

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

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To most of us wild animals are simply names, or pictures, or, at best, a glimpse in field or woods. Such, indeed, were foxes to me until this summer's experiences at Melville.

My first encounter this season with the foxes of Sugar Bowl Hill came on the evening of the twelfth of June. In other summers I had seen the occasional fox racing across its bare pastures. Once Anna and I had surprised two young fox pups in a hollow in the woods but they had speedily vanished. On the strength of such observations I had promised Greer Roberts, who was spending the weekend with us, that I might be able to show him a fox. As we started up the hill the sun was low in the west, and the trees were casting long shadows. This is the most likely time of day for seeing foxes in my experience but Greer was skeptical of our chances, and I was anything but certain. I have had too many disappointments after telling people that I will show them some bird or animal to prophesy with surety just what I will be able to turn up.

We quit the road at the top of the first rise and clambered over the old rail fence, which rests on the boulders of an aged stone wall, and stepped down into the pasture near the salt block that brings the cattle to this corner. There were no salt-tasting cows about this evening. The pasture, (empty and silent, save for a softly carolling bluebird guarding his nest in a decaying fence post nearby,) stretched away green and golden to the dark wood. We set out, following the well-marked cow path along the fence towards the wood. With the memory of the young foxes seen in the wooded vale strong within me, I was intent upon our getting into the trees as quickly as we could. Consequently I was not prepared for Greer's quiet exclamation, "Dick, there are six of them!" We were just emerging from a wet hollow where the cows come to drink and Greer was gazing out into the pasture over the rise. So fixed were my thoughts about the wood that I didn't gather at first what he was talking about. I grunted noncommittally, and he repeated the exclamation, "There are six of them!" Still uncertain, I asked, "Six of what?" When the answer came back, "Foxes!", then I really did come to and take notice. I whirled my own binoculars into focus, and into my startled eyes jumped six, -- no, eight, foxes!

Hastily, but with cautious tread, we withdrew some twenty paces to the sheltering shadows of a large beech tree which spreads its branches over the fence at this point. Sitting down quickly we brought our glasses into play again, hoping to get a few more sights of this incredible assemblage before its members should disperse at the sight and sound of humans.

After all we were scarcely a hundred yards distant, and we had been talking as we came over the rise. Moreover, the wind was plowing straight across the pasture from us to them. Yet strangely, as we sat in the shadows, watching eagerly their every move they did not disappear. They hardly gave a nervous twitch of the head in our direction. They paid us no heed at all! So were we able to observe at such comfortable range a whole denful of foxes, for that, in fact, was what Greer had discovered.

Close watching showed us that the den was placed in a well-chosen site. Atop the backbone of a slight ridge which ran down the middle of the pasture the few feet of extra elevation that this situation provided enabled the foxes to observe the approach of any possible danger from all directions. A brief warning and all the young ones could be down the entrance to the den before any menace could reach them, and one or both adults could be racing across the pasture calling attention to themselves, and away from the family residence. But as we watched quietly from beneath the beech tree, and made no move to draw closer, we were evidently not considered a threat. No alarm was given.

Thus we were granted the wonderful pleasure of seeing a fox family at play. The six youngsters carried on their frolicking as unselfconsciously as kittens whilst the two parents kept watch, one at the north end of the ridge toward the wood, the other at the south end nearer the road. Under the golden glow of the westering sun their coats gleamed like polished copper. They were real dandies, these little foxes, for with the fiery mantles went white chins and black ears, black and red white-tipped brushes, and, most striking of all, long black stockings, covering every leg. These last were so contrasting with the body as to seem almost designed to attract attention, reminding one of the ebony stockings affected by some ballet dancers. Now we knew what was meant by the jingle about the "foxes with their soxes."

Dancers they might well be called, acrobats at least, for they rolled and tumbled, turned somersaults, stood up and boxed, generally cavorted. One or two got a bit tired after a while, retired a few feet and curled up for a snooze but the more vigorous ones weren't ready to give up. They would pounce on the sleepers, nip at their heads, trying to entice them, and often successfully, back into the game. All this time we heard not a sound despite the frenzied activity. It was unbelievable that all this could go on in silence. Yet it assuredly did as we would have heard even the slightest outcries at that distance. Finally one of the players wandered up the ridge and found something to eat not far from its watchful parent. One vanished, presumably into the den. Two fell asleep, and only a single pair remained to play. How long we had occupied our orchestra seats at this drama we were not sure, certainly twenty minutes, possibly longer. It was evident we could stay as long as we liked.

With this in mind we rose quietly and proceeding with caution once more, trying to conceal our movements by crouching behind mounds, we hurried back to the road in search of Anna. Fortunately we met her bringing the dog for a walk. Even tame foxes, we were sure, would not countenance a dog, whatever they might accept of human intrusion. Greer volunteered to take the dog back to the house while I escorted Anna to the show. What is more the play was still going on when we arrived, and had taken our seats under the beech tree. True the old foxes had disappeared

but all six young ones were again in view, gambolling and revelling as before, not quite with the earlier vigor but putting on a very good performance withal. For ten minutes we enjoyed the merriment, then withdrew.

So entranced were we by the drama, and so curious, that Greer and I returned even another time though now dusk was getting so thick that we could scarcely make out the fox's ridge when we got to the beech tree. We were glad we had come back, for, though the youngsters were now quiet, we caught sight of a parent, high on the ridge, triumphantly bringing in a capture. The gloom made it impossible for us to determine what the hunter has caught but from its shape it may have been a squirrel. A substantial addition to the larder this, perhaps one welcomed as dessert by the youngsters after the previous morsel we had seen them eating. That had certainly been a skunk! But what a task, finding enough food for six lively young foxes! Anyone who has to provide for one ravening puppy will understand what parent foxes have to face. Some move or sound on our part caused the hunter to catch sight of us, and, dropping the catch he raced down the ridge to take up position on a rock pile just below the den. From there we were kept under the most vigilant observation while we walked on to the wood. Evidently, once darkness has begun to fall, we were regarded as really dangerous. Had we chosen to cross the pasture towards the ridge no doubt the watcher would have endeavored to lead us away, but we were not desirous of disturbing the family, and so took our way elsewhere.

The next afternoon, before leaving for Toronto, Greer and I thought it would be a good idea to take the children up to the pasture. It was late enough so that there seemed a good chance that the foxes would be abroad. But when we arrived at the favored lookout not a fox was to be seen. This was a disappointment for all of us. Sally, Heather, and I started across to the foxes' ridge whilst Greer took his younger daughter back to the car. Halfway over I discovered a man standing on a ridge beyond our destination. Meanwhile we had become aware of hounds baying in the woods. An intimation of what was happening began to dawn. We crossed the fox ridge, thinking to give no hint of our knowledge to the man ahead. When we reached him, I found that he was not the local farmer as I supposed, but some man from Orangeville, a stranger here like myself. We need not have worried about giving away the foxes, for the stranger soon asked me if we knew that there was a fox den on the ridge we had just crossed. When I expressed surprise he said it was his dogs that were "running the fox". This pronouncement depressed us, and we soon turned back, being escorted off the field, to our general consternation, by a pressing crowd of cattle. It was a sad end to our fox drama, and we were convinced now that the bucolic comedy we had witnessed on the previous eve would end a tragedy.

Although my family became established at Melville during the following week I was prevented by business from returning for nearly a fortnight. Even then it took me several days before I could make up my mind to explore Sugar Bowl Hill in search of the foxes so sure was I that evil had befallen them. On two successive evenings I made the complete tour of the hill without detecting the least sign of a fox. I was doubly convinced of their fate.

Then one evening near the middle of July Sally and I ventured up the road toward the saltblock. We intended to cross the pasture and look into the wood but the sight of a large number of steers in the field caused us to hesitate. As we were standing on the stonewall discussing what to do I heard a sudden pounding sound as of an animal running. Before I could turn my head half around to investigate a fox shot into view, racing along the wall. So fast was he coming, and so close to the wall that he saw nothing of us until he was right underneath us. A move, a noise, something warned him of our presence, and he cocked his head sideways to look up. At that moment I could easily have leaped from the wall onto his back! Instantly he made almost a right angle turn and whipped away up the pasture. What a fright he's had, I thought. He'll be away for a good long distance before he stops. But no, not at all. When he reached the first steer, perhaps sixty feet away, he stopped as abruptly as he had changed direction. Sitting calmly beside the grazing steer he gazed on us with as much curiosity as we looked at him, his sharp eyes agleam with wonderment. My heart took a leap for this was one of the young foxes with the black soxes. If one had survived, perhaps others had too.

Sally and I decided not to risk the steers but when we had walked back down the slope where they could not see us, we climbed over the fence and made for the summit of the Sugar Bowl by another route. This tumbled group of mounds at the top of the hill is locally regarded as a common haunt of foxes. I hoped we might find the reports true. We sat some time on the edge of the bowl, and walked around its edge but saw no foxes. We had decided that our sights for the evening were over, and were just poised on the edge of the slope ready to go down and home when Sally saw a movement below. I gave her the glasses and in a moment she reported, "It's a fox." And, indeed, it was. Another of the young ones. Moreover, when it trotted from its stone pile into the adjoining grain-field, and sat down to look up at us, it showed us still another fox, sitting in the grain and gazing at us too. Three of the young had come through their ordeal. Now our hopes were high that all had lived.

The next evening Anna, Sally, and I walked up the road that borders the grain field, and looked over the gate toward the stone pile upon which Sally had spied the fox from the hilltop. We were not disappointed. There were two foxes, one eating, one sitting, surveying the world. A careful sweep of the field with our glasses showed us two more. Only their red backs were faintly visible in the waving grain but they were unmistakable. Four young foxes had come through.

We realized shortly that a quarter of the field, apparently favored by the foxes, and the neighboring slopes must be open to observation from the railway tracks, much nearer our house. So, on the following evening after supper we walked for four minutes along the tracks and looked up the hill. Each of us shouted at once, "There's one! No, two; no, four!" Then out of a hollow bounded two more! The whole family of six young had survived! As we watched they raced and tumbled, boxed and somersaulted just as they had on the evening when they were first seen. It was a great joy to realize that they were all alive. We were sure now that the old ones had come through too, for these young would not have been able to fend for themselves without their help.

Evidently the parents had decided to move away from the neighborhood where they had been so rudely disturbed. They had brought their family across the hill to another slope, and were now established there. We had discovered the new haunt.

Now we found that we could come every evening and see the foxes at play. So true was this that we were able to make this show the peak of a visit to Melville for our guests. No one who visited us had ever seen foxes at home in this intimate way, nor, indeed, in such numbers. Our most successful exhibition of the foxes came on the weekend of the 24th and 25th of July when we had some of the members of the Toronto Field Naturalist Club as guests. Perhaps the foxes knew that these onlookers were especially trustworthy and appreciative. At any rate it was on the evening of the 25th, when the Jaquiths, the Jim Baillies, the Bob Trowerns, and the Saunders all had their binoculars levelled at the foxes' playground, and when the frolicsome creatures were romping their wildest that we all discovered there were eight players on the stage before us. Here, at last, was the incontrovertible proof that the entire family had survived. Nor could a more appreciative audience have been found to witness the proving.

That very night the hounds were baying on Sugar Bowl Hill again. We listened in pain and disgust, and hoped for the best. In the morning I mentioned the hounds to the hired man to see what his reaction would be. He told me, Yes, he had heard them, and that what was happening was that certain men from Orangeville brought out young hounds to these hills. There they loosed them in the vicinity of a fox den. Soon the hounds would discover the scent of a fox, and would be off after either a young fox or one of the old ones. The foxes would race over the hill and through the wood with the hounds in their wake. This game would go on for hours, until the foxes went to hole, or the men called off the dogs. In this way the young hounds are trained to follow a scent. The men are not concerned at this time of year to kill the foxes but rather to use them in this way. Now I understood how and why the fox family had managed to survive. It bodes no good for them in the long run but for the time being they are to be allowed to live in order that they may be hunted more successfully in the winter, when their coats make valuable pelts. My informant also assured me that it was illegal to hunt the foxes between March 1st and November 1st, and that it is forbidden to run young foxes in the way that is here being done. However, it goes on. There is this much to be said in favor of the practice from the foxes' point of view, that is, if it trains the hounds to follow a scent it also trains the foxes to elude the hounds. Some, at least, must benefit from the ordeal. Possibly the chief protection for the foxes at the present time is that the price of fox skins is now very low, and many hunters will hardly think it worth while to go after them. This, of course, does not apply to farmers who have other reasons to hunt foxes.

Yet even here the story is by no means so one-sided as most farmers think. A fox to them means "stealer of chickens", little else, just as they believe that a hawk or an owl is always and ever vermin. But naturalists know that the scientific researches made at the Royal Ontario Museum, and in many like institutions, have shown conclusively that most hawks and owls are not injurious to man's interests but on the contrary are beneficial by reason of the truly harmful pests they destroy. They realize, in consequence, that each individual hawk or owl has to be dealt with on its own individual merits or demerits, and that wholesale killing of hawks

and owls is impractical and senseless from the point of view of the farmer's own good. It was with this knowledge of birds of prey in mind that I was most anxious to find out what the local foxes were eating. So far I was certain only of the skunk. Hence, on the evening after the naturalists had seen the great show, Sally and I set out over the hill to increase our fox lore.

This time we walked boldly across the grain field, feeling quite chummy with the four foxes that watched us keenly from stonepiles and mounds, hardly bothering to get out of our way until we were within a hundred feet of them. We climbed to the edge of the Sugar Bowl, from whence Sally had first seen the foxes in the grain field. There we sat down to watch. Once settled we scanned the field below, and soon we had to chuckle aloud. For just over the rail fence at the edge of the field, some eighty or ninety feet away, stood a red and white cow. And just on the other side of the cow sat four foxes as close together as they could get, forming a cozy square like four people sitting in a theatre! We looked down at them. They looked up at us. There was certainly no condescension on our part. I doubt if there was much respect on their's -- they were just curious; but we were both curious and admiring. After a while they found their curiosity satisfied more easily than we did. Human watching was not as satisfying as play. They commenced their frolicking, and went racing amongst the rocks at the foot of our slope. They were running much faster this evening, and would dash madly across the pasture until you thought they would disappear. Then they would take up a stand on some mound or rockpile, gaze about, rest for a while before starting the mad game all over again. Once we saw one sniff appreciatively at a bed of catnip. Perhaps these creatures that are quite as catlike as they are doglike have the feline craving for that drug. Possibly it was this fellow who, when he had chased his companion along the slope until just below where we sat, suddenly turned tail, and went yipping and barking in the opposite direction.

This was the only occasion when any of us heard a fox, or rather saw a fox make a sound. It was a curious bark, contriving to be both high-pitched and a little hoarse at the same time. This queer combination of effects gave it a distinctiveness, and set it apart from any dog's bark I have ever heard. There were other yelps, high and whining in tone, used by the retreating fox, that were more doglike. They resembled the remarks of a young puppy. I suspect that similar sound that we sometimes heard during the dusk from this hillside were made by the foxes.

Since the cattle were in another field this evening Sally and I were able to cross the entire pasture, and so to reach the ridge where our first meeting with the foxes occurred. Making our way down this ridge we were soon aware through the olfactory sense of the remains of fox feasts. Our eyes soon confirmed our noses. There were a backbone and ribs, picked clean. I could not identify it, But in a moment I came to a bit of groundhog skin, then a skull, unmistakably that of a ground hog. This was interesting to me for I had not known that a fox could tackle so large an animal. Yet here was another ground hog skull, and another. There were four in all, the last being right at the entrance to the den. It was as I was leaning down to examine this skull that I found myself looking straight into the hole.

Rather larger than a ground hog hole it was of a size quite convenient for a hurrying fox to dive into. So too could a small dog, a terrier or even a small hound. But it probably wouldn't be advisable for the dog to do so. We found three entrances to the den, arranged so as to give ingress or egress from three different sides of a stone pile. The den itself must have been directly under the stones. Someone, without doubt the owner of the hounds, had kindly placed a fence rail across one of the openings with the idea, presumably, of making it difficult for the fox to take refuge from his dogs. Why he didn't block all three holes was a puzzle. However, we didn't worry about that but took the chance to remove the one block he had placed.

We wended our way homeward that evening well pleased with our new discoveries.

On the last day of our stay in Melville I walked alone into the grainfield where we could now always find the foxes. Even in the middle of a hot afternoon they were there. I could see one asleep on the favorite stone pile as soon as I reached the gate. Climbing over the gate, which was wired, I stalked stealthily through the grain, calculating all the while how close I might be able to come to the sleeper. However, he woke up before I was half-way across the field, stretched, yawned, and walked lazily down from the pile into the grain. Obviously he did not see me for he yawned again, and curled up in the grain. He was merely looking for a more comfortable bed.

I kept onward until I was eighty feet distant. I paused, then crept forward another ten feet, then ten feet more, then again. I was no more than forty feet from the sleeping fox when what I thought was one fox abruptly thrust three heads out of the grain, and plainly bespoke me in some such words as "What the devil do you want?" I was so startled by this metamorphosis that I had to stop for a long minute. Then I got so interested, and amused by the bland, questioning look in the keen faces that I kept on looking. Perhaps they sensed that I could never do harm to such winsome, such attractive creatures. Still, man is man, and fox experience shows that man is no friends of their's. At last a touch of alarm crept into the eyes of one. He twitched his head nervously, saw the coast was clear behind, suddenly turned, and took his black sox flashing over the pasture. A second followed immediately. But the third held its ground. I decided to advance. Step by step I went forward. The forty feet was cut to twenty. Still sat the fox. Another few paces and I would be able to shake paws with it. No, that it would not permit. I was a mere eighteen paces from it when it finally decided to give in. Only this fox did not turn and rush away. It popped straight down a hole beside which it had been sitting! I had found the new, the occupied den! And as I delighted myself with this thought I realized why this last fox hadn't rushed off like the other two. This was an adult. Its markings were different. Probably it was the mother fox, standing her ground, because there were other young in the den whom she could not desert.

Making a tour of the stone pile under which his den was placed -- clearly this type of situation is a preferred one -- I found a second opening, but not a third as in the other case. I also discovered a ground

hog skull. These foxes had accounted for at least five of the ground hogs of which the farmers of Melville were complaining so loudly this summer. This is the sort of evidence that farmers everywhere ought to take into account before they embark upon wholesale slaughter of foxes. There may be something "good" even in the economic sense to be said for them as there is for other predators.

As for considerations of beauty, of amusing and exciting fellowship with the wild, the four black-socked youngsters that gazed at me in shrewd solemnity from convenient mounds as I strolled down the pasture on the way home, knew that I rated such values far higher than any economic estimate. They have their place in the scheme of life, and in my world they will be allowed to keep it.

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