



HUNTING AT THE HILL

Story and Photos
by
Phil Audibert

Two years ago, when The Hill last hosted the Keswick hounds, several inches of snow covered the territory, making scenting difficult at best.

Field Master and owner of The Hill, Larry Levy welcomes Keswick and Rappahannock foxhunters to his 620-acre game preserve.



It was nigh unto perfect foxhunting weather: temps in the mid to upper 30s, a cruel moisture-laden wind from the south, and snow in the forecast—absolutely miserable. But looking at the smiles on the faces in the field you wouldn't know it; beaming grins from ear to ear. To the less sanguine, it had been, ho hum, just another routine day chasing Charlie at The Hill—a

minimum of five foxes pursued, with several others observed beating a stealthy retreat.

Larry Levy has the world's most thankless task. He is a first flight Field Master, basically a mounted traffic cop who must keep his exuberant charges in check while simultaneously showing them a splendid time and not getting lost in the bargain. Little chance of that, for on this

particular day he is also host; Larry owns the 620-plus acre Culpeper County estate known as The Hill. Legendary Keswick huntsman, Tony Gammell and hounds have been invited to try their luck in his hood.

Larry is visibly nervous, and his tension is flowing straight out of him and into the steeplechaser he is riding this morning. It jigs. It jogs. It spins and half

rears. It mouths the bit. "Let's get this show on the road," it seems to be saying.

But there are formalities first. This is Rappahannock's territory. With hunt cap doffed in respect, Rappahannock's Master of Foxhounds, the equally legendary Oliver Brown welcomes the assembled riders from the two hunts. Keswick's Joint Master of Foxhounds, Andy Lynn echoes Oliver's words of welcome, and the nod is given to Mr. Gammell.

With his signature low-to-high abrupt slide on the hunting horn, Tony and hounds move off, and the hunt is on. And there, up in the front third of the pack, lopes a grizzled hound named War Cry. At eleven years old, he is still going strong—but that's another story.

It is not long before they jump a brace, and the hounds split, resulting in Tony's loosing a few choice Irish expletives. "Oh no," groans Larry Levy. "We're not having fun, yet." But the split hounds are reunited, and the hunt carries on for a good three and a half more hours, with "run after run after run." It is at a check that Larry starts hearing a few muffled whines and complaints. "I'm cold," says one. "I'm hungry," says another. "I have to pee," says a third.

And then they jump what can only be described as *The Fox*.

Larry Levy tells the story of this chase in a run-on sentence that would make William Faulkner proud. "We flew; we went all the way to the Griffinsburg Road and around and he went up to Boxley's farm and through their horses and ponies and dogs and everything was running and back through the Baldwin's cows, and there are some real nice folks who had just built a house and we went right through their yard and they went 'Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!' they had put a coop right in their yard, and we went back through Yates and this old place called the Ram Woods which used to have an ol' timey ram pump in it and it furnished water for everything all around here—and then all the way back to where they



Larry Levy leads the field over one of his own coops at The Hill two years ago. Fully one fifth of the estate's land area has been set aside to grow wildlife-supporting cover.

Keswick Huntsman, Tony Gammell confers with staff before setting out at The Hill, visible in the background. Built in 1900 by John Griffin Durant, The Hill has hosted foxhunts for at least a half-century.



jumped him, which is all the way at the back of the farm." Winded, Larry pauses to catch his breath.

He remembers looking back after this long run fully expecting that no one had been able to keep up with his steeplechaser. But there they all were, with those now-famous ear-to-ear grins—nary a complaint

to be heard. "I know everybody was completely worn out," he shudders. And little wonder. This same fox crossed the Hazel River into the Opus Dei-owned estate, Longlea, and ran through Riverbend Estates, a 1,100-acre subdivision; they even chased the fox through the Communications Corporation of America's

parking lot!

One of Larry's lads retraced the route in a Gator and clocked it at 6.25 miles—twice. The hounds ran for 50 minutes straight. At one point the fox “almost ran up my pants leg,” says Jake Carle, ex- MFH at Keswick who now follows on foot with a camera. He was so taken by surprise that all he caught on film was a rust-colored blur.

Jake knows about The Hill. Ten years ago, at a performance trial hosted here, he saw a fox run and hide underneath a rock ledge overlooking the Hazel River. The same exact thing happened earlier this season when The Hill hosted the performance trial again. “I’ll be daggonned if he didn’t do the same thing,” says Larry Levy incredulously. “Ran that fox all the way across the river, came back and went in up under the same rock ledge.” Was it the same fox? Not likely; 10 years is a long time. “It must have been his offspring,” winks Larry.

Anyway, there is a reason foxhunting is so good at The Hill. It’s called CREP. It stands for Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and here’s a shocker:

It’s a government program that actually works. The government pays you rent to fence out streams, let natural cover grow up, and plant trees. At The Hill, 135 acres, one fifth of the land area, is in this program; 28,000 trees have been planted. Every swale and drainage has been allowed to grow up in soil-holding, water-filtering cover. “It wouldn’t bother me a bit to get down and drink right out of that creek,” says Larry as he tours the farm in a four wheeler.

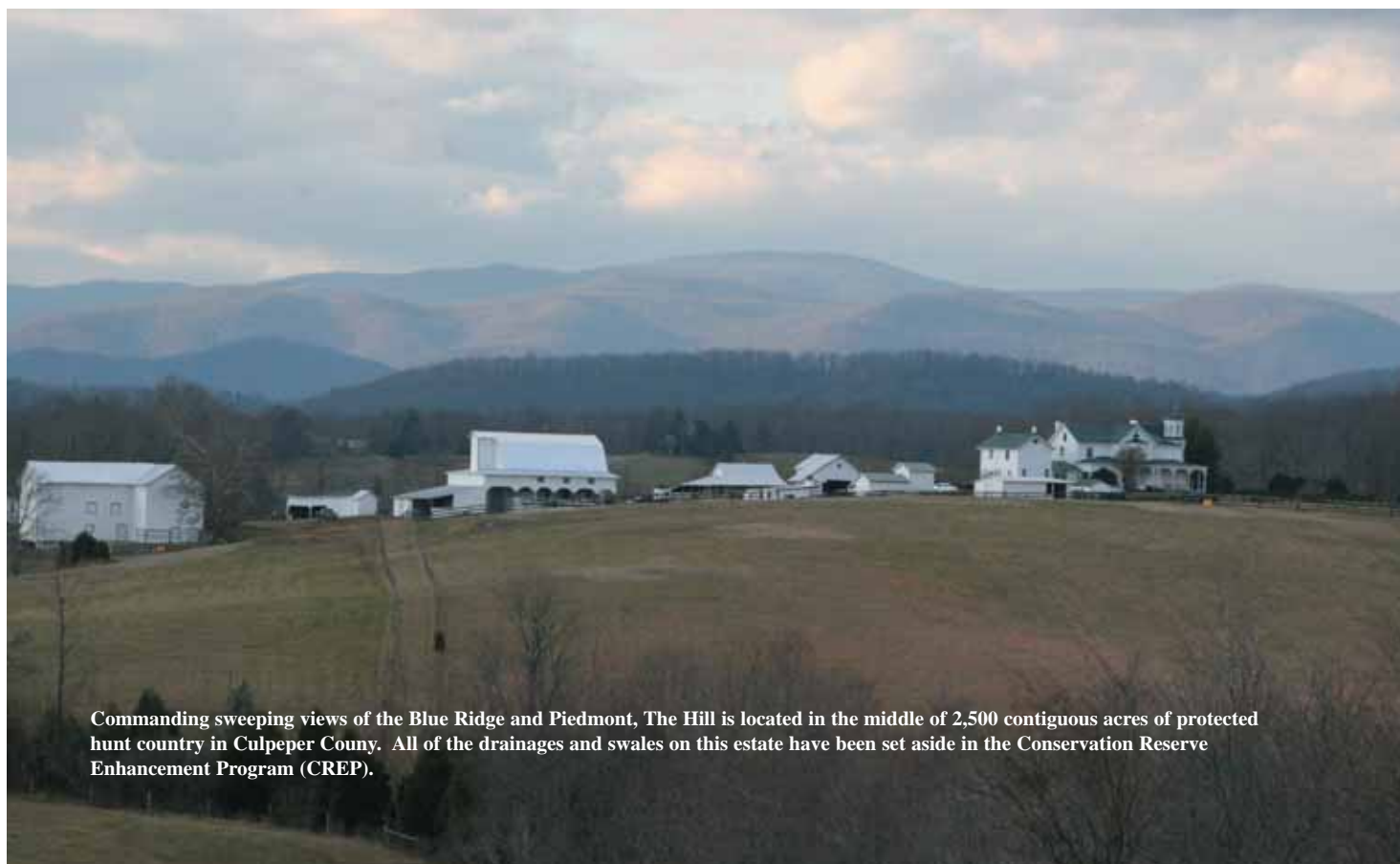
“We’ve got game galore around here,” he continues excitedly. A rabbit hunter friend of his bagged 30 in a day. And with all those rabbits, here come the foxes—dozens of them. And it’s not just fox, “The quail are coming back. I know where three or four coveys are right now.” Not too long ago, Larry was going down his driveway, and “we saw squirrel, rabbit, wild turkey, fox, quail, two dove, a deer; and when we got down to the little yellow barn, a mama bear and her cub walked across the driveway.” That’s all in *one trip!* They have also spotted grouse, bobcat and raccoon. This memorable event has been immortalized by Keswick artist and wood

carver, Lea Gildea who made a walking cane depicting this parade of critters spiraling down the shaft.

It didn’t used to be that way. When Larry bought The Hill from Oliver Durant in 1986, there were no foxes here. There was nothing. Most of the wildlife had been poached and trapped out. “That was when furs were valuable. There wasn’t anything here.” Larry set about to change that. He even admits that 20 years ago he actually bought foxes and released them on the property. “But the main thing we did was feed them.” He had a friend with a connection to a chicken house over in the valley. When layers grew barren they were brought to The Hill to live out their last, albeit brief, days. “We put out about a thousand over a three-year period, and then we never had a problem; the foxes just came.”

They also put out chicken necks laced with Ivormectin. “I haven’t had any mange in 10 years.” And even to this day, “when the Baldwins (neighbors) have a cow die, we push it into the woods or somewhere where it’s not going in the water and they (the foxes) eat it.”

There’s another reason why the



Commanding sweeping views of the Blue Ridge and Piedmont, The Hill is located in the middle of 2,500 contiguous acres of protected hunt country in Culpeper County. All of the drainages and swales on this estate have been set aside in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).



The first and second flights of the Keswick and Rappahannock hunts pause at a rare check in the action. Four hours and five foxes later, this same field was treated to a chase that lasted 50 minutes over 12+ miles.

foxhunting is so good at The Hill. It's called tradition and history. Built in 1900 by John Griffin Durant, The Hill is a Victorian home that looks across the Hazel River to another historic hilltop structure, Longlea. Resembling a castle, Longlea was the home of Michael Marsh, who at age 14 became the youngest Joint Master of Foxhounds in Virginia before or since. Larry Levy hauls out a fixture card from 1953. Marsh's fellow master of the Hazelmere pack was none other than his friend and neighbor Oliver Durant of The Hill. The pack was kenneled here. On the fireplace mantel is a picture of the young Michael Marsh in foxhunt garb, standing by this very same mantel where the photo now sits.

"I don't know how I ended up here," says Larry Levy, "although I've always loved this place since I was a little kid." He has found evidence that in the old days, carbide was manufactured in a sturdy stone outbuilding (at a respectable distance from the main house in case it blew up) and piped into the house for gas light, just like the old fashioned miner's lamps. "They made a lot of moonshine here too," winks Larry. "They were big into peach brandy."

Back in those days, they hunted 5,000 contiguous acres. Today, residential development has cut that number in half. But still, 2,500 acres of foxhunting territory, barely an hour and 20 minutes from the White House, is quite remarkable. And it seems it will stay that way. The Hill, which commands magnificent views of the Blue Ridge and the craggy face of Old Rag Mountain, has been put into conservation easement along with several other neighboring properties. As many as three hunts have called The Hill home. Currently it is used occasionally by Snickersville (Middleburg area) and regularly by Rappahannock.

Larry Levy remembers when the Bull Run hounds were temporarily kenneled here. They would exercise the hounds in the summer. "We'd take them out here every evening, and there were foxes across the river that would be sitting there waiting for us. I think they really enjoyed it as much as we did. He'd blow the horn and you'd see the foxes' heads pop up. And that's the truth."

As we ride around the farm retracing the steps of that recent glorious chase, Larry says he received not one angry phone

call despite the fact that fox, hounds, staff and field had run pell-mell through everything from cattle herds to residential back yards. "Everyone was tickled," he says gratefully, realizing he is blessed to have such sympathetic neighbors. He points to a coop and says the fox ran right over it—must have, because the hounds ran right over the coop too. "We were flying through here and, I mean flying." He points excitedly. "We came up through those woods and over that coop and around through there, I mean to tell you we were *rollin'* outta here."

Ho-hum, just another routine day hunting at The Hill.

Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs ever since he was 16. Recently, he won several first place awards from the Virginia Press Association. His wife Susie is a skilled photographer in her own right. Together they divide their time between dogs, horses, vintage cars, land preservation, gourmet cooking, and following the Keswick foxhunt on foot.