

LATE SEASON BUNNIES WITH SMALL BORE SHOTGUNS AND BASSET HOUNDS

Written by: Autumn Craven - December 29, 2011

With Late Season Rabbit Hunting in Pennsylvania beginning the day after Christmas, Christmas gifts from my parents were given a little early this year. My sister Briannan, her fiancé Paul, and I received .410 bore, slide action shotguns for hunting rabbits with our Basset Hounds. My parents said that we needed shotguns to match our small game quarry, level of marksmanship, and that we needed to practice and keep on practicing for complete comfort with our new guns before the season opened.

Laying down my grandfather's gifted 20 gauge side by side that is a perfect extension of my arm for hunting late season rabbits was a difficult decision. I had thought long and hard about harvesting rabbits with my new .410 during practice events and especially thought heavily about the harvest of grouse that would certainly present themselves during our hunts. I know that small bore shotguns are gaining in popularity with experienced hunters and now, I would be joining these hunters with the light shot load. Knowing the limitations of my new shotgun with its payload squeezed through the small bore of the .410 delivers patterns of definite kill under twenty five yards; after that, the pattern density becomes quite inconsistent, so estimating yardage is essential. I knew that I would be turning down opportunities of harvest that would be easy shots with my 20 gauge double, but kept in my mind the .410 would make a better hunter out of me. After several trips to my sportsman club shooting at bouncing and flying clays with over three hundred rounds, I was completely comfortable and perfectly capable to take small game with my small bore shotgun as compared with my trusty 20 gauge double. With my .410 in hand, I adopted the rule that I will unquestionably avoid taking a shot at any small game once it passes the twenty yard line.

Hunting over a pack of Basset Hounds with a small bore shotgun seems to be the perfect combination. Hunting with Basset Hounds is comparatively uncommon as to that of other breeds of Dog. To the genuine devotee of hunting, there is no Hound to compare with the Basset Hound. They are full size Hounds supported on short legs and have a cry that surpasses many larger Hounds. There is nothing to compare with the sound of echoing music from Basset Hounds hunting through a deep wooded valley. There is nothing to compare with the renowned deep scenting abilities of talking Basset Hounds working a cold line. There is nothing to compare with the slower Basset Hound's comfortable hunting speed for the foot hunter. However, they turn their speed up exploding into full cry while in hot pursuit of quarry, and are easier to follow on foot than other Hounds enabling viewing of the Hounds running at close distance. Hunting with Basset Hounds with small bore shotguns and with the limitations of the small bore shotgun makes perfect sense, because you are always in the close vicinity of the Hounds, especially when they flush the prized ruffed grouse.

Three days after Christmas brought a welcomed sight with one inch of freshly fallen snow from the night before covering a semi-frozen ground making all conditions perfect for bunny hunting and winter basseting. The temperature was 29 degrees, winds out of the Northwest at 10 miles per hour; humidity at 64%, with a forecast of

being mostly cloudy with light snow showers, and temperatures remaining for the day in the upper 20's.

My sister and Paul, arrived at my home at 5:00am with three Basset Hounds; Hunter, Bubba and Lulu. Excitement filled the air with anticipation of the day's hunt making my sister's Hounds and my kennel of Bassets explode with cries of joy. Breakfast was prepared and we planned our day's hunt over good food and the thick camaraderie that makes the start for any good hunt. At 7:00am my kennel doors opened with Riley, Stumpy, Drum, Buck, Bella, Rusty, Molly, Kitty, and Ruby joining my sister's Hounds. Today, we would have the honor to hunt behind twelve Hunting Basset Hounds which would not leave anything in their path unnoticed. What a wonderful Christmas Holiday present could anyone ask for, as for that of Family, Hounds, and Shotguns, hunting for bunnies in a winter wonderland?

The Hounds were directed to the edge of a clover field not eighty yards from the kennel and given the command to hunt. Within less than a minute and slightly over the hill, a strike was made with a single bark that broke the silence, and then bawls in rapid succession came from Riley. The whole pack joined the chase with an explosive cry that made goose bumps on the back of my neck and arms want to jump off of my body. The Basset pandemonium continued as Brie, Paul, and I positioned ourselves on the side of the hill watching the rabbit making tight sixty yard circles with a swarm of Bassets behind. Having the rabbit pass three times while looking for a place to hide, my sister shouldered her new .410, shot and cried out "I got him". What a fantastic way to start the day watching a well executed Basset run, then stuffing my sister's game bag with the first rabbit making spirits high for both Hound and Hunter.

We made our way to the bottom of the hill where a cattail filled pond and swamp had rabbit tracks all around that could be seen at twenty-five yards away. The Hounds covered a swatch of ground thirty yards wide as we approached, then again the pack struck a hot trail and was in full cry. While watching the Hounds, I noticed a speeding rabbit running up the hollow along the creek edge. Across the pond in a clearing another rabbit headed into a tangle of grape vines. While grouping with my sister and Paul to plan our strategy, fifteen feet away another rabbit flew across the dam breast of the pond and down over the hill. Before we could gather our thoughts, the pack split and two chases went in opposite directions. Brie and Paul took after the Bassets that had followed the rabbit up the creek. I followed the Bassets that went down the creek on a trail that I didn't view the rabbit.

With two chases at one time and four know rabbits, my mind was working in overdrive as I wondered where the rabbit would show. I positioned myself on a rise overlooking the creek bottom having a panoramic view of the chase. The Hounds voices coming from two different directions gave an echoing stereo sound that surrounded me in every direction that I pointed my ears. The Hounds that I was following went down the right hand side of the creek and continued their chase until the rabbit turned uphill about one hundred and fifty yards away. Within minutes I heard the Hounds in full cry coming in my direction across a shelf in the mountain above me. Looking through the dense grape vine tangle for the rabbit to show, I thought I was seeing things with the rabbit running across the top of the thicket about twenty feet off of the ground. When I focused on the movement, a ruffed grouse (my tree climbing

rabbit) was headed straight at me, forty yards away. I barely had time to raise my gun to my shoulder and aim when the grouse flew directly over me. I followed through with my aim and caught the grouse with a well placed shot within fifteen yards.

The Hounds were now coming over the breast of the hill with a furry of screams as I caught sight of the rabbit. I quickly moved my position about forty yards back up the creek and backed into a large four pronged ash tree waiting for the rabbit to get within range. As usual, you can never predict which way the game will go, and at fifty yards out he turned back down the hollow as my line of attack faded. The Hounds were not far behind with Molly leading the pack. Buck, Drum, Hunter, Bella, and Bubba were following closely as the pack flew by with a look of mayhem. With trying to put myself in the place of a Hound on fresh scent, I can't imagine what a wonderful feeling of undisturbed focus must be like. So again the rabbit made a circle which seemed to follow inside of its original run. The rabbit was headed for a thicket of blackberry bushes, so I positioned myself to head the rabbit off, and was just in a nick of time. The rabbit was in high gear headed at a slight angle across and in front of me within twenty yards. I followed through with my aim and shot, scoring a double on a single run. This run was combined with excitement and unexpected game that lasted for thirty-five minutes.

During my grouse and rabbit run, my sister and Paul was having their own excitement with the rest of the pack. Riley, Stumpy, Rusty, Kitty, Ruby and Lulu had a run that gave much for the game bag. As told to me by my sister, Paul and she followed the Bassets up the creek and into a select cleared section of woods that is covered with wildlife forage. The forage plants are about five inches high and provide plenty of cover for small game refuge. When they reached the middle of this five acre parcel of woods, my sister and Paul staged their position at fifty yards apart. While listening for the Hounds to make their turn, they both realized that they weren't alone. Rabbits, rabbits everywhere as my sister described; one to left, two to the right, three to the front, and four behind; my counting and positions are illusory but as stated by my sister, Paul and her viewed seven rabbits, some browsing, some traveling, and some frolicking while listening to the Basset chase. Soon the cry of the pack was headed back in their direction and anticipation built with both of them. Louder and louder the bawls came, then chaos everywhere with rabbits running in every direction. I heard the shots from down the hollow where I was located and a smile grew wider and wider on my face as I heard six shots from their guns. They bagged four rabbits; two a piece with one run and will remember this one run for the rest of their life.

After we regrouped, we had a cup of coffee and treated the Hounds with cookies for their great performance. We exchanged our success stories and planned our next run, then set off with the Hounds back down the creek. At the top end of the pond, the Hounds quickly bumped an unexpected rabbit behind a downed tree within ten feet from Paul's feet. The rabbit streaked like lightning in my direction following the bank of the pond with the whole pack of Bassets in hot pursuit. A sight chase was on as the Bassets were jockeying for position to see the rabbit. The rabbit run a tight circle around the pond and was heading back up the creek on the right hand side in a bramble of thorn bushes when Paul shouldered his gun and fired.

A small cloud of snow flew from the bushes and within seconds the run was over with the pack of Bassets teeming through the bush. Bella was the lucky one finding the rabbit and carrying it to the edge of the clearing where Paul greeted her and the rest of the pack with praise. There seemed to be no end in sight as the game was popping from everywhere.

After rallying the Hounds we set out around the pond and entered the woods on the left hand side of the valley across from where I got my double earlier. This side of the hill is steep with a tangle of thick grape vines making human passage very difficult. The Hounds worked the vines as Brie, Paul, and I spread out skirting the edge of the tangle. After covering about fifty yards of the vines, the Hounds hit a hot track with a rapid succession of yips indicating that they were on a bird. We quickly followed the Hounds above us down the hollow for another thirty yards when three grouse rose from the vines like missiles. At twenty yards from the flying steaks, I shot and downed my second grouse of the day filling my daily bag limit. Brie shot and down came the second grouse with the third flying down the hollow. Paul was up the hollow just a little out of range, and was not able to join in on the shooting.

After a short break while gathering our downed game and regaining the Hounds from their elation, we continued down the hollow where a funnel forms from three adjoining hillsides. Two creeks join within this funnel and is one of my favorite deer hunting spots for an evening stand. Up and to the right of the small creek that adjoins with the main creek in the hollow is a bedding area for deer, so we decided to work the Hounds down the hollow working around the deer's home. The woods are filled with old growth oak trees with some measuring four and five feet in diameter. Tons of acorns fall from these trees yearly providing winter nourishment for the many wildlife animals living in this area. The view is breathtaking as you can see clearly down the steep hollow hillsides for over two hundred yards. The Hounds worked the open woods and quickly hit fresh scent of squirrel that I viewed earlier while starting out our entrance to this beautiful section of forest. Within less than a minute, the Hounds were in full cry as they looked like a bunch of balls in a pinball machine bouncing off trees until they found their quarry perched high above in a majestic old oak tree. Two large gray squirrels were trying to hide in the branches above while the pack of Bassets were surrounding the tree with their front legs up on the tree's base looking like Coon Hounds treeing their quarry. Brie, Paul, and I surrounded the tree as the uproar continued trying to position ourselves for the shot. Paul said I got him, and within a second the shot rang out echoing through the hollow like a sonic boom. The squirrel fell from the tree and while Paul was retrieving the game, my sister shot making the second squirrel fall within five feet of Paul as he was bending over picking up his squirrel. Paul took a couple of steps and picked up Brie's squirrel saying jokingly, "I didn't know I shot twice!"

It was now slightly after noon and time for lunch, so with our bags filled with seven rabbits, three grouse, and two squirrels, we decided to call it a day and head back home for a fresh wildlife meal. After tending to our Hounds, and cleaning our harvest my sister and Paul set off to the kitchen to prepare our late lunch. My sister is a Chef at a five diamond restaurant and Paul is an Executive Chef in charge of many restaurants with both performing their culinary art at a popular resort in our area.

My mouth was drooling worse than my Hounds as I was in wonder of what type of dish they would prepare. Soon our home had the smell of a wonderful melody of cooking foods. First the smell of fresh bread filled the air as my sister baked two loaves of a wonderful beer bread. Second came a mixture of smells from sauces that they prepared using honey, nuts, oils, butter, cider vinegar, bottled sauces, and other mixtures of spices. Then the smells of onions, shallots, garlic, celery, carrots, potatoes, beer, wine, grouse, rabbit, and squirrel filled the air with a harmonious odor that kept my nose sniffing as much as our Hounds noses sniffed during the morning hunt. While Brie and Paul was preparing our wild game feast, I sat in the living room cleaning our guns and couldn't wait for the meal to be served. Within the time that it took me to clean the guns, they began to set the table for our late lunch. As I placed our guns in the gun cabinet, the two Chefs called for my family to dine. On the table laid two loaves of sliced beer bread, a platter of three honey roasted grouse, a platter of rabbit and squirrel stew, and a serving bowl with fresh cut fruit salad containing bananas, cantaloupe, pears, peaches, and apples. What a sight to see after a morning of hunting bunnies as we sat down looking at a table filled with wonderful wild game dishes that was fit for a King.

As we sat at the table with my parents in preparation to eat our day's harvest, we thanked God for His wonderful bounty, our wonderful Basset Hounds, and our wonderful small bore shotguns. While eating our delicious meal, we reminisced on this mornings hunt, past hunts, talked about future hunts, and concluded that hunting Late Season Bunnies with Small Bore Shotguns and Basset Hounds are a perfect combination.

This day made our Christmas Holiday, a day that we will always remember!