

IN IT FOR THE CHASE

By David Rainer, Staff Writer



DAVID RAINER

James Ellington with his successful harvest.

Motivation to hunt rabbits can come in many forms. Take, for instance, former Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Director Charles Kelley, who is first in line when the rabbits are divvied up after the hunt. That doesn't mean Kelley doesn't enjoy the other aspects of the hunt, but fried rabbit loins may be his favorite wild game. Meanwhile, many of the die-hard rabbit hunters in the state have another addiction. For them, it's all about the chase.



Robert Collins lets his dogs out of their box prior to a rabbit hunt. Collins is a member of the Sportsmen Hunting Club in Macon County.

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Case in point, last fall on a hunt near the airstrip where the famous Tuskegee Airmen once trained, Robert Collins was asked for his favorite rabbit recipe. He looked a little sheepish and then confessed.



Bill Nunnery surrounded by dogs used on a rabbit hunt.

“I really don’t eat them that much,” said Collins, who was born in Tuskegee and grew up around Notasulga. “I just like to hunt them. I like to listen and watch my dogs work. We go every couple of days during February, but I let the other guys have the rabbits. They’re happy to take my share.”

HUNTING WITH DOGS

Although Donnie Hand of New Site in Tallapoosa County enjoys a nice rabbit dinner, it’s not the reason he hunts rabbits every chance he gets.

“To me, it’s not about hoisting the rabbit,” Hand said. “To me, I just love to see a good dog work. It doesn’t make any difference to me whether he’s chasing the mailman or pointing a bird or what. I just love to see a good dog.”

Hand’s rabbit-hunting passion evolved from another form of hunting with dogs.

“My dad had to work to feed the family, so my uncle got me started dog deer hunting when I was 13 or 14,” Hand said. “I grew up dog deer hunting. Then I went rabbit hunting with a buddy of mine. I thought, man, this is just dog deer hunting on a smaller scale.”

Hand and some buddies with similar backgrounds decided to start a hunting club. They wanted Hand to be the president for a “deer” hunting club. By that time, Hand was already into rabbit hunting big time.

“I said OK, but let me tell you something, I’m all for it, but we’re not going to have a ‘deer’ hunting club; we’re going to have a rabbit hunting club,” he said.

Hand said the club was fortunate enough right away to lease about 6,000 acres of mostly paper company land. The club still leases about 4,800 acres – plenty of room to chase rabbits.

INTRODUCING YOUTH TO HUNTING

“Another thing about rabbit hunting, it’s a lot about the fellowship,” he said. “We got hooked up with a lot of other rabbit hunters in Clarke County and down around Elba. Now they’ve got sons who are 12 or 13 years old, and they’re bringing those kids in.”

But Hand said the young hunters had to agree to certain terms before they were accepted into the rabbit-hunting fraternity.

“They enjoy the heck out of it. But I said, ‘all right, this is what we’re going to do.’ They’re going to get up when I get up every morning. They’re going to get out and help me load dogs, put on collars. We’re going to hunt. When we get through hunting and come in, we’re going to unload dogs, feed and water them. Then we’re going to clean rabbits. We’re not just going to show up out there and shoot rabbits and then jump on the Polaris and ride while everybody else cleans rabbits. We’re going to go at it from one end to the other to see how many of them stick with us.”

In 2012, the group took 12 kids on a rabbit-hunting excursion, and all 12 were able to take a rabbit.

“That’s special to me. I’m kid-oriented anyhow. That’s what it’s about to me. It’s not about firing a shot. Sometimes I don’t even take a gun.”

Hand said he’s pretty much been all over Alabama to hunt rabbits. Some places that were supposed to have plenty of rabbits didn’t. Then there are those special places, like Jerry de Bin’s lease near Petrey in Crenshaw County. Bill Nunnery of Tallapoosa joined in on that Petrey hunt, and he agreed with Hand’s assessment.

“If you wanted to put together a rabbit-hunting place, I don’t believe you could get any better,” Nunnery said. “You’ve got strips of green fields, strips of pines, briar patches, areas that they’ve let grow up. You’ve got to have

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JAMES HYBART

the right habitat. If you haven't got the habitat you'll have a hard time. The coyotes will wear them out if they haven't got a place to hide."

Hand's ideal place to hunt also includes water, whether a creek or standing water like a lake or pond. He said water can determine whether you've got a good beagle or a great beagle.

"Every rabbit dog is not a water dog," he said. "It takes a pretty good dog to hunt a track in water. You get those buck rabbits or cane cutters or whatever you want to call them, when they swim those creeks, it takes a pretty good dog, first of all, to smell him. When you've got a dog that'll bail off into that creek, you know you've got a good one."

SEASON CHANGES

Because of a change in the deer season in south Alabama, Hand said their rabbit-hunting schedule will be adjusted. For most of the state south of Montgomery, excluding some counties along the Chattahoochee River, the deer season will swap 10 days of hunting in December to be able to hunt the first 10 days of February.

"I've already talked to my buddies in south Alabama who have private land," he said. "I can tell you we're going to hunt rabbits in December when deer season is closed."

Back in Macon County, Collins and his hunting buddies are also hooked on hunting with quality dogs, but that wasn't always the case for Collins.

"I've been rabbit hunting since I was about 14 years old," Collins said. "We didn't have any dogs when we first started. We were just walking them up. We were young boys and we were following behind the old guys back then. They showed us how to walk slow and look real close for the rabbit."

As Collins walks along during the hunt, he takes the barrel of his shotgun and taps on likely tangles of vines or brambles to try to get a rabbit to abandon its hiding place.

GOOD EATS

After those lessons of his youth, Collins enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1978 and made a 28-year career of it. He was a drill sergeant for five years and retired in 2006 with the rank of sergeant major, the highest rank for an enlisted man.

Once stationed in Korea, when he re-upped for another two-year stint, he got a 30-day leave. Collins didn't take off for an exotic location for some R&R at the beach.

"I came home and went rabbit hunting with these same guys," he said of the group called the Sportsmen Hunting Club.

Eddie Wilson, a member of the Sportsmen Hunting Club, shares Charles Kelley's taste for rabbits.

"When somebody kills a rabbit, the first thing you hear is 'gravy and onions,'" Wilson said. "We pot boil the rabbit to make it tender. Then we fry him down a little bit. Then we make gravy in the frying pan and add onions. Then we smother him and simmer him down until he's good and tender. I like the buck rabbits. They've got plenty of meat. Give me a hind hip and a piece of the back and I'm satisfied."

Chuck Sykes, the current Director of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, said small-game hunting, especially rabbits, is an activity that offers multiple benefits for young and old alike.

"I can see both sides – the enjoyment of hearing a good race and the taste of fried rabbit," Sykes said. "I am a big-time dog person, so I can appreciate listening to a well-tuned pack of beagles. And looking at my physique, you can see I like to eat. It can also be quite challenging shooting a running rabbit as it squirts from one patch of brush to another.

"But, I guess for me personally, I like the fellowship of the hunt. It's more of a social event than a hunt. Spending time enjoying the outdoors with friends and dogs is not a bad way to pass a cold February day." 

Rabbit season in Alabama runs through Feb. 28 with a daily bag limit of eight rabbits. Visit outdooralabama.com for more information on small-game hunting in Alabama.