

Equipment Matters

By M.L. McPherson



The standing joke (first suggested by someone who shall remain unnamed) was that we were all going to tell Coburn that we had laid our rifles down “somewhere” and could not find them. While preparing to take a picture of my “double,” I rested my rifle against a juniper bough and actually did have trouble seeing it after stepping back only a few yards, to take a picture of the coyotes. This pattern works! While a bipod is helpful, in this sport crossed sticks generally are easier to use and are more useful.

Given the right equipment and help, even a novice can succeed; sometimes beyond one’s wildest dreams. I did.

INTRODUCTION

As I was preparing for my long drive to the 2007 SHOT Show, John Anderson, editor of **The VARMINT HUNTER Magazine®**, telephoned. He explained that he had been invited to attend a coyote hunt but that he could not get free that week. He asked if I would be available. While I had never hunted



Ron Coburn and Gary Roberson (right) with Coburn’s first kill of the second day. Roberson encouraged development of the Savage Predator rifle and is a partner in Burnham Bros., makers of an extremely effective electronic call, an example of which he is holding. The rechargeable battery of this unit holds sufficient energy to run the call for at least three days of typical hunting and it comes with chargers for both household and automotive voltage. When compared with units that operate on replaceable batteries, the rechargeable battery will soon save the cost of this unit. This picture exemplifies success on many fronts.

coyotes, I was interested in learning how to help ranchers keep the price of beef down. So, despite being very busy, I signed on.

BACKGROUND

A full understanding of this event, held near historic Tucumcari, New Mexico, in January 2007 requires background on several subjects. Detailing those is infeasible here, so I will provide only an outline.

First, predator control is a necessary component of modern ranching. In most places, the coyote population is wildly out of control. Cattle ranchers suffer significant calving losses where coyotes have depleted the natural prey

(which is practically everywhere). Hungry predators harass calving cows, resulting in stress and, all too often, lost calves. Shepherds live with the fact that coyotes prefer sheep to any other prey. Another significant problem is that coyotes routinely kill ranch dogs and family pets. As our guide, Larry Symes, noted, “Coyotes will survive.”

Second, predator calling is the only effective means of controlling coyotes. Third, predator calling is the fastest growing hunting sport in the world. Fourth, effective “calling” requires special equipment, knowledge, and skills.

IDEAL EQUIPMENT



The list of essential equipment includes the following: a quiet and dependable vehicle (gently push the doors closed, and do not talk or bang anything against anything else), four-wheel-drive is often useful (rough roads, snow, and mud); camouflaged clothing, and a well-insulated camouflaged hooded coat (cold, wind, and the necessity of remaining completely still for at least fifteen minutes); a padded, camouflaged, ground mat (rough, wet, snowy, or muddy ground); a good mouth call and a remote electronic call (to entice the predator); and the right ammunition, sights, and rifle (to get the job done).

Vehicle choice falls outside my interest here; clothing choice does not. Mossy Oak offers several patterns in high-quality clothing that will provide head-to-toe coverage with excellent camouflage for various backgrounds and weather conditions. To effectively call predators, such clothing is necessary. Because it is impossible to anticipate the weather, we found ourselves wearing a typical forest pattern even when hunting in areas where practically 100 percent of the ground was snow covered, an unusual situation for



Yes, I am pleased. I made a clean double with the second shot on a running target and I did so at the perfect time — when two experienced coyote hunters were watching and when those happened to be the CEO of Savage Arms and the man behind the Burnham Bros. electronic call. It gets no better than that!

Tucumcari! Often, we would have been better hidden in a lighter pattern. Nevertheless, we saw no evidence that any responding coyote was visually tipped off — Mossy Oak proved up to the task. When we set up on the first call of the first morning of our hunt, with the temperature near zero and a strong breeze in our faces, the hooded Mossy Oak coat was a necessity.

Most experienced coyote hunters consider the 223 Remington an ideal chambering for call hunting; similarly, such hunters prefer the 50-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip. In a typical rifle, this combination can deliver instantaneous kills and the modest recoil will allow the shooter to maintain the sight picture. The former is always important; the latter is critical, when a second shot is required and when two or more coyotes respond to the call.

On this hunt, we used the Winchester Ballistic Silvertip factory loading. Everyone reported good results. Those who are less interested in hide hunting and who might be hunting where coyotes have been called extensively, so that longer shots are common, might be better served with the 22-250 chambering and a 55-grain Ballistic Tip load.

It is hard to imagine that anyone who would seriously participate in this pastime would deliberately choose anything other than a high-quality scope. That just does not make sense — good optics, durability, dependability, and ease of use are all critical. Appropriately, our rifles were fitted with Carl Zeiss Conquest 3-9x40 scopes. The bright and clear optics, smooth adjustments, and generous range of eye relief all added to the usefulness of the scope and the effectiveness of the Predator System.

Those who might often hunt where the coyotes have been called might be better served with higher magnification; however, the 9x setting provided sufficient magnification for shots to 300 yards and that proved sufficient on this hunt, as it would on most predator hunts for practically every hunter. An important goal of call hunting is to get the target to approach to within the sure kill range, so that wounded animals do not escape and so that predators are not educated against responding to a call.

With regard to light-gathering ability, a scope with a larger objective might be advantageous for the first and last call of the day; however, the tested scope proved adequate.

Ron Coburn (left) is obviously pleased as we show off the Savage Predator with his first kill of the second day. Note the effectiveness of the Mossy Oak clothing — when in a stand we add netting to mask the shine from our faces, which completes the effect.

After using this combination, I am satisfied — I would not want a bulkier, heavier scope on my predator rifle.

Historically, predator callers have used a variety of mouth calls because these leave the hunter's hands free to handle the gun. While this is good, there are several disadvantages that might not be obvious to the inexperienced. First, it is impossible to simultaneously work such a call while fully concentrating on the visual field. Second, it is impossible to transition from that to shooting without moving. Third, it is virtually impossible to use one while shooting. Finally, and most critically, it brings the predator's attention directly to the hunter.

A remote controlled and remotely placed electronic call significantly mitigates or eliminates each of these limitations. While a mouth call has merit and still is a useful adjunct, an electronic call is manifestly superior.

Finally, experienced predator callers agree that an accurate, dependable, easy to use gun is critical.

THE PROTOTYPE SAVAGE PREDATOR

This story began when Gary Roberson, of Burnham Bros. (makers of an excellent electronic call), who is an experienced and dedicated predator hunter, decided to see if he could get someone to make an ideal "Predator" rifle. In the summer of 2006, he approached Ron Coburn, CEO of Savage Arms, and made his case, paraphrased here as: Predator calling is the fastest growing hunting sport in the world and no one offers an ideal gun and scope package for this sport. Not surprisingly, Coburn was up to the challenge; the rest, as they say, is history — or it soon will be.

This rifle combines a simple, light, and effective injection-molded stock on a 22-inch-barreled version of the short-action Savage repeater with a blind magazine. Atop this is the Zeiss scope mounted with Warne rings. While a basic enough combination, when tested with each of two, randomly chosen, factory loads these rifles proved capable of one-half minute of angle, five-shot, 100-yard groups. (I am confident that a well-matched loading would demonstrate better accuracy.) For this sport, where shots often are taken from awkward positions, the fantastically crisp and light AccuTrigger is invaluable. Anything else in the way of equipment is second rate.

At about 7¹/₂ pounds, this package is ideally balanced. The rifle handles perfectly for shots over crossed sticks (the Stoney Point units are particularly useful) and the medium-contour barrel provides just the right amount of damping for effective shots on running targets — as I proved on the second day of my hunt.

This is all fine, but the finish used is what makes this package so special — excepting the bolt body, lenses, and inner part of the quick-focus ocular tube, 100 percent of the surface of the Savage Predator is covered with a durable, latex finish in a very effective camouflage pattern. Unsuccessfully, I tried to chip it using my fingernails — it is tough. Nevertheless, it can be chipped or worn but it is tough

enough to last a careful hunter a lifetime — minor scars will not ruin the camouflage.

The success of this project would have been predictable. After all, the goal was to create the ideal rifle for use when calling predators and Roberson and Coburn are certainly experts in knowing what is needed and in knowing how to build that. Frankly, that this system worked so well was no surprise at all. Equally, that the prototypes were not perfect was no surprise.

ANTICIPATED CHANGES

The purpose of this event was to wring out the Predator and to consider how to improve it. We did find a few areas where improvement was feasible. Chiefly, all but one hunter agreed that this gun should be fitted with a detachable box magazine, which eases loading and unloading and which also improves feeding functionality — the new Savage detachable magazine is a work of art. This type of hunting often includes shots taken from awkward positions, where one's eye can be either farther from or closer to the scope than normal. The Zeiss Conquest has an unusually wide range of eye relief, which makes it an ideal choice. After using the guns, everyone believed that, for best overall results, it would be useful to mount the scope about half an inch farther forward.

We believe that most hunters who would buy such a rifle certainly would want a quality scope and would not be interested in a less expensive package; that is, a package made less expensive through "cheaper" optics. The chosen scope seemed to suit everyone's tastes and needs.

No one objected to the injection-molded stock but I suspect that some hunters will want to spend more to have a McMillan, or similar, stock — Savage might well offer such an option on a "Precision Predator" version of this package. Similarly, because some hunters have the skill to take longer shots on targets that simply will not respond to the call, I petitioned for a larger-diameter, fluted barrel on a "Precision" version. Use of the larger diameter barrel shank with a larger muzzle and deep fluting would provide about a 20 percent increase in accuracy potential with identical balance and handling. With a top-end stock, such a gun should easily deliver 1/4 minute of angle accuracy. If Savage does offer such a "Precision Predator" model, that likely will be offered in 243 Winchester, along with the 204 Ruger, 223 Remington, and 22-250 chamberings of the standard Predator model, and it might include other scope options.

CONCLUSIONS

Anyone interested in effectively hunting any of the smaller species of predators will find the new Savage Predator an ideal choice for call hunting. With addition of some sort of ground pad, appropriate Mossy Oak clothing, and an electronic call, a hunter will have all the field gear needed for a successful hunt.

While this is not necessarily simple, any serious hunter should have little trouble in learning the needed skills to-

ward choosing a site where sun angle and wind are in one's favor and where terrain and cover improve concealment. Learning to place the call and use it effectively is even simpler — upwind, visible, and about 25 yards away.

I would not hesitate to recommend the tools discussed in this short introduction to anyone who hunts predators or who is considering taking up this sport. Consider that we showed the prototype rifle to two dedicated coyote hunters whom we chanced to meet. Both were struck with the Predator and wanted to buy one, on the spot. Perhaps the ultimate proof of the "rightness" of the Savage Predator Package is the following: After seeing the prototype in use for three hours, Larry Symes summarily retired his tried and proven coyote hunting companion of 25 years. He now owns and uses a Savage!

MY HUNT, IN BRIEF — MONDAY

I left Cortez, Colorado, in the wee hours of Monday morning. When I got fifty miles from Albuquerque, New Mexico, I encountered fog and then snow-packed roads. This prolonged my 430-mile drive by about two hours. I arrived in Tucumcari, New Mexico, around noon, picked up my gear, and took my randomly chosen rifle to the local "range." There, I fired several groups for accuracy, and to familiarize myself with the gun and scope.

Roberson had zeroed the guns and reported that, with the 50-grain Winchester Ballistic Silvertip load, each shot good enough that he believed the combination would routinely produce half minute of angle groups. I fired groups using the 55-grain Hornady V-Max factory load, which I had randomly chosen to bring along. Despite the cold (temperature was near 20 degrees and I never do my best shooting when it is below about 45 degrees) and the primitive facilities, I proved that the gun would indeed routinely shoot half minute of angle, five-shot, 100-yard groups. In predator calling, it is ephemeral unlikely that one will get more than two shots at any stand, so three-shot groups would make more

sense for accuracy testing and, in any case, this is certainly sufficient accuracy for this game.

For my testing, I used the Hench Bench made by Tower Stool Co., Faith, SD 57626-0337. This is a handy and stable portable bench and stool system. While I had other choices, this is the one that easily fits in the trunk of my car.

TUESDAY

Larry Symes guided Tony Tekan-sik, then with Zeiss, and me. Before we got set up at the first stand, I already had spotted a coyote. This proved to be a very old male that was harassing a herd of calving cows — a classic case, an older predator that is no longer capable of effectively hunting wild game, bound to cause the rancher grief. As this coyote was nearly 300 yards away and as it had not disappeared when it saw us, I waited. However, when Symes got the call set up and played the first "tune" it immediately began to withdraw, so I shot it. This was too easy! From many conversations with dedicated "coyoters," I knew that this was not how this game was supposed to go.

About one hour and two stands later, five coyotes responded to the call but "locked up" about half a mile away and would not come closer. Who knows why? The most likely explanation is that the ever-changing breeze had shifted enough to allow them to scent us. All that morning we had that problem. We would stop at a location where the wind was ideal but before we could get set up it would have changed three times. Oh well, that is why they call it hunting and that is why they call it the "weather;" whether you like it or not, it will do what it does. (For example, as I write this, the inch or so of snow that the weather "experts" promised us less than 24 hours ago has accumulated to almost 8 inches.)

Later that day, while driving to another location, we jumped a group of coyotes. I shot one of those and almost had a good chance at another — it stopped behind brush. Then, as we drove, we spotted another and I tried a shot at it. I am certain that I hit a twig on

an intervening bush. In hindsight I can visualize that that animal was behind sparse cover and I know that I should not have taken the shot.

Lesson learned. We drove on and spotted yet another roaming coyote. This time we stopped, turned around, and drove about one-half mile. We found a low spot to conceal the truck, got out, and set up a call. For cover, we used sparse vegetation and a slight rise. I took the right flank (which is a natural setup for a left-handed shooter). Tekan-sik took the left flank and Symes set up the call in front of and between us and positioned himself behind that.

For once, the breeze settled down and stayed in our favor. It was blowing on the left side of our faces. If the coyote that we had seen or any other coyote that was in front of us responded to the call, the most likely scenario would be for it to come in, directly toward the distressed jackrabbit call, until it got to within about 200 yards and then it would circle to our right, to get downwind of the call, so that it could catch the scent. Of course, there would be no scent other than ours, so it was critical that we take it before it got too far to the right (our downwind side).

Three times, Symes ran the call for about one minute, and then paused for about one minute. Then I saw a coyote coming in from exactly where we had seen the one. (I love it when a plan comes together!) There was enough cover that I could not get a clear shot when it stopped at about 200 yards. Then, as predicted, it began to circle to our right but it kept stopping and it was closing the gap.

When it was directly in front of me and about 125 yards out, I probably had time for a shot as it paused but I was not certain that I had a clear line of fire, so I waited for a better opportunity. It moved another 30 yards and stopped but, this time, it was completely hidden behind brush. I figured that as soon as it moved again I would have to take the shot, as it was getting too close to the point where it would wind us. I was ready, willing, and, I prayed, able but

I was not eager to take a running shot at that distance (coyotes almost always run, it seems).

I never got the chance — BOOM, CRACK, WHAP! Tekansik had a shot and he made it count. A perfect kill. I was relieved because I knew that I might not have gotten another shot and I was happy that he had a kill. As a bonus, he believes that I gave that kill to him! Who am I to dissuade his belief in my generosity?

As a point of interest, Symes, who was positioned between us, never once had a clear shot at that coyote and might well have never gotten one. As he had noted and as we saw on several stands, that situation is common. When team hunting, if you have a shot *you take it*, because your partner may not even see the critter. Before we finished that morning, Tekansik took a second coyote, so we had reduced the predator population on that ranch by four, which matters.

We had plenty of days-old snow cover; in fact, most of the areas we hunted were completely covered. This made it simple to observe tracks. We saw at least ten times as many coyote tracks as we did rabbit tracks. We also saw far more coyotes than we did rabbits. Even I can figure out that when the predator outnumbers its natural prey it has to be eating something else! The predator population far outstripped the natural carrying capacity of the area and, as I had observed at the first stand that day, coyotes were, indeed, harassing calving cows. In those circumstances, inevitably, livestock losses will occur.

WEDNESDAY

That morning, I went out with Roberson and Coburn. On our third setup, two coyotes on Coburn's side responded to the call. I was not more than 100 yards from him and I would have sworn that we had a clear field of view but I never saw a thing; more proof of what Symes had told us — "If you have a shot, take it!" This time, Coburn got one but the other found some cover and escaped.

Two locations later, we set up

with me on the left, because that is the way we had come in and I had been lagging behind. Roberson placed the call about 20 yards out, about halfway between Coburn and me, then sat down between us and prepared his video camera. He began the call with the distressed jackrabbit sound. We were immediately treated to a howling contest between two coyotes, nearly a mile away, directly in front of us.

Roberson tried that call three times with pauses. We heard no further response from the coyotes and I never saw anything move, despite a relatively clear field of view all the way to the horizon in the direction from which the howling had come. Roberson then switched the call to a distressed woodpecker sound.

That Burnham Bros. call works! No more than fifteen seconds later, I saw two coyotes charging over the horizon in an all-out run, at least 1,200 yards away. The two soon separated slightly and proceeded, side by side. When they were about 300 yards out, they crossed paths.

I remained perfectly still, or as still as possible while tracking the one on my side in the scope, by rocking my body, to move the butt of the gun as needed to pivot it in the Stoney Point crossed sticks.

When "my" coyote got to within about fifteen yards, I woofed. It slid to a stop. At my shot, the other (the, typically smarter, female) immediately whirled and blasted away. I worked the bolt and fired the second shot within about two seconds and took that one at about 70 yards.

As the bullet hit, that coyote slid to a stop where it was completely hidden behind a small juniper. Had I missed, I might not have gotten another shot and even if I had, because of the rapidly increasing distance, I would have had a far harder task.

Coburn reports that he never saw a thing until after my first shot and that he never had a shot on the second coyote. If you have a shot, *take it!*

I must report one other thing

about my first double on coyotes. Roberson at first exclaimed, "Wow, what a shot." Then he was completely quiet. I wondered why. Well, it turns out that the sun angle had made it hard for him to see the camera screen and that with his heavy gloves he had managed, inadvertently, to turn off the camera! He never got one bit of video; he had just missed a perfect chance to film a classic "double," with a rather tough running shot. Stuff happens, even to the best of us.

THURSDAY

The other hunters had had to leave, so it was only fellow writer John Haviland and me. We hunted with Symes. That morning I took another double and Haviland took a single. As before, our hunting was somewhat limited to the early mornings, because of melting snow and mud on the ranch roads that we were wont to tear up by traveling in the warmer afternoons.

THE TALLY

So, on my first coyote hunt, I took six in three mornings. I can assure you that quality equipment and guides who knew how to establish and work a "call" were responsible for much of that success. Moreover, I know enough about this game to realize that I might well hunt coyotes a lifetime and never do better, so I am not spoiled but I am eager to try it again.

Predator hunting has an entirely different "flavor" when compared with any other hunting that I have tried. While I "know" that a lone coyote presents very little threat to any healthy person and while even a small group of coyotes is not particularly dangerous, my instinct does not share that "knowledge." A predator is a predator, and I can assure you that that matters! Yes, when two coyotes charged me at full tilt and crossed nearly one mile of prairie in fifteen seconds, my heart pounded, the adrenalin rush hit, and the hair on my neck stood up, straight and rigid. (If I had any, the hair on my head would have joined in on that display).

