

Rascally rabbits can foil even an earnest hunter

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Excited barks and howls from the beagles on the gentle hillside above me gave prolonged warning. The track they were following must be smoking hot.

I snugged my shotgun tight, the barrel pointing

slightly downward as I quickly scanned left and right, afraid to blink lest I miss the fleeting flash of fur of a cottontail rabbit.

Rabbits are, simultaneously, the easiest and hardest things to kill. It doesn't take much to bring one down — often a single, small shotgun pellet — but their erratic, bounding runs can make it exceptionally challenging for that pellet to connect. Fold in the usual tangle of briars, broom sedge, scrubby pines and young hardwoods where they wisely hang out and a lot stands between you and a wascally wabbit.

I say "wascally wabbit" in honor of the patron saint of rabbit hunting, Mr. Elmer Fudd. Many a young lad or lass laughed at Fudd's foibles as he chased Bugs Bunny on hapless hunts.

Sadly, Fudd has been rendered shotgun-less, cancelled and unable to complete the mission that inspired him for decades. I was under no such politically correct sanction. My shotgun was ready to lift and shoot whenever the approaching rabbit broke cover either left or right across the narrow trail where I was stationed.

I waited, curiously juiced with anticipation; it's just something in our hunter DNA.

There! A flash of movement in the jungle three yards to my front. Rabbit! My shotgun rose on autopilot.

Instead of veering and running to my side, the rabbit paused a scant second, then charged me like a wounded cape buffalo. It was almost a President Jimmy Carter moment, the one from 1979 when a crazed, swimming, long-eared, killer swamp rabbit made an aggressive move on Carter's fishing boat.

In utter self-defense, I hurriedly fired a frontal shot, the 28-gauge Mossberg over/under shotgun delivering a shotgun pattern diameter slightly tinier than a tennis ball at 2.5 yards, the distance between me and Bugs at the blast.

For a second, I thought the beast might try to run through my legs. Instead, it made a Walter Payton-worthy feint, pivoting left and barely dodging my boot. I wheeled and fired the second round from the shotgun. The pellets plowed ground just behind the lucky rabbit's foot.

The little wascal beat me.

My dog did it

Joe Valasek, the hunter to my left, witnessed the sorry episode. He then offered a less-than-sympathetic opinion, instead sullyng my shooting ability, even questioning whether my shotshells were loaded with pellets.

Valasek could afford to chuckle. He already had collected two rabbits with his vintage side-by-side 12-gauge, even though he just about ran out of ammo doing it.

But he was correct. I was having a rough day.

Earlier in the hunt, I stood at a field edge with

Frank Spuchesi, a dedicated hunter and the man who had half of the pack of dogs we were enjoying this fine January morning. Spuchesi often teams his dogs with the beagles owned by Mickey Ford. The two packs operate well together. Both men easily identify their dogs and what is going on in the thickets by the beagles' vocalizations.

"This is a perfect morning," Spuchesi said. "We had a good frost and when that frost just starts to melt atop the ground is when the conditions get great for the dogs. They can really follow the scent."

He explained that Cricket, a nearly 10-year-old female, was the dog that often "jumped" the rabbit and got things going. She comes by it naturally. Her father Willie was a skilled hunter enshrined in Spuchesi's beagle hall of fame.

"That's Red," Spuchesi said as one dog sounded off with a slowly phrased deep yodel. "There's Little Red," he added as another dog added its own howling aria.

The dogs worked in and out of the scrub. Capturing a few moments of video seemed like the thing to do so I tucked my shotgun under my armpit, retrieved my phone and began filming.

Of course, that is precisely when a rabbit flushed from a thorny thicket and, naturally, ran right at me. It veered as I hastily dropped the phone into the cool, thin mud and raised my gun. Boom — miss. Boom — miss.

As a wise old photographer once shared, "You can shoot film, or you can shoot shotshells. It's darn near impossible to do both."

After my second humiliation, I resorted to something I do best: muttering rationalizations. I finally figured out what it was that was throwing me off. It was my dog. He put a curse on me.

You see, Jameson knows when I am going hunting and he doesn't like it when he isn't invited. As I was donning my hunting clothing that morning, he reached into the box with his gear and pulled out his neoprene vest, bringing it to me with the enthusiastic, full-body waggle that only a Boykin spaniel can deliver.

"Nope, not today buddy. Leave it," I told him as I pulled the vest from his mouth and returned it to the box.

This always breaks Jameson's heart. It happens too many times during deer season. Dejected, he sat there as I opened the door and slipped out into the late dawn, telling him, "Good boy. I'll be back."

I'm fairly certain he returned to his bed and started reciting dog versions of voodoo curses.

Peace offering

My hunt wasn't a total shutout. I finally was able to take a shot longer than three yards and connected with a cottontail. By early afternoon, it was time to go.

In a peace gesture for his funny, painful comments, Valasek offered me his two rabbits.

"I hope we get to do this again," he said.

We parted, me carrying three rabbits for the stewpot and wearing a big smile.

"Me, too Joe. Me too."

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