

Advanced Predator Calling

by Patrick Meitin

Predator calling is the perfect sport to pass the winter doldrums or even cut down on spring depredation on deer and pronghorn fawns or turkeys in your hunting area. There are typically minimal regulations, plenty of targets available, and gaining hunting permission on even tightly-controlled private land is normally much easier than gaining trespass for big-game or bird hunting. In fact, predator hunting can sometimes open the door to previously off-limits lands, helping a landowner with his coyote problem while also demonstrating that you're a reliable, polite individual he can trust during deer or quail seasons. Plus, bobcats, foxes and coyotes make gorgeous and sporty targets. More recently another alluring factor to varmint hunting has evolved: Raw fur prices are on the upswing once more, meaning varmint hunting can now pay for itself with a little luck and proper preparation of hides. My most recent batch of fur brought a \$247 average for bobcats; up to \$35 apiece for better coyotes; \$24 for grey fox. That's money that puts fuel in the tank while enjoying fun sport — hunting that can actually pay for itself.



The author actually missed his first shot at this gorgeous mountain bobcat, but a squeaking motion decoy from Edge by Expedite held the cat's attention and allowed a second, killing shot.

Photo by Patrick Meitin.

CALLING ALL VARMINTS!

Unlike many forms of hunting, varmint calling involves fairly basic gear: Calls, camouflage and weapon. The basic mouth-blown is still a viable choice for any predator-hunting outing, with quality options available from every player in the game-call dodge, including Primos Hunting Calls, Knight & Hale, Hunter's Specialties, Flextone, Johnny Stewart Wildlife Calls and Wood Wise's, just to name a few. When making call purchases, choose a variety of call pitches — higher-pitched (cottontail) or raspy (jackrabbit or fawn) calls — until you determine what varmints in your area like best. A coyote howler (like Woods Wise's Super Howler or Primos' Mini Mag Howler) locator call is also a good investment, saving wasted time calling over vacant habitat, coaxing coyotes to yodel and reveal their presence before investing in a set-up.

Predator calling with mouths calls is pretty easy, as there certainly isn't any set pitch or rhythm necessary, only the ability to create morbid cries imitating a rabbit or other prey species being ripped limb from limb. The basic procedure is to go at the call enthusiastically for a few minutes, normally until you run out of breath if you're going about it with the required animation, taking a break to catch your breath and watch before going at it again. When approaching predators are spotted, put the call away and make the varmint come to you, producing only subtle squeaks if they seem to need additional coaxing. Calling too much when game is in sight can end in them spotting you and turning tail.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL EDGE

Today's electronic calls make getting started easier. They save your lungs and keep hands free for quick or unexpected shots. They can also encourage you to hunt harder and longer, as blowing a mouth call for an entire day can eventually come to seem like work. Included computer cards also produce calls as varied as screaming rabbits, distressed woodpeckers or whining coyote pups. This provides variety unavailable with mouth calls, variety that often proves more productive. They are available in highly-affordable hand-held units the size of a walkie-talkie, to more elaborate systems with remote speakers that pull attention away from your position — some even operating on a remote control for added versatility.

DECOYING SUCCESS

More recently varmint-hunting motion decoys have added another level of realism to predator calling. These can be just the ticket in bringing those wary varmints who hang up just out of range, providing a visual focal point that adds the finishing touch and makes it more likely you'll go undetected. Some of the best are offered by Primos Hunting (Sit N Spin Crazy Critter or Wobblin' Whabbit, for example) or Flambeau's Rigor Rabbit or Predator Rabbit with Stake. If your predator hunting takes you into

remote areas where lightness is at a premium, consider Montana Decoy's 7-ounce Miss Hoptober spring-action, cloth-covered folding decoy. Many predator decoys are wired to create squeaks and squawks of their own, such as decoys from Edge by Expedite (All Call or Hare Bawl Screamer Combo with remote, as examples).

Another interesting facet of predator decoying, especially when targeting game-eating coyotes, are spotted whitetail fawn decoys — available from Flambeau (Foam Fawn), Primos (Frantic Fawn with motion), Edge by Expedite (Fawn Decoy), and Montana Decoy (Fawnzy). Finally, coyote decoys are offered to act as confidence decoys that bring wary predators closer, or spark greed during leaner times. Look to Edge (Yote' Coyote Decoy; they also offer a red fox decoy), Flambeau (Master Series Flocked and un-flocked Lone Howler — the only full hardbody coyote decoys in the business) and Montana Decoy.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

Varmints are hunters, with razor-sharp eyesight and whetted senses that put them at the top of the food chain. Added concealment earns you closer and surer standing shots. Leafy 3-D outfits break up your tell-tale human outline better by scattering light reflections and shadows. My favorite is Rancho Safari's Shaggie System, abundant hanks of camo-material, jute rope and burlap hand-sewn to industrial-grade camouflage netting and allowing you to melt into any surrounding, worn over insulated duds or a T-shirt, depending on weather conditions. During warmer spring or summer weather lighter, mesh-backed suits are also, available; true leafy suits that weigh nearly nothing and are available from a variety of manufacturers, such as Whitewater Outdoors.



The modern electronic predator call makes calling easier, saving your lungs to encourage you to hunt harder and longer. It also helps novice callers who are not yet confident in their calling ability. Photo by Patrick Meitin.

Such ghillie suits may seem like overkill in many terrain types, especially where you're able to back into a cedar or other such vegetation, but they really come into their own in open prairie or desert country where cover is thinner, allowing you to set up in areas other varmint callers might pass on due to lack of cover. The best suits — like Shaggie Systems — essentially acting as a body blind.

LOCK 'N LOAD!

Finally, you'll need an appropriate shooter. If selling your take — or collecting a trophy for mounting — is important, minimizing pelt damage is an absolute must; otherwise you'll spend a lot of time sewing, suffer lower prices for pelts or render your prize unfit for the taxidermist.

The big-game rifle you already own will suffice if you'll take the extra time required to hand-load full metal jacket (FMJ) bullets, or in the case of highly popular .30-'06 Spr., .308 Win. or .223 Rem. cartridges, purchase military surplus "ball" ammo, which is loaded with FMJ bullets in accordance with the Hague Convention governing the rules of warfare. Even in varmint-specific rounds — anything from .222 to .220 Swift at least — FMJ bullets make sense on smaller targets such as fox, and especially highly valuable bobcats. In the case of these smaller varmints, the various .17-caliber rounds, such as the .17 HMW, are potent medicine, though they require careful shot placement on bigger bobcats and especially coyotes. In center-fire rounds, avoid "prairie-dog" bullets that explode on impact to create fist-sized holes, and place shots to avoid major bones. Ribs cause little bullet expansion and a lung hit is always fatal. Even in my .22 Hornet (my longtime favorite fur round) I load controlled-expansion Nosler bullets to keep holes smaller than a nickel in most circumstances.

A tight-choked, 3- or 3 1/2-inch 12-gauge shotgun is also fur-friendly and quite deadly, especially in brushy areas that result in frequent running shots at close range. I've killed hundreds of coyotes with shotguns, so heed my advice and avoid anything labeled "buckshot," choosing copper-plated lead BBs — period. Running varmints will literally traipse right through patterns created by any shot size larger than this, escaping wounded or completely unscathed. Shotguns loaded with magnum BBs will cleanly roll even big mountain coyotes out to 50 or 60 yards for a standard full choke. In cases when I'm dead serious about my calling, during calling contests or when fur prices peak, I typically carry both a rifle and shotgun, leaning the rifle at ready, laying the scattergun across my lap and handy. When coyotes, in particular, come in hot and heavy, or especially in groups (common during late-winter months when they hunt in packs), I roll everything in range with the shotgun, grabbing the rifle to finish off fleeing coyotes outside the 60-yard shotgun range.

It's also handy to have a rifle available should a predator hang up out of shotgun range, taking a carefully-steadied shot off a folded knee or bipod. I used to consider the bipod

superfluous, but soon had to acknowledge they improve my long-range shooting considerably. The ability to confidently take running coyotes with a rifle comes with practice, but can also prove a huge advantage in most predator-hunting situations. I've found no better practice than thinning summer jackrabbits in open ranchland — another way to make quick friends with area stockmen, who would rather have their grass eaten by beeves than hares.



Just because you are hunting predators with a long-range rifle does not mean you don't need camouflage. Varmints have super eyesight; camo gives you more of an edge and closer shots.

Photo by Patrick Meitin.

SETTING UP

There are simply too many variations to discuss every single possible situation in regards to wind, terrain particulars and animal disposition. So, in very basic terms, attempt to set up overlooking a wide expanse of country, and especially where varmints will not receive your scent while approaching. Park your vehicle in a low spot to keep it hidden. You don't have to hike far, just far enough to get out of sight of your rig. A single roll of land or low ridge will normally do the trick. I've even been quite successful calling within easy earshot of interstate highways. Settle with your back against a rock or tree where it's easy to comfortably sit still while also maintaining a commanding view. Calling in pairs, allowing each hunter to cover different fields of fire, is also a good idea — assuring varmints won't slip in unseen from a blind spot.

How long you call depends on your target species. Bobcats normally require more time to arrive, stalking in slowly and carefully, unlike coyotes' galloping approaches. If bobcats are possible — in rocky or mountainous country — spend up to an hour in a single spot. Coyotes are normally greedier, coming in a hurry. Thirty minutes in a single stand is

normally enough time for song dogs. Grey fox are best called at night — where regulations allow spotlighting (check regulations carefully), though they occasionally show during daylight hours. They normally, like coyotes, arrive fairly quickly.

Coyotes, in particular, are smart critters capable of learning. So it goes without saying the best varmint calling is normally found where coyotes have not been educated through too much hunting pressure. This means places others overlook (such as off a major highway, as I have already suggested), cannot access readily (exclusive private lands), or remote areas far from civilization that might require an overnight stay to reach. The coyote, in particular, that has been subjected to hunting pressure can prove downright elusive, while the virgin yodel dog might appear outright greedy and suicidal.

PROPER FUR HANDLING

To sell your take you'll have to skin and properly care for its fur. Hang your prize by the hind legs, carefully creating an incision from the hocks, straight down the back of each leg and around the anus with a sharp knife. Cut around the entire hock, to the tip of the tail and begin carefully peeling the hide away from the body. This involves more pulling than cutting. You normally can't pull hard enough to tear tough hide (the exception being the tail), but you can certainly create holes with your knife, so keep cutting to a minimum, just enough to loosen tough spots. Pull the entire hide over the body like a pillow case. After reaching the front legs, pull them down to the elbow and cut around the legs to pull them through. Continue pulling the hide down and over the neck and head, areas where you'll normally have to begin using your knife. Carefully cut the ears from the skull at their bases, remove the eye lids and entire nose. The operation closely mirrors caping a deer's face for mounting.

Turn the hide fur-side out and wash it in cold water to remove blood and dirt, allowing it to dry in the wind. Pre-formed stretchers can be purchased from trapping-supply houses. Heavy wire models are the most trouble-free, and may include sliding leg hooks to hold the hide tight. Consult the Internet, punching in "trapping supplies" on your search bar (a book on fur handling might be a good idea while you're at it).

Turn the hide flesh-side-out and pull it tightly over the form, carefully removing any excess flesh or fat. Allow it to dry in the shade (avoiding direct sun) until slick but not crackly before turning it fur-side out (including front legs) once more. Pull it back onto the stretcher, stretch it tight and allow it to dry thoroughly. An area ranching-supply store is normally the best source of information on area fur buyers or auctions.

Winter predator calling has always been a great way to keep your hunting and shooting skills sharp, but now it can also put a few extra dollars in your pocket. Having fun while paying for it at the same time; what could be better than that?

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