



Predator hunting has gained popularity in recent years with coyote populations at all-time highs and fur prices on the rise.

BOB ROBB

Predator Hunting's Deadly Dozen

Twelve expert tips for hunting the hunters.

by Bob Robb

THE HOTTEST TREND IN WESTERN hunting today has nothing to do with big antlers. Instead, it's something you can do year-round, with no bag limit in most cases. Best of all, private landowners will most likely greet you with open arms, even when they've closed their land to most other types of hunting. I'm talking about hunting predators—critters like coyotes, bobcats and fox.

"There are several reasons for the increased popularity of predator hunting, and coyote hunting in particular," said Ralph Lermayer, editor of *Predator Xtreme* magazine, a leading authority on varmint hunting. "For one thing, it's been documented that deer and elk, as well as wild turkeys in some areas, suffer a high fawn or poult mortality rate directly related to predators, especially coyotes. In most cases you're allowed to hunt predators 12 months a year, there's lots of public and private land available, and in recent years prime coyote hides have brought a decent price at fur auctions."

If all this sounds as good to you as it does to me, you might want to try your

hand at calling predators. Here are 12 advanced tips from Lermayer, a man who's been successfully thinning Western coyote numbers for 4 decades, to start you on the right track.

1>> Where legal, using an electronic caller will make you an instant expert. Using the actual recorded sounds of prey species will add instant authenticity and variety to your calling. Remote control models allow you to place the speaker up to 100 yards away, which will give you an advantage, because when predators approach, their attention will be directed toward the source of the sound. Begin with low volume and gradually increase the volume as the stand wears on. Territorial sounds are often effective when predators aren't responding to food-source sounds, or when you're calling in areas that have been heavily hunted. These sounds might include canine pups in distress, coyote vocalizations, and fighting sounds, such as two gray fox having at it. Territorial sounds are particularly effective during the mating season when canines and felines are staking out terri-

tories and diligently guarding their boundaries.

2>> Always try to take an elevated position with good visibility, but pay careful attention to your back cover so you're not skylined. Keep your movements to a minimum once your calling sequence begins and have your rifle positioned to shoot in the direction you expect the predators to come from. Try to set up with the wind in your face or for a crosswind.

3>> Classic rabbit-in-distress or rodent-in-distress calls work well year-round. However, predators are opportunists and will take advantage of whatever they perceive to be an easy meal, and during spring that's often newly born elk and deer fawns. However, you have to be careful when using mule deer fawn-in-distress calls in particular, because you might call in a very angry doe. Believe me, a mule deer doe can and will come looking for you with fire in her eyes!

4>> Limit your calling sessions to 15-20 minutes per location for coyotes and fox, and 30-40 minutes where

“Uniformity is the secret—do every step of your loading process similarly and good accuracy will be the result.”

crush the pellets with too much force as this will result in uneven ignition and marginal accuracy.

When my friends and I have a new in-line muzzleloader to sight-in, we like to experiment with a variety of propellants and projectiles. Although pellets are by far the most user-friendly, some in-lines don't shoot as accurately with pellets as they do with loose powder. I start my accuracy test with Triple Seven pellets and then try Pyrodex Pellets, too. Then, if I'm not happy with the accuracy, I'll switch to Triple Seven and Pyrodex loose powder.

I always start with two 50-grain pellets (measured by volume) and a 250-grain bullet (measured by weight). Then I'll try three 50-grain pellets to let the rifle determine the combination it prefers. Shooter's tip: The best accuracy is usually achieved with bullets and sabots of the same brand as that of your in-line muzzleloader. That means T/C bullets typically shoot best in T/C in-lines, Knight bullets in Knight rifles and the same for CVA and Traditions.

Primers are a non-issue in my opinion. I haven't found any accuracy improvement with the new primers designed specifically for muzzleloaders, and as a matter of fact I prefer to send as much flame into my propellant as possible—we're trying to set-off a detonation here, not start a progressive burn. When my rifle is cold, maybe sweating or whatever, I prefer as much fire as I can get to ignite the charge. I don't buy into the claim that too much flame can push the powder charge forward because I've seen far too many sub 1-inch groups shot with three pellets and standard primers. But if you believe the new primers work well for you, then go to it.

Some shooters are surprised to learn that many popular sabot muzzleloader projectiles are actually handgun bullets. Velocity loss frequently ranges as high as one-third in the first 100 yards of travel according to my chronographs, and terminal performance isn't much better. (I once said that most muzzleloader bullets have the ballistic efficiency of flying

trash cans.) And even at low impact velocities, these handgun bullet cores and jackets frequently separate.

Thankfully, today's shooter has aerodynamically shaped bullets specifically designed for muzzleloaders, and they feature relatively sharp tips that retain velocity and energy better. I've tested the new T/C ShockWave, Hornady's SST and the Spit-Fire MZ from Barnes and found that these bullets retain their velocity significantly better than the flying trash cans. This extends long-range killing potential significantly. I particularly like the new Bonded ShockWave from T/C and the Barnes Spit-Fire MZ. These are tough bullets that shoot superbly in my test rifles.

Getting back to my friend and his new Encore: He insisted I shoot first to get the scope zeroed and determine the best load. The scope zeroed with only a couple shots because we had a large backboard to catch every bullet. Then I fired three shots, each loaded with two Triple Seven pellets and a 250-grain ShockWave. The group measured exactly 1 inch. “There's your deer hunting load,” I said. “We got lucky and got great accuracy with the first try. But just for fun let's try three pellets.” After firing a three-shot group using the 150-grain powder charge, we walked to the target. I knew the bullets had hit closely together, but was amazed when we measured the group. My three shots measured just under a half-inch!

At the range you must determine the loading procedure that works best for you. Uniformity is the secret—do every step of your loading process similarly and good accuracy will be the result.

Remember—the more you shoot, the better you'll shoot, and this holds true for pistols, shotguns, rifles and muzzleloaders. Unfortunately, after I shot those groups for my friend with his new Encore muzzleloader, he proved this axiom. He sat down and fired three shots at the target and only one bullet hit the paper! Needless to say, he intends to do some practicing with his new in-line before taking it into the field. ■

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bobcats are prevalent. Unlike coyotes and fox, which usually arrive relatively quickly, bobcats come in slowly and cautiously. The distance you travel between stands is determined by what kinds of animals you're hunting, the weather, the terrain and a host of other factors. In open terrain, where sound carries great distances, you might want to put a mile or more between stands to ensure you are calling to a fresh pair of ears. In hilly or brushy country, where vegetation and breaks in the topography cut the distance that sound will travel, you might need to only move ¼-mile between setups.

5>> For general-purpose Western predator hunting in open country, flat-shooting .22-caliber centerfire rifles work best—cartridges like the .222 Rem., .223 Rem., .22-250 Rem. and .220 Swift. In dense cover, 12 gauge shotguns loaded with buckshot or some of the hot new tungsten No. 2 or No. 4 loads can be deadly out to 50 yards. When hunting with a buddy, one of you should carry a rifle while the other packs a 12 gauge. That way you can cover all potential shot opportunities.

6>> If you plan on selling your predator hides, use solid bullets where legal to leave a small exit hole. If not, rapidly expanding soft-point or hollow-point bullets are best.

7>> Head-to-toe camouflage is very important, as is choosing a pattern that matches the natural cover—a sage brush pattern in sage brush country, for example. It's also important to remove any "shine" from your gear. This includes gun barrels, belt buckles and other equipment.

8>> Landowners can be a good source of hunting information. Before heading out to hunt, ask them if and where they've seen coyotes, fox or bobcats. If you're on your own, remember that predators tend to hang around primary food sources, such as small prey animals like rabbits, squirrels, quail, etc., and that usually means heavy cover near water sources.

9>> It should go without saying but bears repeating: You must watch

the wind at all times. Coyotes will try to get downwind of your setup and if they smell you, it's over. Keep open shooting lanes downwind.

10>> Where legal, decoys can be helpful. Fluttering wings, vibrating rabbits and more are available and work well to add another dimension of believability to your setup. Any calling setup can be enhanced by something as simple as tying a couple of old turkey wings to a branch where approaching predators can see them fluttering in the wind.

11>> If you're just getting started in the predator hunting game, there are a number of good instructional DVDs, videos and cassette tapes on the market that will help you learn the basics of hunting and calling predators.

12>> Always share the results of your hunts with the landowner. Tell him what you saw and what you shot, and offer to take him along with you if he shows any interest. You never know, it just might open the gate for future hunts on his property. ■

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