

Predator Calling Tactics

by Stephen D. Carpenteri



The author dropped this coyote after he called it from nearby woods. The animal had been feeding on a dead deer carcass and hadn't moved far from the easy meal. Photo by Stephen D. Carpenteri.

The first time I called a fox in close I was young, excited, and so surprised by it that I never got a shot at him. That was back in the early 1960s, and I've never forgotten that animal. I had done all the right things (sat still, called sparingly, and waited patiently) but I had made one mistake — and it cost me a valuable hide.

My mistake, of course, was not facing downwind. Most canine predators, particularly foxes and coyotes, will come in with their nose into the wind. That helps them decide if what they heard was indeed a dying rabbit.

There's much more to successful predator calling tactics, but Rule No. 1 is this: Always face downwind when calling.

For more success in predator calling, the hunter must understand his quarry and be willing to do whatever it takes to fool them. To begin with, plan on calling at dawn and dusk, when predators are most active. A hungry predator might be called in at any time of day, but in most cases dawn and dusk (or at night, if it's legal in your state) are the best times to call.

While calling is the way to get a distant predator's attention, hunters must remember that foxes, coyotes and other midnight scavengers utilize all their senses when coming in to a potential meal.

The biggest question in predator calling is, "Where should I set up?"

The ideal predator-calling setup is much like a turkey hunter's strategy: back up to the base of a tree facing a hedgerow, fenceline, woodline or similar dense cover that predators might use to slink into the area. Be in a position to see the predator coming in but with just enough cover to allow it to keep moving forward. If there is a large open area in front with no cover, the animals are likely to stall there. In extremely open areas, predators will stop near the last bit of cover and just keep sniffing the air in an effort to "read" the situation.

When setting up for predators, the last thing to do is call. The hunter must be sitting and facing downwind. Scent pads — skunk essence, fox urine or rabbit scent — should be placed on a branch or stem 10 yards to the left and right of the caller. The hunter should be comfortable enough to sit without twitching, moving or shifting for at least 45 minutes — the longer the better. Have the gun or bow up and ready to shoot with a minimum of motion. In most cases the time frame from predator sighting to shot is about 10 seconds. Be ready to shoot the instant the animal appears at the edge of cover.

The most unsettling aspect of predator calling is to find that, after you've called and then sat patiently for 30 minutes, the animal invariably shows up staring directly at your position. Predators are intelligent, superior hunters with remarkable instincts and they allow no mistakes. Be comfortable, face directly downwind and be sure your gun or bow is loaded before you pick up that call.

A fox or coyote may show up just a few minutes after you start calling or it may take one close to an hour to reach your position. Sit still, pay attention, and do not move. Keep your facemask and gloves on. From your first dying rabbit squall they will know exactly where you are. Give them time to close the distance and do not move.

The basic, traditional beginning call is one or two loud, plaintive squalls designed to emulate the wails of a dying rabbit. Do not overdo it! No "dying rabbit" lies there squalling loudly all day. One or two squeals will alert every predator within a mile that there's a free meal available. Continuous loud calling makes predators suspicious. If predators are in the area, rest assured that they heard the call. Now it's all about the waiting game.

At some point (often immediately, but sometimes 30 or 40 minutes later) a predator will slink into view. Hunters with long-range gear may take the shot at anytime, but those who prefer point-blank shooting now have an additional challenge: calling the critter closer.

Given that the animal showed up, there's no doubt that he's interested. To get him closer, remain sitting still, gun up, but utter a few squeaks with a hand call or by kissing the back of your hand or thumb. A couple of squeaks will do it — remember, most predators can hear a mouse under two feet of snow! Utter a squeak or two, and then watch and wait. Keep in mind that the predator is actually hunting you and he knows where you are. Sit still and stay alert. He will find you!

Most predators will zig and zag from tree to bush to stump and stone while closing the distance. Let the animal come in. Don't try to keep your sights on him every step of the way, just keep pointing your gun or bow in his direction until it's time to shoot. When the animal steps behind the last bit of cover, aim at the point where you expect him to come out. Ease the safety off with two fingers to avoid the giveaway "click" that will send the predator running.

When the animal presents a clear shot, take it without hesitation. At some point any predator is going to realize he's been duped and will head for the hills. The hunter's job is to decide when the game is up — just before the coyote does!

I have always been a fan of "up close and personal" when it comes to predator calling, so I keep them coming in for as long as possible. This is why I often carry a shotgun loaded with No. 4 lead shot instead of a rifle. I try to get my foxes and coyotes within 20 yards or less! When rifle hunting, I go with the limits of my shooting ability, but I always try to get them to come 10 yards closer.

My personal record for calling was an ermine (weasel) that I called in so close he stood on the toe of my boot for a closer look! I wouldn't go that far with a larger predator, but it proves what can be done with patience and some judicious calling.

Over time, hunters will begin to see a pattern in predator response in the places they choose to call. In very open areas — croplands, pastures, hay fields and the like — predators may only come as far as the distant woodline or hedgerow, which means the best choice is a flat-shooting rifle for shots out to 300 yards or more.

In brushy country, shots might be well under 50 yards, and an expert teaser can bring them as close as 10 yards — well inside .17, .22 or shotgun range. Where legal, try calling over bait (a road-killed animal for example) to lure predators even closer.

Predators are abundant throughout the country, but they are not found behind every tree. I received some sage advice from Murray Burnham (founder of Burnham Brothers, Inc.) back in the late 1960s when I wrote about being frustrated with the lack of response from foxes in my area. Burnham advised me to move at least one-half mile between calling sites. He said the thick, rolling country I hunted made it difficult for predators to hear the sounds of the calls, so changing calling sites should solve my problem — and it did!

That's just one more thing to keep in mind while hunting America's most challenging winter targets. Down your first fox or coyote fairly called into range and the addiction will begin. Some 50 years after I missed that first one I'm still trying to even the score!

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