

Predators and Nighthawks
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It was a miserable night, one of those typical half rain and half snow nights southeastern Ohio is famous for in December. A night when all good Buckeyes should have been snuggled away in their warm beds for the night.

We were chilled to the bone, soaking wet, too. My old partner, Mark, and I were drying out before the fire-place after a nights work on stakeout under a wet old oak tree overlooking an old logging trail. We were in a rented cabin perched up high on the side of a wooded hill overlooking a beautiful lake bordered by oak, hickory, pine and old elms. "What a spot for my retirement years," I said out loud to no one in particular. Mark only grunted. He wasn't much for talk when he felt and smelled like a wet old coon dog.

After 40 years of chasing poachers, moonshiner's, and bad guys in general; in the woods, from the lake, to the river, my mind kept telling me it was about time to hang up the badge and Sam Brown and unpack my old Blake and Lamb stop losses and bodygrips and maybe try out some of those "new" soft catches. Maybe even buy a little cabin down in Deer-John-Two-Bear's territory. Just one more year, I whispered, just give me one good year.

I glanced over at Mark who was busy wringing the ice water out of his boot socks, bare feet on the cold, rugless cabin floor. Mark and I had set many a trap together, over the years, for both the 4 legged and the 2 legged predators.

I had never personally met 'Ol Stanley Hawbaker along the trail, but in roaming the upper and central eastern Adironadacks in the early years I met many a gent who had sat with him by the campfire, coffee and venison cooking. Maybe I even saw his tracks in the snow a time or two. But his teachings had quite an influence on me, both in my work as well as along the trapline. We're all hunters in one way or another, you know.

Steam was rising from our wet clothes hanging on a rope in front of the roaring fireplace. Maybe by morning, they'd be partly dry, we hoped. Mark threw another short log on the fire and sparks flew up the chimney. It was well past midnight and still the rain pattered on the old tin roof. We were both cold and dog tired and overworked. Did I say overworked? YES! We were not on the vacation-hunting/trapping trip where we intended to be; high in the Colorado Rockies. Instead, we were on the job. On duty 7 days a week, assigned here in the forlorned, lonely strip-mining area in southeastern Ohio, miles from any piece of civilization and still more miles from our home base in Cuyahoga County. We had some catchin' to do.

Our assignment originated when 'Ol Alfonso Daniel Black, an old likeable coot that lives all over the Ohio/West Virginia mountain area, where he lives by hunting, fishing and trapping, filed a complaint. He was an outdoors legend in this rugged area where Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia all come together along the grand Ohio River. He wrote a nasty letter to the State demanding a full-blown posse. He got us. He complained of the increasing number of trap thieves and deer poachers jack-lighten' in the strip country which he considers his own. He reported seeing commercial hunters on the back road loading up trucks with deer carcasses to be taken to the city and sold so wealthy "Sportsman Clubs" could have their venison dinners without legally hunting the same. This doesn't set well with the local licensed hunters and trappers; hence our assignment and our cancelled elk hunt and beaver trapping in the Rockies.

Mark and I both were almost "Senior Citizens" but we still enjoyed a good hunt; man or beast. It's all the same, if it's an illegal predator. Alfonso permitted us the use of his tiny summer cabin as our base of operations with the Feds paying the tab.

My old corncob briar was almost out. I promised myself I'd hit the sack when it died and my coffee disap-

peared. I just couldn't get to sleep. I kept imagining I heard shots being fired in the far distance or vehicles on the road. Mark said, "That's only the sap freezing in the trees, snapping the limbs as the temp drops." I knew it, but it still bothered me.

This was our third night working a single county area staking out back logging roads and open meadows. It was beautiful, almost virgin trapping country, streams, ponds, marsh areas, and tracks galore. Another place on my list of places I'd rather live in. We'd mark the mud tracks on the roadway and check them frequently to see if we had any visitors in or out of the area. Three nights of absolute "nothing", except rain, snow, mud, and nighthawks. The night birds would start their songs about 2100 hours (9p.m.) and we'd have steady "music" from the whippoorwill, several owls, perhaps a nightingale, a couple of restless ducks on the pond, and a lonely fox "barking" at everything.

A slow shuffling in the leaves behind me one night caused my hair to rise, until our little nocturnal 'possum came ambling by without even a friendly grin at me sitting there all stressed out. We hung around the cabin in the daytime, keeping warm and drying our clothes, eating our biscuits and coffee, trying to make the cabin look "unlived in". It gets mighty miserable sitting on a log under a dripping tree all night long, straining your eyes and ears through the darkness searching for a beam of light or the drone of an old pickup truck coming up the hill in darkness.

But that was our job, way back then. Even then, records show there were literally thousands of deer, bear, and fur bearing animals illegally taken from the three state area to supply the clubs and organizations catering to the "sportsman" who paid predators to harvest their prey for them.

As I recall it was on the fifth night of our cold watch that we first heard the approaching vehicles, motors and transmissions growling along, coming up the winding logging road where we overlooked a big meadow flanked by deep woods where the deer rested during the day. After dusk the deer, one by one, filed slowly out of the wooded shadows to browse on the tender grass shoots in the meadow. One night we counted over 100 deer in this one field, which sloped down to a marsh where we also were enjoying a couple of days trapping muskrats. I'd daydream of coming back here to live someday after retirement. One of the jobs few benefits was being assigned to interesting areas where you thought you'd like to return to someday, after retirement, to trap and live the good life. We all had our secret notebooks full of such places.

We were about 100 yards apart but after working in harness together for so many years, we knew each other's thoughts and worked well as a team.

With our adrenaline pumping, we watched and waited, not unlike the deer or turkey hunter on a stand. There were two older pickup trucks, three men in each, laboring noisily up the logging road towards us. You'd think the noise of the trucks would frighten the deer, but they were used to the noise around the strip mines and ignored the trucks. Both vehicles reached the center of the meadow spacing themselves about 100 feet apart and stopped. Dead silence. We watched and waited for what seemed like an eternity, not daring to move for fear they'd see us in the faint moonlight. Their powerful spotlights snapped on; three on each truck, spotting and holding on the closest deer. The animals snorted, blowing steam from their nostrils but stood perfectly still, motionlessly staring into the spotlights as though hypnotized. Within seconds 6 shots rang out, echoing and re-echoing from the distant hills. Six deer hit the frozen ground as if struck by lightning. It was a slaughter. The rest of the herd milled slightly about, but did not bolt. They stood nervously pawing the ground by their fallen comrades as if wondering what had happened, the others continued to stare at the deadly inviting spotlights. An entire herd ready for the slaughter.

With their eyes trained on the herd, the poachers failed to see Mark and I approaching from different angles, shotguns at the ready. Their shots continued to ring out resembling the firing range at Camp Perry. Deer were falling. With our Winchester Model 12s at our hips pointing directly at the trucks occupants, we slowly crept up

to the far side of each truck. Mark snapped his powerful head lamp on first, lighting up his truck in a glare and loudly announcing our presence with his powerful voice, shouting out our police identities and commanding them to lay down their weapons as they were under arrest.

They all appeared totally stunned and scared, and for a brief moment they looked about for an avenue of escape, casting glances left and right. I immediately cancelled their thoughts when I snapped my blazing headlight on, brandishing my 12 gauge toward them. For all they knew there were ten of us in the shadows awaiting their reaction. They gave up peacefully. Seldom do we have active resisters who try to fight their way out into the shadows. There have been times when they tried and running gun battles ensued, but eventually we'd round them up either for the jail, hospital, or the morgue.

There were some tough characters living in those hills from Zanesville to Steubenville (Dean Martin's old home) and to Wheeling. Homicide was common back in the hills. There were also some of the finest hunters and trappers in the country living throughout those old hills. But that's another story.

This particular night the poachers were not the commercial type killers we were looking for. Nevertheless, they were illegal poachers and predators. They stood quietly by their trucks, beautiful expensive rifles lying at their feet, frightened faces with strong alcohol on their breath. My notes recall two were teen-agers and the other 4 were teachers and businessmen. All out for an illegal thrill hoping to get a nice buck to brag about the next morning; a set of horns for the office wall. To a man they admitted they'd heard of the commercial poachers being so successful they thought they'd give it a try as "no one ever got caught".

Come daybreak we had 6 men, 6 rifles, 12 deer, 2 revolvers, and 2 pickup trucks at the village court awaiting the judge. The court kept the deer for the children's home and confiscated the rifles and the trucks, per Federal law. A stiff fine and license forfeiture ruined their future hunting days. We knew after checking court records, the men were all good citizens and duly licensed to hunt. But, under the influence of alcohol at the club party listening to the stories passed out by the poachers of the big herds waiting to be shot at night; they lost all sense of reasoning and reverted to the illegal "sport" of jacklighting. They became predators of the night.

In this ugly undertaking hundreds of deer are wounded and left to die in the woods. Hunters accidentally shoot one another and lost shots find their way into neighboring homes and victims. We interviewed a farmer who had 44 head of cattle shot in the field at night by poachers for the thrill of shooting "something". We hope through education and proper law enforcement to curtail this wasteful, illegal, wanton practice, but it seems each generation brings new problems and new faces.

All of us in the conservation field hope that those of you reading this message who may jacklight an occasional deer will reconsider and keep in mind; this illegal sport is very dangerous and expensive when you get caught.

Sooner or later you will meet me or my associates along the trail, hopefully to brew friendly coffee together over the campfire and warmly talk of our retirement dreams. That sure was a beautiful cabin perched up on that hill back in that promising valley. Someday...