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Decoying Coyotes with Dogs¹

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Abstract.--Decoy dogs, used in conjunction with a predator call or coyote howl, are an effective technique to reduce coyote depredation on domestic sheep ranges during the spring and summer when coyotes are highly territorial and aggressively protect their young and den area. Trained decoy dogs, when chased by coyotes, return to their owner bringing the coyotes into shooting range. The type of dogs used successfully for this work is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Professionals in Animal Damage Control (ADC) have used dogs (Canis familiaris) as a technique in controlling predation by coyotes (Canis latrans) for many years. Denning dogs are used in locating coyote dens (Wade 1978) and aid in destroying the pups; greyhounds hunt by sight, pursue, capture, and kill the coyote (Wade 1973), and hounds are used similar to greyhounds, but trail by scent (Duffey 1964, Hawthorne 1980). The use of decoy dogs in ADC operations started in the mid to late 1960's. Decoy dogs lure coyotes by provoking the defensive and den guarding behavior of coyotes by intruding in their territory and natal area.

Food and energy demands of adult coyotes steadily increase from estrus to weaning. Subsequently predation to livestock, particularly sheep and goats,

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⁴Gary J. Rowley and DeLyle Rowley are credited as forerunners instrumental in development, employment, and use of decoy dogs in operational ADC programs.

also increases. Established territories and den sites are highly defended and protected (Kleiman and Brady 1978). Intruding canid species, particularly domestic dogs, are aggressively attacked by coyotes in an effort to provide protection to their young. This display of defensive behavior is effectively used as a strategy to control depredating coyotes.

The use of decoy dogs in reducing coyote predation has many applications and can be successfully used in any habitat and terrain. It is one of the most effective and efficient means of selective coyote damage control during the late spring and summer grazing seasons.

APPLICATION

Adult coyotes normally hunt at night and early morning and return mid-morning to the den to feed their offspring (Young and Jackson 1951). Vocalization of adult coyotes is easily instigated at this time. Imitating a coyote howl by a person's voice or using a predator call encourages a response from the coyote(s). This response can be used for triangulation in estimating the coyote(s) location.

Approach the den site cautiously and select a "stand" location. It is very important to select a place where the wind is blowing directly from the den to the stand. This favorable wind direction provides an olfactory advantage to the decoy dogs in detecting the scent of the coyote(s) and a disadvantage to the

coyote(s) in detecting the shooter sitting on the stand. The use of 1 decoy dog has been successful, but 2 provide the best results. However, the use of 3 or more dogs appears to reduce success. It is speculated that the presence of 3 or more dogs may increase intimidation and decrease aggression in the coyote(s).

Once the stand is selected and the shooter is in position, reproduce a coyote howl. Usually, the coyote(s) respond with a return howl and come to investigate the sound. Immediately after hearing the coyote(s) howl, the decoy dogs respond and sprint toward the approaching coyote(s). After visually locating the coyote(s), the decoy dogs will begin to chase it. Coyote(s) will normally respond by barking as a warning to the encroaching decoy dogs. This barking also acts as a stimulus and encourages other coyotes near the area to investigate the disturbance. In some cases, the coyote(s) will become frightened when confronting the decoy dogs and retreat. However, frequently the retreating coyote(s) stops, holds its ground, reverses the dominance, and begins to chase the dogs. It is common for the decoy dogs and coyote(s) to exchange dominance during the chase. During this time, the shooter should be patient, restrict movement, and remain out of sight. With increased experience, decoy dogs learn not to chase coyote(s) for long distances before returning.

When the decoy dogs begin to return to the stand the coyote(s) will pursue, and their aggression and attacks intensify. Fights occasionally occur if the coyote(s) captures the dog. In very aggressive attacks, coyote(s) appear to be less cautious as full attention is given to the decoy dogs. This provides the shooter an advantage. When using decoy dogs from the start of denning season to late summer when the pups disperse, it is not unusual for more than 2 adult coyotes to appear and join in the chase. The authors have witnessed up to 6 adult coyotes attacking the decoy dogs in one location.

Most of the time when the decoy dogs return to the stand the coyote(s) will be following. Very often the decoy dogs will successfully lure the coyote(s) within 10 yards of the stand. The use of a shotgun accompanied with a rifle is recommended. Often the coyotes concentration on the decoy dog is so great that they pay no attention to the shooting. If escape occurs, encourage

the decoy dogs to pursue and in conjunction reproduce a coyote howl. Occasionally the fleeing coyote(s) will stop, show aggression and resume chasing the decoy dogs and provide the shooter with another attempt.

Infrequently, the coyote(s) refuse to evoke a chase and will only respond to the decoy dogs for a short distance from the den site. A possible explanation for this behavior is that the coyote(s) are at their extreme distance from the den site. If this is suspected, select a closer stand, approach cautiously and prevent the coyote(s) from visually detecting the shooter.

BREEDS OF DOGS

No one breed of dog is specifically used in developing decoy dogs. It is the dog's individual characteristics, qualities and training which dictates the success. Usually medium sized dogs (25-50 pounds) with medium build are best suited. Color or physical appearance of dogs has little or no relative effect on coyotes. Short-haired dogs are preferred in summer due to the heat factor.

The more common breeds of dogs the authors have successfully used are: McNabb shepherds, Border collies, Australian shepherds, Norwegian elkhounds, and wirehaired terriers. A few of the hound breeds and large terriers have developed into excellent decoy dogs, but the majority tend to be too aggressive.

TRAINING

Preferred attributes and traits required of a dog for consideration as a prospective decoy dog are few. Proper training and experience are imperative in developing a successful dog. Basic characteristics needed in selecting a candidate dog are: (a) one that likes to hunt, (b) one that will free range within 400 to 500 yards, and (c) one that possesses a small amount of aggressiveness. Start the training by familiarizing the dog with a trapped or snared coyote to encourage assertiveness and build confidence. Have the dog accompany the trainer when calling and denning and allow the dog to free range. Accustom the dog with rifle and shotgun fire but avoid muzzleblast by restricting the shooting when the dog is very close

or directly in front. Once a dog becomes "gun shy", it is useless.

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