

## Red Ants

By Glenn F. Witchey

That's an odd title for an article in a trapping magazine, but we will get into the ants later in the article. Lady luck is sometimes on our side. This summer I met a southern deer hunter. He leased several thousand acres to deer hunt on in the deep south. He wanted some predator control done on his property. He asked me if I could do it and I jumped at the chance.

On a cold, wet evening in December, I left my Ohio home and headed south. A very long drive later I pulled into the lease. After a quick bite we went to bed. My host was hunting the next morning. I unloaded my truck and trailer, about noon he showed me around the lease. The land was a lot different from the rolling hills and agriculture I am used to trapping at home. This was paper company land. Stands of mature pines, selectively cut stands, and clear cut replanted stands. Also, the land was very flat. An ant hill was a mountain to the local folks. When you started to make a set you got fooled fast. The top two inches were nice fine sand. Then you hit the hardest red clay I have ever driven a stake in.

It was late afternoon before I got the chance to put some sets in. It was mid December and at 80 degrees, sweat was dripping off my nose on my canine sets, this was not the first time I had trapped canines in hot weather. To tell you the truth it did not scare me to death. I do not believe you can totally mask or hide your scent from a canine. I think you limit the amount of your scent but that's it. That coyote is going to know you were there. That canine has smelled man before, sometimes that man scent has ended in a nice big fresh gut pile. What a nice easy dinner that was.

That afternoon I only got a few sets in. About dark it started to rain. It rained hard all night, the next morning it was still raining. About noon it started to break up. It would rain awhile then slow to a drizzle then rain again. I did manage to get a few sets in between the rain. Because it was so wet I mainly set big flashy cubbies in slash piles with a lure holder in back. It continued to rain off and on most of the night. It did bring with it a welcomed cold front. For the rest of my stay we would have a high temperature of about 65 degrees but go down to 35 at night.

The next morning it was nice and sunny. I did pick up several grey fox from my sets. One had been killed by a coyote. Just two bites in it, one in the chest and one in the neck. I could finally get down to serious trapping. It was great to be able to drive the somewhat maintained logging roads. I think the farthest I had to walk to make a set was 100 feet. Most of the time sets were made 10 to 20 feet from my tailgate. A main set of course, the dirt hole set with a hole as deep as I could get it. That was sometimes only 6 inches. I normally like to have them deeper than that but it was not the end of the world. What was tough was bedding the traps. I am a little eccentric on bedding a trap. I don't want it to move at all. I have in the past been in soil I just could not get the trap to bed right. I could not accept this and would abandon the set for another sight. That tough chunky clay was mean and took some time but I got them where I wanted them.

I did put in a few flat sets. Almost without fail, after a catch I turned the set into a flat set. At a catch sight there will be so much scent you won't need much more. I would usually bring in something for a backing/focal point. A small shot of urine on the backing and the set was done. I use a lot of rocks for backing. Here they were nonexistent. I do like a heavy backing or something an animal can't carry off. Sometimes a clump of grass on a new set, here I used dirt clumps or a chunk of log.

I have bait that I make that I really like and have great luck with. Unfortunately, I forgot to grab another jar when I left so I didn't have much. I ran out early and with the empty Mason jar decided to make a set. I stuck a handful of leaves in the jar and buried it with the mouth open, as my dirt hole. I bedded a trap in front of it and called it a set. The next morning I had a grey fox in that set. The jar was still in the hole so I remade the same set. A day later it held a nice silver coon. The coon had pulled the jar out and licked it as clean as it could. I had to guess it did this after getting caught.

A couple of funny, but could have been bad things happened to me while I was gone. One morning first thing I caught a grey fox. After giving it a trapper's love tap on the top knot, it went down. I took the fox out of the trap and laid it beside the set. I then started remaking the set. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. The grey fox head was up and he was looking at me. I jumped up and as I did the fox took off running. There I was a 53 year old man chasing down a grey fox in a clear cut, replanted patch of pines. A clear cut has a lot of tops, branches and stumps in it. Not the easiest going. While still running after the fox I saw a limb about an inch in diameter and

grabbed it. I swung it at the fox and did connect but the limb was rotten and it broke. At that point the fox decided to turn around and chase me awhile. I made a dive and luckily my aim was on. I caught the grey fox around the neck. I did not let go until I knew it was expired. Another day I caught a big ole aggressive male coyote. I was on the outside of at the catch circle. The coyote was on the other side of the catch circle as they do. I was taking a picture and had my digital camera about waste high. It was an overcast day and the camera was on auto flash. Just as I snapped the picture the coyote lunged at me. I swear I saw that coyote's teeth snap shut two inches from my hand. That got my heart pumping blood.

You have probably all heard or read pro trappers say when trapping coyotes set on sign. Well back home in northeast Ohio if you only set on sign you would not be making many sets but down here there was sign everywhere, most of it was very old but still there. It appeared that dropping could last for weeks. They would deteriorate down to a ball of deer hair. Those southern coyotes seemed to me just like their Ohio brothers. Same size, went after the same baits and lures, and worked sets the same. They were of course not furred as well and were redder in color.

The grey fox were smaller than the ones we had here in the 70's and 80's. But they were just as aggressive and bold. I believe any kind of set would catch them from dirt holes to cubbies. They were attracted to any lure from food lure, beaver castor to coyote gland lure. I still think they are a very beautiful animal. All I brought with me was coyote size traps. I think if I were targeting these southern greys only I would use a #1 double coil. They have very small feet and tender bones.

When I headed south I was hoping to get into some bobcats and otter. Although I did see some bobcat sign it was very little. I never got to tangle with one while there. There was very little water on the property I had permission to trap. Where I stayed there were three connected ponds each a few acres in size. I searched these for otter or beaver sign but found none. When I asked the leaser if they ever saw any in the ponds he said not since they released the eleven foot and nine foot alligators into the ponds. The gators did make it easy to get rid of the carcasses though.

If you ever get to trap these huge pine plantations here are a few things I observed on them. The mature pine forest's do not seem to be very good habitat. Because the mature trees cut out sunlight from getting to the ground there is no under story just dead pine needles. The pines are planted in rows and you can see for a mile down them. In these mature stands there were no deer trails or any other wildlife sign that I could see. The second type of habitat is thinned stands of mature pines. The paper company comes in and cuts out every fourth row of trees. They also selectively cut the bigger trees out of the other rows. This allows sunlight to get to the under story. Briars grow quick when the sunlight gets through. Rabbits and other rodents live in these briar rows. Predators do hunt these rows and use them as travel corridors. The third type, and as far as I am concerned the best habitat is the clear cut/replanted tracks. The paper company goes in and cuts all mature trees. They replant the whole track. Every few acres they make a pile of limbs and stumps. The ground is taken over by briars and small shrub brush. There is a lot of browse for the deer and a great place for rabbits and rodents. The slash piles are fur magnets. These are good places to concentrate on.

If it can go wrong it will. I am a firm believer when you go on a trip like this you should take a spare of everything. Spare boots, coat, sifter, and driver, just everything. I did pretty good but forgot one thing. Guess what I broke on my second day, my stake driving hammer that I forgot to bring a spare of. It was over 25 miles into town. I was lucky enough to borrow a ball peen hammer from a local. It got me through the day. That night I drove into town and bought another hammer. I hope I don't make that mistake again.

If you ever get a chance to go south to run a trap line, as they say on TV, Just Do It! Whatever techniques work for you at home use there, but be ready to change tactics if you need to. Don't believe things you heard like their coyotes are smaller, easier to catch, won't work your northern lures or set the same. Just use what is successful for you at home. Although it does take a while for the people to trust you they are good, hard working, honest folks. Once they get to know you, they will help you in any way they can. All the time I spent by myself in the woods down there I never once heard banjo music playing.

Now back to those red ants. It was my first go around with red ants. It would be ok with me if they were my last. I got into them twice when I needed more soil to cover my set. Both times I was in a bull dozed road cut. They had pushed up a little bunch of sand perfect for my needs and I guess the ants. I dug it out went to my set and starting sifting. I felt something biting me on both wrists. Looked down and saw the small red ants. Brushed them off and kept making the set. The next day I repeated the situation. That's when I noticed the puss sacks from the day before. Mean little ants! A local told me they were fire ants. I just know I didn't like them nasty critters. If you find yourself down south watch out for them.

Here's hoping your stretchers are always full.

