

Turning the Corner

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Somewhere around about the middle of February rabbit hunters will notice a distinct change in the air. Sure, it's still officially winter, and even your basic ground hog knows there's likely to be six more weeks of snow and cold to contend with, but this is rabbit hunting, and I prefer to listen to the cottontails and hares, whose subtle switch from survival to procreation mode often means more, better running from now till the end of the season.

The reason for this is simple and has nothing to do with great beagles or brilliant hunters – it's more about the way rabbits make more rabbits. Starting in February (even earlier depending on how promiscuous a particular female rabbit is feeling), both cottontails and hares begin looking for mates. Over the next few months male rabbits begin roaming the countryside looking for prospective mates, seeking a love affair that may last all of five minutes! Traveling males will cover a lot of ground, which is one reason why yesterday's empty clear-cut is suddenly overrun with rabbits today. Plus, most female rabbits will consider dalliances with multiple males, which only adds to the fun – and the number of rabbits you are likely to encounter on any given day from February right through the end of the season (and well into spring, if you continue to train till summer's heat puts an end to the festivities).

So, hunters who think that February is the beginning of the end for beagling may be surprised to find that great hunting will continue through this month and the next. In Maine, for example, the hare season does not close till March 31, one of the longest open hunting seasons for rabbits in the U.S. Females seeking multiple mates and males willing to travel several miles can only mean that rabbit numbers are bound to increase no matter where you hunt. If you can find a hidden honey hole somewhere, you may find yourself in the midst of the season's best hunting – long after most other hound men have quit for the year.

Speaking of Maine, one February a beagling buddy and I found what has yet to be equaled as a rabbit gold mine. We found it by mistake, actually, while we were looking for a lost dog. Determined to find and discipline that obstinate rascal, we trudged a mile or more down some abandoned railroad tracks, hollering and whistling, trying to get that hard-headed so-and-so to come back to us.

At a point where the rails crossed through a huge expanse of alders and cedars, we heard the lost dog open up on a rabbit. This caused the rest of the pack to drag us off the railroad bed into the alders, where we found so many well-packed rabbit trails that the beagles were able to run without breaking through the crust! Rabbit sign was everywhere and conditions were perfect. For the first time in years all four dogs were running separate rabbits, and the shooting was phenomenal. Rabbits were hopping all over the swamp, some chased by beagles, some just getting out of our way. We could hardly tell which was which and, not wanting to shoot strays, we had to wait till we could verify that Rabbit A was indeed being chased by Beagle A – or B, C or D.

Our anger quickly turned to joy as we filled our limits. We let the dogs run free for the rest of the day. We returned to that

same alder swamp every weekend that winter and every year since then, and we never fail to find a ridiculous number of rabbits there – and always beginning in February. By the way, we also gave that lost dog a ride home on the front seat!

One could say that deep snow and cold, plus the isolated nature of the spot was what made it attractive to those rangy snowshoe hares, but I have hunted rabbits in many Southern states and the Mid-West and have found similar situations in those places as well.

One of my favorite late-season spots is on a wildlife management area in Georgia where, by some miracle, there is not a single briar to be found and the woods are full of big, fat swamp rabbits. This was another February hotspot I found when my dogs vacated the power line clear-cut I wanted them to hunt in favor of a river's-edge peninsula that, to me, couldn't hold a rabbit if you hand carried it in there. As usual, my wise assessment was completely wrong, but at least I had sense enough to follow the dogs and let them do their job.

After I killed two giant-sized swamper in the first five minutes, I decided to let the dogs decide where we should hunt. We spent an entire afternoon in that nondescript thicket and I finally had to quit shooting because I had four over-sized cottontails in my vest and more than a mile to walk back to the truck. We hit that spot once or twice a week through the remainder of that season and never failed to take three or four rabbits home with us. Year after year it's the same thing – come February, the rabbits move in and there's nothing you can do to push them out.

I found the same thing in Ohio in a 100-acre CRP field that the farmer is managing more for deer and pheasants than for rabbits. By February interest in whitetails or birds has waned, so permission to run the dogs is usually granted. We do flush the occasional deer or ringneck that the dogs encounter while running a cottontail, but that's no big deal because that field is chock full of cottontails. The good news is the dogs can safely run all day and often we'll have several beagles on their own rabbits.

However, there is a down side to this particular spot. It is so thick with grass, weeds and brush that we can rarely see a rabbit to shoot at. There is only one bush-hogged path in the entire field and the cottontails are smart enough to turn back whenever they reach that opening. Every so often a rabbit will risk running across the path with (sometimes) fatal results, but the fun is all in hearing the dogs run while rabbits, deer and pheasants (plus the random coyote or two) do their best to avoid them.

One thing I've noticed at these heavily-populated late-season thickets is that they are usually very large and very thick. Some of those swamps and beaver flowages in the North meander for miles in the lower elevations, and rabbits tend to run perpendicular to the water flow, which can make it difficult to find a cut-off spot.

In the South, the highest numbers of rabbits are in the clear-cuts and brushy honeysuckle tangles, which is great for the dogs but not so hot for hunters trying to get a clean shot at a rabbit. There have been many occasions when I found myself standing 10 yards from another hunter and, when the rabbit came through between us; neither of us could get a look at him.

In fact, it's often tough to see the dogs as they go by!

In the Mid-West, the February rabbits tend to congregate in large fields where tall grass dominates. Generally referred to as "CRP fields," these fallow lands are common on just about every farm, and it makes sense that the rabbits would favor them once the crops are down and the woods are barren and snow-covered. I do some winter deer hunting in the region and often see cottontails hopping along the edges of the CRP fields – making me wish I'd brought my beagles with me!

These late-season love nests can be hunted by a lone dog and hunter, but expect the rabbits' circles to be much longer and wider than they were back in October. Snowshoe hares will often run the dogs right out of hearing and sometimes won't come back around for an hour or more. Standing where the chase began is a good way to pick him off on the first go-round, but if you miss that opportunity it's pot luck from then on. I remember one rangy snowshoe five of us started just after dawn that was still running at noon and no one had had a look at him. In fact, the chase went right out of the valley for most of the morning and we had no clue where the rabbit, or the beagles, had gone. The dogs finally lost him in an area where rabbit tracks peppered the snow, but we all agreed that the rabbit had earned his freedom.

I have noticed a few trends among late-season rabbits that can be helpful when deciding where to stand for a shot. What I look for is the bigger topographical picture, the lay of the land so to speak. When all the cover looks the same it's tough to decide where the rabbit may go next, but when I look at the topography I focus on the gullies, creek bottoms, hedgerows and fence lines that rabbits use as travel lanes when hard pressed by the dogs. Most rabbits will make the obligatory small circle at first, hoping to evade the dogs with a few rudimentary escape tactics, but when they realize that the beagles are still coming the rabbits try to put some serious ground between them.

I'll let the chase go through the first phase, where the rabbit is just toying with the dogs, but when I see that he's no longer interested in playing I pick a cut-off point along a brushy "highway" that gives the rabbit some room to roam. Of course, if a cottontail heads out the back door early, I pick a spot near that escape route because, most often, when he comes back around he'll use that same trail – at least once!

The trick in finding these late-season hotspots involves some research and careful consideration. Over the course of a long fall and winter it's easy to forget all of the places we've hunted, and as time goes on we all tend to continue hunting the areas that produced best for us last time and the time before that. Soon the list dwindles to a mere handful of familiar hotspots that, by late winter, often aren't quite so hot anymore. This is the time to revisit our list of options, back track to a few forgotten destinations and reconsider those spots that were too far, too thick or too difficult to reach back in October and November.

I'll admit that it's not particularly enjoyable to brave a bitter February wind while crossing a 100-acre hill-top cornfield to get to where we think the rabbits are, but one does what one must. It's quite a mental challenge to reach the top of a wind-swept hill where snow and dust are sifting over the top, knowing that our destination is another 30 minutes beyond, dead into the wind. But, if that's where the rabbits are that is where we must go.

One such spot is about a mile down an abandoned railroad bed with high, brushy banks on both sides. Walking down the tracks on a February morning is a brutal experience because the wind whistles down between those banks like a freight train. On one trip I backed all the way down the tracks because the wind was so strong, but when we arrived at our secret spot the place was full of rabbits. The high bank of the railroad bed offered the rabbits some protection from the wind, and the dogs had a great time running them back and forth along the lee side of the berm. The tracks provided a perfect place to ambush cottontails crossing back and forth over the bed, and we shot several of them as they ran along the brushy banks just 10 yards away. The only down side of this hunt is the walk back to the truck – the afternoon wind pattern switches around and is right in our faces as we head out at the end of the day.

One commonality among late-season hotspots is that they are invariably a little bigger and a little farther away from the road than the average small briar patch. A few minutes of study over a topographic map will reveal plenty of lowland swamps and wetlands where good rabbit hunting may be found this month. Between the old places you already know and the new places you discover there should be more than enough cover to hunt through the remainder of the season, maybe with a few left over to keep in mind for next year.

A little preparation goes a long way when you may be spending the day a mile or more from the truck. Be sure you have all of your necessary dog gear (collars, leashes and electronic gear) before you leave the truck. Remember to fill your pockets with ammunition and check to be sure you have your gloves, hat and license with you. Make sure you bring your shotgun, too – believe me, it happens!

Perhaps the most important item is water. Many of the lakes, ponds and creeks in the coldest areas may be frozen in February, and the dogs will need a source of water every couple of hours. I usually carry a dozen shotgun shells and save the rest of my vest and pocket space for bottles of water, just in case. When I get to our hunting area I'll stash a few bottles here and there behind a stump or in a clump of grass so I don't have to carry it all day.

Hunting conditions can be a little dicey at this time of year but as long as the rabbits continue to participate in their ancient February mating rituals the ambitious hunter should be amply rewarded. My records over the last 50 years show that I've never been skunked in February, which is more a testament to the rabbits' determination to perpetuate the species than any great hunting skill on my part. All I ever do is drop the tailgate and turn them loose – what happens next is beyond my control. I do know that February running can be challenging but very productive if you find the right spot.

As Charley Lehman, my long-departed mentor, told me back in the 1960s: "You can't win if you don't play." Turns out that advice can be applied to just about everything in life, but he was talking about late-season rabbit hunting, and decades later his words still ring true. Put the dogs out and see what happens – you may learn something new and have a good time doing it, too!