

Aaron Dockum, a railroad employee, has permission to hunt tracks, private property normally off-limits to the public.



# RABBIT LEGENDS



## A TALE OF TWO HUNTERS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

*COTTONTAIL RABBITS ARE IOWA'S MOST ABUNDANT GAME, BUT RABBIT HUNTERS ARE RARE. THESE IOWANS THRILL TO THE CHALLENGES OF HUNTING RABBITS...*

### TALE #1: *The Ancient Falconer Returns*

As if calling the meeting to order, Aaron Dockum raises his hiking staff and vigorously strikes the top of a large brush pile. When nothing happens, Dockum whacks it again. He then rattles the staff among the loosely piled branches as if stirring a kettle.

The tactic works. The brush pile's hidden occupant loses its nerve and erupts in a blurry explosion of snow and fur. The dislodged cottontail escapes with two foot bounds toward the next thick cover.

The drama is interrupted by the sharp sound of bells. Dockum's gaze quickly shifts skyward. "There she goes," he cries. "It looks good. She's on it."

Dockum live-trapped this aerial member of the hunting party — an immature, female red-tailed hawk — earlier that fall. Now mid-winter, the bond was forged. The

magnificent wild raptor was the loyal hunting companion of a man, Dockum, a licensed falconer. Their relationship strengthened with daily forays in search of rabbits.

As winter continued, the cottontails had become tougher and faster while the raptor gained strength and cunning. By New Year's, the first season red-tail proved herself a reliable game hawk.

But even for a powerful bird, bagging a healthy rabbit is challenging. In Iowa's outdoors, predator and prey are evenly matched. There are no guarantees for either contestant, and the pendulum of life and death swings both ways.

Today's victory belongs to the rabbit. With the hawk just inches from seizing its prey, the cottontail makes it to the safety of an underground burrow. The red-tail pulls



pursuing cottontails across northern Iowa habitats. Living in the frozen north, weather is often a limiting factor. Winter storms and high winds can put hunting on hold — sometimes for days on end. But when storms pass, winter hawking heats up.

“Our best hunts are two or three days after a big snowfall,” says Dockum. “By then, rabbits are pretty tired of being holed up underground and are out and active. We look in raspberry patches, brushpiles and prairie grass — anything with canopy. Our usual tactic is (for me) to beat the brush while the red-tail moves from treetop to treetop watching for any rabbits that I flush. Once something moves, the chase is on.

“This is our first season together, and it’s been exciting to watch the hawk get better and better. She’s a smart bird. Once we’ve hunted the same place a couple of times, she seems to know exactly where the rabbits are going to pop out and where she should be to get the best shots,” he adds.

“Her intelligence and memory are amazing. One day, she caught a big cottontail in some brambles. It was early,

## **“SHE’S GOT IT,” Dockum hollers.**

up, flying to the branches of a nearby cottonwood. Bells sound again as the hawk shakes to realign her plumage.

“That’s OK. It was a good effort,” says Dockum.

“With all these tracks, we’ll find more,” he predicts.

Trudging through knee-deep snow drifts, Dockum explains his love of the ancient sport. “I’m a hunter, and have always enjoyed being outdoors. With guns, we used to shoot all the rabbits we wanted. Sometimes our group would get as many as 20 in an outing. After awhile that sort of lost its appeal and I was looking for something better; a way to move on. I’d been interested in falconry for a long time but it seemed so out of reach. Last year, I decided to try for my license.”

Falconry is challenging. “There’s a lot involved in keeping a wild hawk in good flying condition. Unlike a shotgun, you don’t just wipe it down and put it away when you’re done. Falconry takes a lot of commitment to your bird.”

But falconry benefits easily outweigh the work. The opportunity to have a wild hawk as your hunting partner is its own reward. The chance for close observation as a raptor chases and catches game is something few people are privileged to enjoy.

“Before it was all about numbers, but now things are different,” says Dockum. “Today, catching one or two rabbits is a great hunt. The hawk feeds herself, and there’s more than enough left over for me.”

Dockum works for the Iowa Chicago & Eastern Railroad and spends late afternoons and most days-off

and I decided to keep hunting and try for a double. I fed her a small tidbit (as a reward), slipped the rabbit behind my back and into the bag, and then moved on.”

Returning days later, the hawk flew to the same spot in the brambles, searching in the snow. Dockum, confused at first, then remembered the cottontail. “She thought we’d left that rabbit there and this time she wasn’t going to leave without it,” he says, laughing.

Again, bells ring. Looking up, Dockum spots the red-tail in hot pursuit, pumping hard for its target. Although thick vegetation prevents seeing the intended target, the chase concludes with the hawk executing a “wing over,” crashing into the cover. From 50 yards, Dockum hears a “thud” as the hawk pins its quarry to the ground.

“She’s got it,” Dockum hollers.

Scrambling to the scene, there was no rabbit, but something better — a proud young hawk enthusiastically plucking a very plump, dead rooster pheasant. The rooster had been sprinting, undetected, far in advance.

Dockum is speechless. Successfully bagging a pheasant with a trained red-tail is the ultimate hawking trophy. “All year, I’ve had this goal of catching one wild pheasant with my red-tail,” says Dockum. “We’ve had some near misses, but this is the first one she’s bagged. It’s now been a perfect season.”

Watching this awe inspiring picture of predator and prey, giant snowflakes began to gently drift from the darkening sky. The season was perfect.



## FALCONRY

Falconry is among the oldest hunting forms, around for at least 4,000 years, first on the Mongolian steppes and later across the middle-east, falconry came to Europe as crusaders returned home in the 1500s. European falconry, once an obsession, abruptly ended with the invention of gunpowder and firearms. Only 50 lowans, including Aaron Dockum, above, are licensed falconers.

BELOW: Bob Benedict, and his beagle, Penny, rest during a winter rabbit hunt. A dedicated cottontail aficionado, Benedict conducts many outings during January and February when more popular hunting seasons are closed. "It's a great time of year," he says. "Even on big public hunting areas, I usually have the place to myself."

## TALE #2: Fenceline Symphony; The Sound of the Hound Cannot Be Denied



Even before he could carry a shotgun, Bob Benedict followed an unlikely duo consisting of a golden retriever and one loud-mouthed beagle.

Whenever the beagle flushed a rabbit, the retriever would try to run it down. "The Golden had longer legs, and if the snow was deep, it might get lucky and catch something. Even then, I knew there was something that made me want to follow those dogs — especially the beagle."

That early beagle attraction is what cottontail enthusiasts call the "sound of the hound."

Once heard, the sweet baying of beagles warms the heart. Regardless of whether you refer to the winter

symphony as a bawl, bark, howl or chop, one fact is undeniable. No sweeter sound ever reaches the frozen ear of a rabbit hunter.

By age 11, Benedict had his first shotgun — an H&R single shot .410. He promptly bagged a plump cottontail. Four decades later, Benedict still follows beagles. He has but one dog at the moment — a six season veteran named Penny.

Compared to other working dogs, such as high-octane pointers, laid-back beagles are easy on the nerves. Their pleasant dispositions are contagious. You'll rarely, if ever, see a beagle owner melt down as his dog runs amuck in the middle of the next section.

"It's not complicated, and the way I hunt is pretty standard," says Benedict, who first finds good habitat then lets the dog run. "A good beagle already knows that it needs to head toward the brush and it doesn't take long before it finds the rabbit."

Once flushed, it takes but seconds to put a sizeable distance between hound and rabbit. That's when the excitement, fun and music begin. Like most good beagle men, Benedict relies on sound to determine how and where the hunt is going.

"If I stand in one spot and listen, Penny will let me know what's going on," he says, calling one of her sounds a 'frustration bawl.' "It's a two-toned howl that almost ends in a growl. That tells me she's getting scent, but hasn't



exactly figured out what the rabbit is doing or which way it went. She's still trying to sort things out. A steady, excited bawl is good. It means she's getting plenty of scent and the rabbit is moving down the trail. Sometimes a rabbit will stop and wait to see what the hound is doing. When the dog gets close and jumps it she'll change to an excited, choppy bark. That tells me she's sighted the rabbit. If a trail gets cold, you'll just hear short bawls that are farther and farther apart." The fresher the scent, the louder and more frequent the baying.

Radio telemetry studies recently confirmed what rabbit hunters have known for generations. Cottontails conduct their daily activities confined to a well-defined home range and are reluctant to leave. Pursued by experienced hounds, cottontails travel in a circle or loop which bring them back to where they were first jumped. The shape of that loop is determined by the shape of the habitat.

Some rabbit-loaded locales are not good for dogs, says Benedict. "The brush may be too thick or the cover may be too close to standing corn or cattails. Once rabbits get into this kind of cover they're usually home free. There's lots of barking for the dogs, but no good shots for the hunter."

He likes hunting brushy fence rows or lines of habitat. "I try to find an obvious gap in the cover — a place where circling rabbits are likely to cross. On a good area, eight or 10 rabbits may end up using the same crossing. Once I decide where to be, I take a stand and get quiet. After

## 7 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT RABBITS

### **Dung Dining: Recycling the Pellet du Jour**

Enriched with vitamins released by beneficial bacteria in the intestine, rabbits eat the soft, moist greenish waste pellets of partially digested food. Called coprophagy, this animal behavior allows maximum nutrient intake. The second passing provides the familiar dry, brown pellets.

### **Lucky Rabbits Have a Birthday**

Survive 12 months against predation, disease and traffic, and a young rabbit has beaten the odds as annual mortality rates are 85 percent. Less than 1 percent of rabbits reach age two. Prolific breeding helps the species survive against owls, foxes, bobcats, skunks, badgers, weasels, snakes, hawks, coyotes and others.

### **Lagomorphs, not Rodents**

Similar to incisors found in squirrels, beavers and other rodents, rabbit teeth constantly grow. But rabbits have two sets of upper incisors, one behind the other, placing them in a different order from rodents, called lagomorpha.

### **Breed to Succeed**

Producing up to 30 young a year, a rabbit born in the spring is sexually mature by summer, giving birth a month after mating. These offspring could yield 5 million rabbits in five years if mortality wasn't a factor.

### **Elmer Fudd Has Buck Fever**

Once a popular pastime, Iowa hunters harvested 2 million rabbits annually throughout the 1960s. A tenth of that amount are taken today despite surging cottontail populations. Today's deer and turkey populations, uncommon in the 1960s, compete for hunter attention.

### **Differing by a Hare**

Iowa jackrabbits are actually hares, differing from rabbits by having furry young born with eyes open, versus naked and blind baby cottontails.

### **Jack Rabbits**

Replaced by corn and soybean crops, loss of pasture, hay and grasses have hurt jackrabbits, which are native to short and mid-grass plains. Weighing up to 10 pounds, jackrabbits can hit 35 miles per hour. Capable of bounding 20 feet, these high-jumping hares can hop 5 feet above ground. Like its northern cousin, the snowshoe hare, jackrabbits wear white winter coats.

that, I just wait for Penny to bring the rabbits to me."

It's an effective tactic. Utilizing a good stand, a hunter can bag three or four rabbits — sometimes up to a half dozen — without moving.

Like most hounds, beagles have a pack mentality and hunt well with others. During one outing, Benedict and his brother used three beagles. Providing nonstop music, the hounds helped the brothers bag 15 cottontails before they even lost sight of their parked pickup truck.

Benedict eats more than his share of fresh cottontail, most often treating the tender, white meat like a chicken breast. Regular menu items include fried rabbit, crock pot rabbit and rabbit Alfredo along with 25 pounds of breakfast sausage ground last month.

"Rabbits are extremely mild," notes Benedict. "The taste is so good that most people will eat them whether they like wild game or not." 🐰