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.

Terral White inched through the sweetgum saplings. His battle-scarred boots shuffled through the interwoven barrier of briers 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.

Hunting marsh rabbits can be a difficult, dirty challenge that’s worth every moment.

Chasing

BLUETAILS

WITH BEAGLES IN DUPLIN COUNTY’S LOWLANDS

WRITTEN BY MIKE MARSH | PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA McGAW
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,” Terrail 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 shoot-and-run affair. 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 Terrail 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’re the Horsemens Hunting Club. Along with the club’s name, their motto, ‘Strictly Rabbits,’ is embroidered on brier-abraded, skid marks and scars on their members hunting coats. Members and guests for this trip include (left to right) Donnell Picket, Bernard Bullock, Josh Barber, Jack Barber, Phillip Barber, Case Barber, Terrail White and Giovanni Brizula.

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. Terrail 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 Terrail 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 of dogs. A Saturday hunt these days typically hosts a dozen hunters and 10 beagles. This hunt, on Friday, January 10, 2020, began with eight beagle packs totaling 15 beagles.

“We welcome kids, anyone,” Terrail 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.”

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

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The cottontail Barber is holding has a white tail. Bottom: The marsh rabbit foot 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.

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 300 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 Horsemens 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 Horsemens 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 potted 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!” 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 Brassie.

After all of the beagles are in their dog boxes, the Horsemens have a tradition of placing their rabbits in rows on the boxes and tailgates for the count. Terrial had one cottontail and two blue-tails. 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.

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 oozed 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 rabbits’ 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 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.”

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