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CHAPTER FIVE

TERRIERS

Terriers have always been widely used by gamekeepers especially hill keepers. No dog in the keeper's kennel is loved more than his terrier. He may be a poultry killer, fight other dogs in the kennels or even, sometimes disastrously, his employer's dogs, chew the head-rest of the Land Rover when left unattended, chase sheep, roll in a long-dead fox just before you are about to put him in the Land Rover or disappear down a rabbit hole for 24 hours at six o'clock just as you were about to go home but the keeper always forgives him because he delivers the goods that matter: he kills foxes and cannot be replaced by other methods.

There was a period between the Second World War and to the 1980s when most keepers used Cymag gas to control foxes. This gas

was widely used to control rabbits and rats and had been tested by the appropriate authorities on these species and found to be a humane method of control. However, it had not, apparently, been tested on foxes and when this was discovered in the 1980s, it was banned for the control of foxes. Cymag gas is now illegal to use in any control of any species and is unobtainable.

Before the ban many keepers used a terrier, Spaniel or Lurcher to mark a hole. This involved the dog who was experienced in finding occupied fox earths standing, usually with ears cocked, to show his handler that the earth contained a fox. The good handler would recognise the signals that the dog was sending out. The dog was then usually tied up and the holes gassed. It was a very effective way of controlling foxes on hill ground with little cover, but when Cymag was banned, most keepers were quite happy, as the gas was unpleasant to use and transport – and there was always the danger that the dog would be affected by the fumes if he broke away to investigate the earth later.

Terriers and Foxes on the Hill

The ban meant that a good terrier became essential to the fox controller and many more keepers kept one or more, even a small pack where there was enough work. A hill keeper with a large beat (more than 5,000 acres) will know the location of every fox earth on that beat and will check every hole at least once a month or even fortnightly. This is virtually all year round but certain times of the year are more likely to find a fox at home. Ground where there is little cover in the way of woods is the most likely place to find a fox because in fine weather the fox will be lying out in the sun in preference to going into a damp earth. Sunny banks of bracken are also favoured. So the keeper only tends to check the holes when the weather is extreme: cold, biting wind, heavy rain, deep frost, snow.

During a heatwave foxes on the hill tops can be found sheltering in peat runners. A peat runner is formed when a burn has gone underground making a tunnel in peaty ground. In the summer these usually dry up, especially in really hot weather. The fox finds these tunnels cool and free from the insects which can annoy him on the low ground. The keeper when checking these runners usually takes a fellow keeper or companions with him as they can be over 50 yards in length. When the terrier is entered, the fox may flush out of shot if only one gun is present. The keeper who knows his ground will know the dens that can be checked single-handed and will tend to check these alone.

The weapon of choice nowadays is the multi shot semi-automatic shotgun: this is not sport and a miss and a fox escaping is not a scenario to be countenanced. The reader who is not a keeper may think that this is a tremendous lot of trouble to account for a fox but the fox is the keeper's number one enemy. A healthy population of foxes inevitably means a shortage of game and a shortage of game means a keeper looking for another job, which may be difficult to find as his failure will not have gone unnoticed. It is that simple.

The grouse keeper will check earths more regularly as soon as the shooting season for grouse is over (the beginning of December). Foxes at this time are often on the move as the breeding season approaches and vixens explore new territories, looking for an area unoccupied by other foxes with a good food supply and little disturbance. A grouse moor fits the bill perfectly so there is a never-ending supply of new 'recruits' to colonise the moor and take advantage of the bounty that it offers. From the beginning of December to the end of January the earths are checked regularly then left until the end of March to the middle of April. The reason for this is to leave the breeding earths quiet so that any vixen on the moor will have her cubs on the moor and be more easily accounted for.

When checking an earth, it must be approached into the wind. Perfect quiet is the order of the day. This can be difficult if there are two or three guns but it is essential if the fox is to bolt. The terrier should be let loose 20-30 yards from the hole and left to check it himself while the guns as silently as possible should take up their vantage points to get the best chance of a shot. The terrier should be a bolter ie. one terrier which does not fight with the fox but harasses him until he vacates his den. Obviously if he has heard human footsteps, voices or a gun being cocked, he will be less inclined to show himself and may decide to try his luck with the terrier. Some terriers are better than others at shifting foxes and some breeds tend to be better than others.

When the fox bolts he usually makes no noise and accelerates to top speed in a very short distance. It is a very exhilarating experience and often requires a very difficult shot. Occasionally in 'foxy' country there can be more than one fox at home: this is especially likely during the mating season which runs from approximately mid-January to mid-February although there is evidence that some vixens are coming into season earlier and later than this. The majority of cubs are born in the month of March and most keepers check known dens from the middle of April. In the highlands some keepers are charged with controlling foxes over huge areas of hill and mountain. This often takes them a

month to six weeks to accomplish, then it is time to check them again. This type of country is usually very difficult to access, just the type of country that a vixen chooses to have her cubs. It is not difficult to see how the keeper becomes attached to his terrier in these circumstances. Usually he will take a vehicle as far into the hills as he can, then hike up into some remote glen where he knows of a den which is regularly used and therefore likely to be occupied. This far north and this high up, the weather in April can be anything from pleasantly warm to sub-zero with snow on the ground and the keeper and his small dog feel as though they are both united with a single purpose and when they fulfil that purpose the bond between them becomes stronger every time it happens.

Farther south the hill keeper views the arrival of the curlew to his domain as a sign that spring has arrived. The beautiful song of the curlew calling from every corner of the moor is a sure sign that all is well in his world but should the keeper hear the curlew's alarm call, which once heard is never forgotten, he knows that he has an unwelcome guest, almost certainly with a family to support and his terrier is called into action again. Such scenarios occur right through the summer months.

My Search for a Vixen

I remember when I was a young keeper in my first job getting a phone call from young Ronald, the head keeper Ronnie's son. The shepherd on a neighbouring farm had just seen cubs at an inaccessible den well out on the hill. I had to make a decision. Ronnie and his assistant Allen were on a fox call at the other end of the estate (which was 30,000 acres in size), there were no mobile phones, no quad bikes and no four wheel drives. It was about six o'clock at night and I was sure that if the vixen had been in the area when the shepherd passed, she would move the cubs to a large expanse of forestry nearby. I decided to take young Ronald and his rather rough border terrier 'Brush' as far as we could in my van then walk the rest of the way to the den which I had never visited before but the shepherd described its location to me.

Eventually we found the fox's earth. It was in a perfect location facing south and shielded by the hills all around. The holes were quite large and were surrounded by the remains of pheasants, hares, grouse, blackcock, lambs and curlews. We released Brush who was quite large even for a Border. The question was: could he work? The answer came quickly as in no time large cubs were bolting like champagne corks

and Ronald and I had shot six cubs. Brush emerged then re-entered other holes to check that he had not left any behind. The sun was now starting to set behind the hills and we headed back to the vehicle then negotiated the rutted track, trying to balance on the verge and the raised centre to avoid bottoming the sump, until we found ourselves back at the farm. The shepherd met us and we showed him the six tails of the cubs. He told us that Ronnie had been on the phone and added: 'He's not happy' so we set off for Ronnie's house and the expected rocket.

The reason for Ronnie's displeasure was that I had not got the vixen, a cardinal sin in his book. His view was that I should have taken the rifle and waited for the vixen to appear. I had realised this but after weighing everything up I had decided that getting the cubs was the priority. I would point out that there were no hand-held lights in those days and I had little time to make up my mind or gather other equipment up before it would have been too late to go to the den. As I drove home I pondered whether my actions had been worth the consequences. You bet they were! Foxes in that area were very numerous at that time and there was plenty of cover and an abundant food supply. There was also a never-ending supply of foxes to replenish the ones we killed but the measures worked. Most estates nowadays would marvel at the number of black game, grouse, curlew, peewits, and wild pheasants we had on what at first sight seemed inhospitable country.

Some Terrier Anecdotes

Ronnie had a little Border bitch called 'Chico' who was an excellent keeper's dog. She never seemed to be bitten by a fox and could be called out of a hole easily. She worked as a gundog and was an excellent deer tracker. Allen his assistant had a selection of terriers: Jack Russells and Border Lakeland crosses who were as game as they come. I decided that a Border terrier was the one for me, so I made enquiries which alerted me to the possibility of a bitch at the Otterhound kennels at Lockerbie. I was told that the huntsman Billy Scott had a good bitch but he was not happy with her and he would possibly sell to the right person.

I phoned Billy who told me to come down to the kennels and look at the bitch. This I did, travelling down the pleasant road one evening to the kennels. I drew up outside a large, impressive house with a steep roof: the huge wrought iron gates to the kennels, which were attached to the house, came straight from the Hammer House of Horrors. As I stepped out of the van it was by now dark and a full moon was starting to appear above the large stone kennels and it shone