

# My Adventure With a Wildcat

## A Hunting Trip in the Game Region of Upper New Hampshire

By MARTY O'TOOLE

The following sketch by Marty O'Toole deals with some of his hunting adventures in Central New England. This is not a section of the country that is commonly supposed to furnish many thrills to the sportsman, but most peaceful localities occasionally offer real dangers as a spice to adventure, as this article graphically illustrates.

FOR the past four or five years I have taken an autumn hunting trip. Every season as soon as I was through with my work, I would plan to spend two or three weeks as much as possible in the open air looking for game. In this way I have had a number of pleasant vacations in different parts of New England, where I have found hunting all that could be desired.

Last season it was my good fortune to visit a particularly interesting part of New Hampshire, where several little adventures came my way which were at least of some concern to myself and might bear telling.

The base of operations for this trip was the little town of Warner, but most of my actual hunting took place on the slopes or neighboring valleys around Mount Kearsarge.

This section of New Hampshire is one of the finest in the country. The ridges are covered with rather heavy timber, a good deal of it hard wood. When the frost has touched it this timber makes a remarkably gay appearance as the red and yellow leaves of the oak and maple are mottled with the dark shades of the evergreens on the mountainside. The country is thinly settled and abounds with various species of game.

A good deal of my time I spent in bird shooting, particularly quail and partridges. But there were many foxes and some deer in the woods and more wild cats than one might imagine.

As soon as I arrived at this locality and heard of this more interesting game, I was very anxious to get some of it at

close quarters. It seemed to me it might be possible to capture alive one of the foxes which are so numerous. I had friends in Brockton, where I used to pitch in the New England League, who I knew were anxious to secure such a novelty. And I determined if possible to get them one.

There is no more difficult animal in the world to trap than a fox. I am by no means an experienced trapper, so it is not at all to be wondered at that I failed in my original design for trappers who have spent a lifetime in the business have told me of the difficulties they experience in capturing foxes. This animal is particularly wary and suspicious. It seems to have a special instinct for detecting the presence of a trap and is one of the most shrewd and cunning animals in the world.

However, although I did not fully realize the difficulties of the undertaking, I at least determined to make an attempt to capture one of these really beautiful animals alive, and with that end in view I procured several large steel traps and set them with as much skill as I could command in what I judged would be likely places on the slopes of Mount Kearsarge. I was stopping in the town of Warner at the house of a very good friend of mine, and every morning we would harness the horse and drive out to the slopes of the mountain. Then we would spend the day in hunting and return at nightfall. On the day when we went out to examine my fox traps we had the precaution to take with us an empty sugarbarrel so that we could

bring home any living captive if we were fortunate enough to secure one.

I imagine the life of a trapper must be one of continual excitement for the anticipation of finding something in his traps must be a constant spur to his interest. At least it was in my case as we drove along through the rocky ledges to where I had set the first of my traps. I was destined to disappointment, however, on this occasion for the trap was undisturbed although I could plainly see the track of a fox which had been obliged to go a little to one side out of his way, to avoid the trap. This was an indication of how difficult an undertaking I had started out to accomplish in catching one of these intelligent animals. However a Baseball game is never over until the last man is out and a trapper's work is never accomplished till he has visited his last trap.

My last trap was set at the foot of a steep rocky ledge which was practically bare of vegetation. It was surrounded, however, by a clump of small trees and rather thick underbrush. As I approached I could tell at once by the rustling in the fallen leaves which covered the ground that there was some living creature in my trap, all right. But the moment I came in sight I saw that I had made a serious mistake in looking in that particular locality for foxes, for it was not a fox that I had in my trap this time but an animal that the people of this section called a wild cat.

As I understand it there are a number of different creatures that go by this name. The particular specimen which was crouched low in the leaves with one foot securely caught in the steel jaws of the trap was, as near as I could see, some species much like the well-known Canadian lynx. The trap was fastened by a stout chain and staple to a small log. We were naturally surprised to see in place of the relatively harmless fox we were anxious to get, this savage animal; but we were no less determined, since chance had delivered it into our hands, to capture it alive. We had our guns with us as we always carried them in our tramps through the woods so we could easily have killed the wild cat if we had wished. But it was no part of our plan to kill.

My friend took the sugar barrel and

approached the animal very cautiously while I stood by ready to strike the cat over the head with the butt of my gun if he proved troublesome. I expected some little difficulty in getting possession of the thoroughly savage animal, but I was not ready for the surprise he gave me. Of course I knew in a general way that all wild animals are remarkably quick. This wild cat unquestionably made the quickest move that I ever saw from any living creature. As my friend approached with the sugar barrel and was in the act of crowding it over the crouching body, the cat sprang like lightning directly at his face. The only reason he didn't get there was the fact that the chain stopped him about six inches short of the mark, but at that, he had sprung with such savage force that he pulled his hind foot which was caught in the trap almost completely out so that it held only by two toes. This, and the fact that the chain had become caught around a small stump so that the log to which it was attached was immovable was all that saved my friend from a most unpleasant experience and very likely serious injury.

As soon as we had recovered from this unexpected assault we both attacked the cat in turn and stunned it with the butt of our guns. Before it could recover we had it safely in the barrel where we secured it so it could not escape. We thought this was quite a thrilling adventure. At all events the cat was a remarkably fine specimen and my friends in Brockton were greatly pleased when I gave it to them. They placed the animal in a cage in a show window where it lived for some little time and attracted a good deal of notice. But it could not become accustomed to the confinement and eventually died.

This was my only experience on this trip with an animal of a dangerous species, but in addition to my many successful quail and partridge hunts I had some very interesting experiences with foxes. It is true I was never able to secure one alive but I did shoot several during my visit. A light snow fell soon after I arrived at Warner and taking our Winchester rifles, we started out to take advantage of this snowfall in a genuine fox hunt. We had in all five very well-trained dogs and with their aid we hoped

to be able to secure some good fox pelts. We spent the whole of one day, getting up very early into the heavy timber region at the foot of the mountain. Our dogs ranged through the woods and finally found a fox. We could follow them by their deep baying in among the trees as the chase wound in and out among the ridges.

For some reason that I do not pretend to understand a fox almost invariably seems to seek a clearing when he is pursued. Knowing this, we stationed ourselves in a rather extensive cleared space which was surrounded by heavy timber but which had been cleared partly by lumbermen and partly by a small forest fire. After we had remained for some time concealed behind the underbrush at one side of this clearing we could tell by the continuous racket in the distance that the dogs were driving the fox steadily nearer us. Sure enough, this proved to be the case, and in a few minutes a fox, a very fine animal, burst from the underbrush at the far side of the clearing and ran at full speed diagonally across it. This was my opportunity. Although I do not pretend to be a very good shot, a single bullet from my Winchester rifle was all that was necessary. This was the first and best fox we secured in this way. During my stay, however, before we were through we shot two more in much the same manner that I have outlined. The old method of hunting foxes by riding them down on horseback may be more exhilarating, but we found our simple but effectual method quite entertaining enough.

We did not kill any deer on this trip, but later in the season I had an odd experience across the line in Massachusetts. There were two others with me when we started out with our rifles hunting for deer. The game laws of Massachusetts, as in most other sections, are peculiar. In some counties it is legal to kill deer at

certain seasons; in others, there is a heavy fine attached to each offense. We were successful enough to rouse a very fine deer from a thicket and could catch an occasional glimpse of him running at full speed through the scattering heavy timber. This was at a spot very close to the county line which separated lawful territory from territory where it was against the law to shoot deer. We crossed and re-crossed this line several times during the day following deer trails, hoping to get a shot at the stag we had already seen early in the morning but without success.

In the afternoon one of the deputies of the Fish and Game Commission accosted us in a little clearing. It seems he had been following us about all day in an effort to catch us in the act of unlawfully shooting a deer. In this he was disappointed for we had shot no deer either lawfully or unlawfully. But at that time the state of Massachusetts had passed a law requiring a hunting license of everyone who hunted any game whatsoever, and he still hoped to get us on this account. Fortunately all three of us had our hunting licenses with us which we were obliged to show. It seemed to us a rather high-handed proceeding which we certainly didn't like very well. We didn't hesitate to tell him what we thought about it, and inasmuch as it wasn't against the law to talk even though it seemed to be against the law to do about everything else, we gave him a very unpleasant five minutes before we were through. All told he didn't seem to be much pleased with the results of his day's work in tracking us about through the woods.

Someday I hope to take a hunting trip through a typical big game country. But so far I have always succeeded in finding entertainment enough with my gun in the middle States of New England.