

THE CURIOUS SOUTHERN CUSTOM OF COON HUNTING

By Wayne Hogan

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There are lots of customs in the South that, to your average Yankee, virtually defy explaining. Eating grits is one. Another's coon hunting. I see my job here being to make a brief but hopefully successful effort to shed a little light on the latter but explaining grits I've found, for me, only a born-again southerner, nigh onto impossible. For those who may not be all that familiar with the coon-hunting custom, I'll start off by saying a few words about coons and then take up the coon hunter's part.

Raccoons (*procyon lotor*): The coon is a medium-sized animal. Its pelage is long and thick, with a bushy ringed tail, slender smile on a white face with black mask, prominent and rather pointed ears, and has five toes on each foot. The coon's skull is broad and rounded, its molars broad and tubulate, its palate extends back of the last molar for some 18 mm, with a bullae that's slightly flattened and that extends laterally in a tubular auditory meatus. On average, coons weigh between 6.8 and 8.2 kg and are about 812mm in length. The coon is a creature of the night.

Coon Hunters (*carnivor pickupus*) Coon hunters come in four styles: tall or short; broad or narrow. All live for the midnight baying of coonhounds hot on the scent of a coon loping unawares across an open field under a full November moon. But whoa-first let's talk a bit about how coon hunters come to be coon hunters, talk a bit about their growing-up years, their adult lives as, probably, members of somebody's family. It's been pretty well scientifically demonstrated by now that coon hunters are born, not made. That they come into the world compatible with up to as many as 16 or 17 varieties of Blue Tick Hound, can spot the booming moan of a "Sarge" versus a "Géraldine" more'n a mile away; can easily tell when a hound's glad just to be out romping through somebody else's property in the middle of the night or when it's seriously onto something; can tell when the lead hound's really taking charge or is just goofing off waiting for the curiously quiet ride back home to a late snack after a rousing outing. It's these sorts of things that separate the real coon hunters from chaff.

Just about the time a coon hunter realizes he (yes, all coon hunters are males; not one female has ever been heard of) knows most of what's to know about coon dogs, he starts practicing how to drive a three-quarter-ton pickup truck through the dead of night without using headlights, how to park barely off a country road as near as possible to a peace-and-quiet loving, early-to-bed family's house so that when the hounds that ride in screened wooden boxes in the back of the pickup are set loose to sniff out the unsuspecting coon, they make all the noise it's possible for up to a dozen or more coon hounds to make when they pick up the trail they've been brought for.

It's easy to underemphasize the coon hunter's affinity for pickup trucks. The plain fact is that the pickup is no less than an evolutionary appendage to the coon hunter hisownself. It goes with him everywhere-to town on Saturdays, to church on Sundays, to the county fair in September. And wherever the coon hunter goes in his pickup truck with its tailgate

almost always open, he also goes with the screened boxes in the back. Born to drive the pickup his coon hounds were born to ride in. It's in the genes.

Coon hunters usually go coon hunting in twos or threes. Some say they do this just to be efficient users of the space available in the cab of the pickup. Others say they do it for protection from renegade coons that might slip back past an inept pack of hounds, aiming to confront their opposite number head on, as it were. And some say coon hunters band together trying to have at least a twosome for bridge as they wile away the night hours that wear into the early fringes of morning.

Through there's apt to be a little truth in these and other rumors, I personally know for a fact that the main reason most coon hunters like company on their coon-hunting outings is to provide for greater didactic vigor in the incisive discussions they give the latest works of literature appearing in *The New York Times Book Review*, which they frequently bring with them on their hunting expeditions.

Coon hunting, you see is not an activity designed merely to keep idle dogs off the streets; it's also quality time for the hunters too.

As opposed to weekend golfers and tennis buffs, there hasn't been any really clear-cut fashion to develop with coon hunters' clothes. They mostly wear now what they've always whether coon hunting or mowing the lawn – big overalls (now and then with a tiny coon hound embroidered onto the bib's upper left-hand corner), steel-toed work boots that lace up past mid-calf, a long sleeved flannel shirt with Ralston Purina Chow-type checks, and a baseball-style cap with JOHN Deere etched in big green letters across the front just above the visor. Oh...and a homemade walking stick. It's used to scratch an "X" in the sand to let any hunting buddies, who might have followed them in a second pickup, know they'd arrived at a certain place first. If somehow they'd all been separated driving through the midnight dark without their headlights on and the second pickup had arrived first, same thing, they'd have made the "X" with their stick. To outsiders this may not sound like much, but to coon hunters, well, it's just one of those things that to fully appreciate, you'd have to be there.

Not unlike warfare or breathing, there's a certain rhythm to coon hunting. The hounds' bays enlarge or fade as, Doppler-like, they first move closer to, then farther from the coon hunters parked in their pickup trucks playing bridge or dissecting *The New York Times Book Review* or praying they won't have to beat back the aggressive advances of a humorless coon. And the coon hunters themselves ebb and flow, driving their pickup from spot to spot along the night-enveloped county road, gathering the hounds into their screened-in boxes at one place and then stopping and releasing them again a hundred or so yards later. These starts and stops continue all night until, as if by some genetic signal, the hounds are called in and all head home. A certain rhythm.

I've never yet talked to a coon hunter who said he'd actually taken a coon home as the result of his nightingale efforts. All the time spent sitting around in the cab of a pickup truck, parked beside a country road in the middle of the night playing bridge or debating

some hoity-toity Yankees' review of some hot-shot's new novel with two or three other guys in their own bib overalls and JOHN DEERE caps, what do they get from it, one might wonder. Well, the most objective answer I've been able to come up with is: not much. It's just something coon hunters do.

'Scuse me, but I've gotta go now. My dogs are starting' to sound like they're maybe onto something.'

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