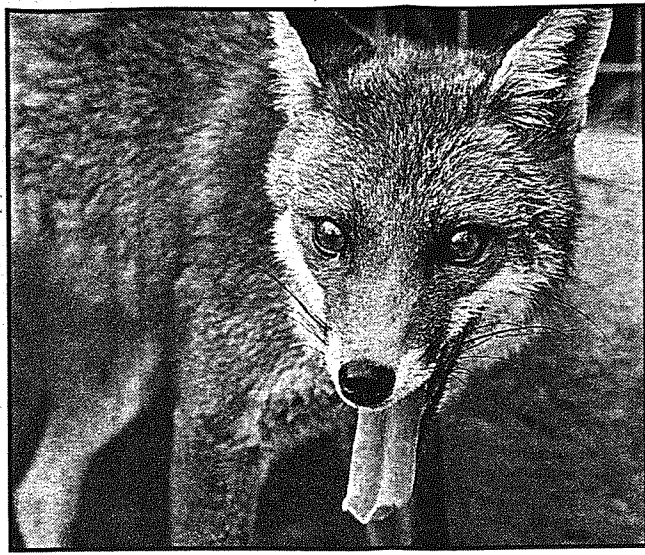


Views to a Kill



NOBLE SPORT: Hunting represents 250 years of a "fine British tradition"

IF yesterday was a black day for turkeys, today is even worse for the fox. Across the country men and women in red coats will celebrate Boxing Day with the traditional hunt. Oscar Wilde called it "the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible", and a century later protesters are still trying to get hunting banned. But huntsmen argue that it is a legitimate sport and necessary method of pest control. DAVID JONES interviewed leading figures on both sides of the debate.



MOVING TARGET: But the fox's death is not always mercifully quick

For the hunt

by MICHAEL CLAYTON

Editor of Horse And Hound magazine

WHEN I put on my red hunting coat to ride with the Cottesmore in Leicestershire today, I will not only be preserving a fine 250-year-old English tradition.

I will also be helping to protect the countryside and all the animals that live in it — especially the fox.

I can understand how people who have never watched a hunt or read an unbiased account of the sport might think it is cruel.

But before they listen to the anti's propaganda and come to that conclusion, I would ask them to put aside emotion and consider the facts.

Riding over the open countryside in pursuit of hounds is a wonderful sport. I have been hunting two or three times a week for 35 years. You need to be fit, a good horseman and prepared to encounter some danger.

This morning, for example, we will set off at 11am and hunt until dark without even a break for lunch. The only time we will stop is to change horses. Yet it is far more than a recreation. To those who live in the countryside it is a way of life.

Some 400,000 take part, if you include supporters and subscribers. And it is thanks to the hunt that we have point-to-point races, and all manner of social activities, from hunt balls to skittles and darts matches.

Despite what the anti's would tell you, it is for all walks of life. Prince Charles might enjoy it, but so do blacksmiths and, in my hunt, the man from the sewerage works.

A ban would hit at the roots of rural recreation. It would be like wiping out football, which I love dearly but actually sparks far more violence than fox-hunting. You would not only

wipe out soccer clubs themselves but the supporters' clubs and all the associated activities. And imagine the mayhem if anyone suggested that.

The only reason for a ban would be if you could prove that it was not the most humane form of fox control. Foxes must be culled by man because they are a predator and we are the only species higher than them in the food chain.

You can do it in a variety of ways: shooting, gassing, poisoning or snaring — and all cause infinitely more suffering than

"They don't suffer, the hounds just tear them to bits and that's it"

killing with hounds. When I go home this evening I will know that if we caught a fox, it died almost instantly. The hounds just tear it to bits and that's it.

I don't wonder if it is dying slowly in a snare. I don't worry that it may have been wounded and limped off to bleed to death. Cyanide isn't quick or pleasant, either.

They say the chase terrifies the fox, but it doesn't run for miles with a hound three inches from its brush. It's more stop-go, stop-go and the pressure comes at the end when it knows it's about to be caught.

A fox that runs to ground is shot. I know this wasn't the case

at the Quorn recently but the masters were disciplined. And if it happened regularly I wouldn't go hunting.

The anti's say the fox population controls itself but that is all eye-wash because nobody has an accurate census. All we know is that there are more in some areas than others.

Where there are many and they cause problems — in stock rearing areas for example — we cull far more. It's not our purpose to wipe them out but to maintain them along with other wildlife.

The most important contribution we make to the countryside is in maintaining the fox's habitat. Developers are constantly destroying it, ripping out hedgerows and making new roads and buildings. Go to hunt country and you won't find that happening.

We also plant coverts — small woodlands where foxes live. Over the years we have invested millions of pounds in this way. We were Green before it became fashionable.

The anti-fox hunting movement is not new. A similar mood sparked a government inquiry in 1952 and it exonerated the hunt of all cruelty allegations. I'm sure the same would happen today.

Before people listen to the League Against Cruel Sports I would urge them to think of the 400,000 dogs that have to be put down because town and city folk who don't understand animals properly can't be bothered to look after them.

I was once a war correspondent for the BBC in Cambodia, Vietnam and the Middle East. To talk about the cruelty of fox hunting when you have seen man's inhumanity to man seems to me absurd. It is just not relevant. This is actually something positive and beneficial to society.

For the fox

by JIM BARRINGTON

Director of the League Against Cruel Sports

THIS morning the Old Surrey and Burstow hunt assemblies at East Grinstead in Sussex for its annual Boxing Day meet. I will be there.

As always, I will be taking pictures and simply making my presence felt. I will watch the riders drink their "stirrup cup" of mulled wine or sherry, then try to follow them.

When the terrified and exhausted fox is finally trapped and torn apart by the hounds I will feel disgusted, just as I have since I first saw this gruesome sight in 1974.

But instead of returning home thinking such barbarism can never be stopped, as I did then, I will at least be confident that soon it will end.

Hunt followers insist that their so-called sport is as popular as ever, even though some 20 hunts have closed through dwindling support in the past 15 years.

They even claim one million people will "enjoy" today's spectacle. But these figures are massively inflated. For them to be accurate, it would mean 5,000 people watching each of the nation's 200 hunts.

We are so confident that this will not happen, we will pay £100 to a horse protection charity for every hunt that *does* attract so many spectators if they give the same sum for every one that *doesn't*.

Opinion polls show that 80 per cent of the country is against hunting. The nation's biggest landowner, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, has banned it and it is only a matter of time before foxhunting is outlawed completely.

Thanks to a private member's bill introduced by one of our vice-presidents, the issue will be

debated in the Commons for the first time in 40 years this St Valentine's Day. And Labour have promised to make banning the hunt a priority if they come to power.

When you consider what will happen in the fields around scores of towns and villages today, is it any wonder?

The preparations began last night, while you were digesting your Christmas dinner. An "earthstopper" went out to block up all the foxholes he could find, to make sure the fox has nowhere to hide. His only

"The huntsmen all want to have a good chase, no matter what they may say"

choice is to run for his life. And whatever the huntsmen tell you about their motives, that is their prime purpose — to enjoy a good chase.

Of course, they want to prolong their fun. So the hounds are bred to be slower than the fox — but they have far more stamina and wear him down.

After up to 90 minutes of panic and confusion, his energy runs out and the pack closes in.

At least when the animal is caught like this, the kill is quick and death comes as a merciful release.

But if the fox goes to ground and is found by the terrier-men, the scenes can be much more

harrowing. Terriers are sent down the hole and the animals begin biting and snapping at one another. Then the terrier-men dig the fox out, perhaps pushing shovels into his face to separate him from the dogs.

The fox is then supposed to be shot and must never be released to the hounds. But this rule, like others, is often flouted — as it was by Prince Charles's favourite hunt, the Quorn.

Huntsmen boast that by controlling the number of foxes, they make Britain's fox population the healthiest in Europe.

A study by Dr Stephen Harris of Bristol University found this to be false. Every season they probably kill only 12,000 to 14,000 foxes, under three per cent of the total population. Numbers are controlled by the availability of food and territory, and hunting actually upsets the balance of nature.

Foxes live in families consisting of a dog fox, a dominant vixen and several subservient vixens. The dog fox usually breeds only with the dominant vixen. But if she is killed by hunters, he breeds with the others to produce more cubs.

We would like to see drag-hunting introduced as a replacement. This is where a rider sets out across country with the scent and the hounds then hunt the "drag" rather than pursuing a live animal.

The traditional pageantry would be retained, people could still enjoy watching the hounds and stable staff would not suddenly lose their jobs.

It would also be safer for the horses and hounds because the trail would not cross busy roads.

The only difference would be that no fox would be terrorised and killed. Now perhaps that type of hunting really would attract a million spectators each Boxing Day.