 14, were along. The other adult hunters were Donnell Picket, Bernard Bullock and Giovanni Brizula. Terrial and Donnell brought their beagles.

"We used to stomp up rabbits when I was young, but I've only hunted them with dogs a couple of times," Philip said. "I saw Terrial one day and we decided to put a hunt together and bring my kids along."

The hunt took place in bottomland cover, where beaver-cut saplings poked up in and near shallow water. The area had been flooded by Hurricane Florence two autumns prior, leaving a water mark higher than a hunter's head on the trees. Below that line, most of the brush, vines and grasses were dun-colored, indicating they were dead or dormant. The adverse impact of the lack of greenery on the rabbit population was soon evident. Jumping the first rabbit took more than an hour. The beagles burst into song for a few minutes accompanied by the booming of two shotguns. Shouts of "Did you get him?" were answered by the howling beagles rather than successful hunters. They continued onward until they fell silent when they lost the scent.



"I shot at a rabbit that was sneaking away from the commotion," Giovanni said. "The dogs did not seem to be running it, but I missed it twice. The cover was so thick, I couldn't get an open shot."

"I shot at one that was going 100 miles an hour!" Bernard exclaimed. "He went under a root and through a hole in a tree. I missed three times when he came out on the other side."

Due to the time lag between Giovanni's and Bernard's shooting the hunters speculated as to whether they had missed the same rabbit. Giovanni fired first and the beagles may have picked up its trail after he missed it. Both hunters said they had shot at a marsh rabbit.

### THE ELUSIVE BLUETAIL

While hunters of the uplands in the Piedmont and Mountains are familiar with the habits and appearance of cottontail rabbits, marsh rabbits are completely different animals. Beagles that have never coursed them can have difficulty sorting out their trails. There are three native species of rabbits in North Carolina. While the Eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is found throughout the state and the Appalachian cottontail (*S. obscurus*) is restricted to the mountains of western North Carolina, the marsh rabbit (*S. palustris*) is found typically in or near wet habitats in the eastern part of the state. Marsh rabbits differ from many other rabbit species in that they lead semiaquatic lives and are excellent swimmers.

Cottontails are critters of upland fields and thickets. White tails flagging during their bounding runs give them their name. In contrast, most hunters who pursue marsh rabbits call them bluetails. When they run, their darker tails are invisible. In the jargon of the



Eastern cottontail

DANIELLE BRIGIDA/USFWS



Marsh rabbit

DENNIS CHURCH/FLICKR



Appalachian cottontail

KETZIRAH LESSER & ART DRAGLIS/FLICKR

**Loose the hounds! Donnell Picket drops the tailgate as his pack of beagles spill out of the dog box. Right: The three subspecies of cottontail rabbits found in North Carolina.**

Horsemen Hunting Club, the "r" in "marsh" drops, resulting in another nickname, "mash" rabbits.

Their escape mode is more secretive than that of a cottontail. With their tail held low, they slink through thick cover. Sometimes all that alerts a hunter that they are approaching ahead of the beagles are vibrating switch canes as the rabbit brushes against them. That is not to say that they cannot run flat-out, leaving smoking empty shotgun hulls and nothing to show for the shooting in their wake. When they are zigzagging through a thicket with the dogs hot on their heels, veering every which-way to miss fur-ripping devil's club, their darker brown color makes them look more like a fumbled football than a cottontail with its hopping run, light tan fur and flipping powderpuff tail.

Since marsh rabbits inhabit flood-prone lowlands, it's not surprising they are excellent swimmers. They can even dive beneath the water's surface to avoid predators, including beagles. Their feet have strong, curved toenails, which may aid their survival by allowing them to cling to branches in flooded trees and bushes where they can feed on twigs and leaves until the water recedes. When pursued by beagles, they stick to cover, running in the tight circles of their territorial trails. Hunters are forced to claw their way into the bays





Top left to bottom: Marsh rabbits gnaw the bark of woody vegetation in their lowland habitats; hunters look for freshly chewed saplings, vines, briars and cane before releasing their beagles. Marsh rabbit tracks often show prominent toenail marks. Fresh droppings or “rabbit balls” show rabbits are in the area.



Top: Terrial White (left) shows Case Barber the difference between a marsh rabbit and a cottontail rabbit. The marsh rabbit White is holding has a blue tail. The cottontail Barber is holding has a white tail. Bottom: The marsh rabbit foot on the left shows more prominent toenails than the cottontail foot on the right. Opposite: Marsh rabbits are excellent swimmers, so beagles that pursue them must be too.



### NATURE'S WAYS



How Do Marsh Rabbits Digest Nearly Indigestible Food?

See Nature's Ways, page 43.

and canebrakes where they can see no farther than a few feet, making the rabbits very difficult to hit because the shotgun pattern may be no bigger than a baseball at such close range.

“A bluetail doesn't act like a cottontail,” Terrial said. “A cottontail might go into a hole in the ground to get away. But I have seen a marsh rabbit climb so high up inside a hollow tree I thought the beagles treed a squirrel. I have seen marsh rabbits swim through stretches of flowing water so long I couldn't believe the beagles could smell them. It takes an experienced dog to run them, but even the best beagles can lose their trail when the swamps are full of water.”

The frequency of hurricanes in the southern Coastal Plain and the resulting high floodwaters have ticked up in recent years. The club keeps track of each hunter's bag every season. Whereas the club's marsh rabbit tally had once been even with the number of cottontails, now about 70 percent of their bag consists of marsh rabbits. The club's collective annual bag used to exceed 500 cottontails, but more recently it's annual take has been 200 to 300. Hunter numbers have declined and Terrial has also observed other changes.

“I think coyotes prey on cottontails more easily than they do on bluetails,” Terrial said. “When we started out, there were no coyotes. Another change is the type of cover left where we can still hunt. It was mostly farmland, which cottontails like best. Lots of those same farms have grown up in trees. But the swamps and bays that were always too wet for farming are still there and that's where marsh rabbits live.”

Another result of losing some of their farmland territory is that the Horsemen must hopscotch more to find places to hunt. More houses, changes in landownership and declining cottontail habitat means having to pick up the dogs and drive to another spot two or three times in one day.

### THE CHASE IS ON

Everyone agreed that the flooding from Hurricane Florence put a damper on the morning's hunt, so the Horsemen saddled up their pickup trucks, loaded their beagles and headed to another farm a 10-minute drive away. The Barber family did not accompany them. However, Donald Ray Carroll joined them with his four beagles. Once released, the three beagle packs nosed their way into a privet thicket along the edge of a harvested cornfield. Barking half-heartedly at cold rabbit scent, the dogs were telling the hunters the afternoon hunt might be another bust.

The hunters kicked their way through privet and tall pines, urging the dogs on with shouts of, “Find Him! Find Him! Hey-Hey!



Hey-Hey!” When the privet gave way to a regenerating clear-cut, the beagles gave tongue. They broke into several packs or single dogs until they were running rabbits in all directions. The soggy ground sprouted head-high blackberry brambles so clingy that the hunters had to claw their way to the few open spots to take a stand and watch.

That's how and when Terrial bagged that first rabbit of the day. After squeezing out the marsh rabbit's entrails and slipping it into his coat, he was ready to hunt again. The beagles had seen the dead rabbit, signaling that chase was over and it was time to find another rabbit to run.

Beagles chased. Rabbits ran. Shotguns fired. Every hunter saw at least one rabbit, but few of them presented not even the remotest probability for shot. Donnell shot at a marsh rabbit, but the dogs kept going—a bad omen.

“My beagles are really putting it to him,” Donnell said. “Just listen

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to them run! This is the fourth time I have been this season. I got two rabbits on the first hunt, one on the second hunt and none on the third hunt. I hope I don't get skunked again today.”

Late in the afternoon, Terrial rounded up Low Ball, High Ball, Sissy, Cream, Jack, Cutthroat, Sweet Thing and Tiny. Donald Ray lifted Blue, Bo, Jack and Red onto his tailgate and turned their noses into their compartments. Donnell shouted up Joy, Lucky, Cleo, Popeye, Wild Bill, Bonnie and Brassy.

After all of the beagles are in their dog boxes, the Horsemen have a tradition of placing their rabbits in rows on the boxes and tailgates for the count. Terrial had one cottontail and two bluetails. They were the only rabbits bagged in exchange for a group total of 16 shots.

“It's just the luck of the draw,” Terrial said. “Next week, all of the other hunters might get rabbits and I might not shoot a single one. Sometimes, we get 20 or more. It isn't the number of rabbits you shoot that matters. The fun is in being outside with your friends, listening to the beagles run.” ♦

*A frequent contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina, Mike Marsh lives in Wilmington and is the author of four books on North Carolina's hunting and fishing. To contact Marsh or order his books, visit [mikemarshoutdoors.com](http://mikemarshoutdoors.com).*