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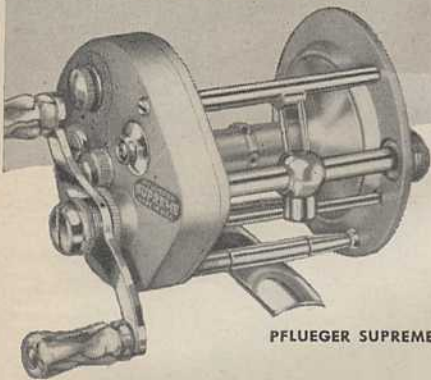
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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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★ JANUARY, 1949 ★

NUMBER 1

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COVER PAINTING BY ROBERT G. DOARES

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With a cornfield for bait (left), snow tracks as guides, and a beagle hound hot on the trail, we just couldn't miss this jackpot

SNOWDRIFT BUNNIES

by ROB F. SANDERSON

Two hunters and an eager beagle try a "hunted out" woods in the winter—and bring home the makings for some tasty stews

The early freezes, which we here along the Caledonia Hills of Wisconsin call squaw winter, were long past, and a deep drifting snow had swept down from Canada, bringing the brittle winter cold behind it. The cold had moderated the day before, and a new flaky snow, this time a light one, covered the older and harder drifts. I was getting my blunderbuss ready to be put away until the following autumn when the phone rang. It was Tom, and he wanted to go hunting.

"Where?" I snorted. "Florida?"
"No, right here," he said. "For rabbits." These, he explained carefully, don't go south like ducks, or hibernate like woodchucks. In fact, the shooting ought to be good and the woods all our own. He would drive over as soon as he could find his hound and buy a box of No. 6's.

He arrived a few minutes later accompanied by a dog I call the Atomic Mutt; actually, the name is Trump. Our maneuvering grounds were to be the big woods along the Baraboo River, where I had hunted several times for squirrels

in the early fall without much luck.

When we arrived at the woods all was very white and quiet. From all appearances the place had not been hunted since the big snowfall ten days before. "Well," I mused to myself, "we might see a fox," and I slipped a load of No. 2's into the left barrel just in case.

As I plodded through the snow I found several squirrel tracks that crisscrossed the white woods floor, and looking ahead I saw tepees of corn in a field along the woods. Then the rabbit tracks commenced.

Yesterday's light snow had stopped after dusk, so when I found a one-way cottontail track leading under a fence and out into the cornfield, I followed. After a bit the track played cat's cradle so confusingly that it was hard to decide which corn shock hid the rabbit. I called the dog.

Trump Goes Into Action

Trump came kangarooing eagerly through the drifts, arriving with white-powdered whiskers and ears. Sniffing eagerly, he passed by the first bundles of corn. But at the third his tail went up like a tent pole and, voicing a fog-horn bellow, he scrunched himself into the widest opening while I kicked lustily at the opposite side. Suddenly there was a muffled yip, and a bundle of brown fur cannon-balled out across the wind-packed snow with the hound right be-

hind him. For a few seconds I couldn't shoot without fear of hitting the dog but when the cottontail veered out of line I pulled.

The rabbit tumbled sideways, recovered, and ran on. I pulled the left barrel. The No. 2's I had put in for fox bridged the range, and when the echo rolled away among the trees, bunny was down for the count. This was action!

With a pleasing sag in my game pocket I looked around for Tom, who had hunted off toward a thicket along a draw which drained into the river. As he entered the cover, snow from the low branches avalanched about his head just as he sighted game. Firing a hasty shot into the thick brush, he only ticked the rabbit. Bunny, safely beyond my gun range, ran over to a brushy fence corner and disappeared down a hole in a snowdrift.

"That hole doesn't go into the ground," Tom observed. "Otherwise the entrance would be dirty from soil tracked out by the rabbits. Let's tromp it out."

Starting at opposite ends of the drift, we tramped back and forth, approaching each other in zigzag fashion. The whole drift was honeycombed with tunnels, but no dog or fox could dig them out because of caving snow and rolls of fencing wire which were covered by the drift. Where the passages touched the bases of saplings, all the bark was eaten away, proving many an underground

meal was munched on blustery days. Trump, smelling rabbit all over the place, filled the air with yelps and jumps.

When I was less than twenty feet from Tom, his gun jumped to position and a charge of shot flew past me well to my right. A rabbit had exploded out of the snow behind me, and Tom dropped him before he'd gone a dozen feet.

I decided to draw the rabbits then and there, thus making a lighter game load and a sweeter-tasting meat in the event any shot had pierced the stomach cavity. As I dressed the animals I opened their stomachs to see what they had been feeding on. The first was full of corn, the other was full of green bark.

A Rabbit's Winter Motto

"Never far from food, never far from shelter," Tom observed. "That's a rabbit's winter motto. Live in a corn tepee and eat corn; live in a brush patch and eat bark. That's why you don't find them in the fields and open places, where you see so many in the early fall."

"That explains why, when I hunted this woods in early fall, I never saw a bunny," I replied. "These rabbits moved in only after the snow and cold had forced them to."

The drawn rabbits, lighter by 50 percent, were hardly back in our hunting coats when Trump, who had been ambling about on his own, opened voice on a track. Floundering off through the snow, we pursued the commotion, but the rabbit quickly outdistanced us. Then the hound's trail bark stopped. I raised an earlap to listen better. I couldn't hear a thing.

"Holed or brushed up," Tom declared. "Probably brushed. Let's mosey over and take a look."

Bunny had bunked in a big brush pile. Climbing on top of it, Tom and I jumped and jounced. Suddenly I lost my footing and my feet went crashing down into the pile. With this, the bunny bounced out.

Contort myself as I might in the tanglefoot, I was unable to get off a shot. But Tom's 12 gauge boomed, and the fur flew. Luckily he hit a little low, the range being short.

"Sort of shot up," he said, observing the rabbit's dangling legs. "But a close choke is the only thing for winter shooting. You can spot their brown fur so far away on snow that you get a lot of long-range shots." He pointed a few yards off. "See those weasel tracks back there? With weasels around, rabbits seldom use a hole if there's a brush pile around. Afraid of being cornered underground, they prefer a hideout from which they can escape in any direction."

Later I came upon old fox tracks partly covered by the new light snow. For several hundred yards I followed them in a near-straight line. Then abruptly they veered and became scrambled. Here I found a few tufts of rabbit fur—silent testimony why, though the day was not particularly cold or windy, no bunnies were to be seen. With foxes threatening them in the open and weasels endangering them in the burrows, only brush piles and

snowdrifts were safe. Or better yet, a snowdrift over a brush pile.

For some distance there were few tracks, and no fresh ones. We were among big trees now, and with no corn standing alongside there was no lunch counter for the cottontails. Then we crossed a thickly woven fence and were again in thick brush. Even as we crossed the fence, Trump gave voice, and we hurried ahead.

Approaching the dog, we discovered the rabbit had run down a peninsula of saplings flanking a ditch, and then out into an open field. We took our stands on the chance that he would pull a monkeyshine at the end of the second growth and return the same way. At a brisk clip, the rabbit ran the length of the brush, circled out into the field to fool the dog, and then started back toward the woods. As the bellowing hound passed on one side of the brush strip, the rabbit crouched on the other. With the dog past, he came jumping along easily until almost within gun range, then he cut diagonally into the brush.

With a silent signal to Tom, who immediately went on the alert, I climbed a broad stump to see better into the thick brush. In a moment Tom's gun boomed, and seeing a flash of brown in the growth, I dispatched a snapshot, the pellets nipping cover all the way. The next I saw of the rabbit was when Trump came trotting cockily out of the brambles dangling the fugitive by one hind leg.

We zigzagged back into the woods from brush pile to thicket, closely watching both far ahead and about our feet as we walked slowly forward. In the snow, sitting rabbits often have to be pried loose with a crowbar; but once routed they can easily be frightened by a far-distant noise or movement.

That day we ran two more rabbits with the dog. The first holed up in a large woodpile after a long run. The second took refuge in a series of brush piles which were situated so that he could jump from one to the next with-

out giving us a chance for a shot. After bouncing ourselves breathless on these piles, we finally gave up. The sun was setting, and we were far from home.

As we headed back to the car we left the woods for easier going along a narrow road. At one point where the road was flanked by standing corn on one side and a brushy ditch on the other, we found rabbit tracks lacing the snow. We decided to take turns walking the ditch. Being in a hurry to reach the car, however, we weren't so alert as we might have been, for when a bunny bounced out of the snow we both missed him. Before we could get off another shot he had ducked into a burrow beneath some tree roots, and there we had to leave him.

Laxity and Bad Shooting

We continued along the ditch, cursing ourselves for our laxity and bad shooting. And then, just as we came within sight of the car and were about to empty our guns, a brown ball burst out of the snow ahead of Tom. Our two shots were simultaneous—and both scored. We figured Tom must have trampled a snow passage in which the rabbit was sitting. It all happened so fast that for a moment Trump didn't know which way to run.

We were all glad to reach the car. My leg muscles ached from pushing through the snow, and the Atomic Mutt lost no time lowering his flagpole tail and curling up on the back seat. A sixteen-inch dog is none too large for kangarooing through heavy snow, and having covered at least five times as much ground as we had, he had run up an impressive mileage.

Arriving at the house with a gamebag full of rabbit that would furnish several tasty stews, I made a fresh resolve. No longer will I lay my gun away when the time comes to shovel snow. From now on I'm a down-to-the-last-day rabbit hunter. In fact, for me the season won't really start until it's snowdrift time for bunnies!

THE END



A cover along a lonely road often brings good results. This one produced three!