

# HUNTING THE HUNTER

Fox controller and long-range expert, Mark Ripley, is out after Charlie on the Sussex Downs. His vast experience is key in helping him to outsmart this sneaky predator

**T**he sudden flash of ginger caught my eye as I glassed the distant hillside. A press of the range button on my Leica Geovid binoculars clearly displayed the red illuminated reading, although I never actually bothered to read the range; it was just a habit reflex, and I already knew it was around 800 yards across with the wind too gusty to even consider a shot from where I sat. I'd already made up my mind what I would do if I spotted a fox on that bank.

It had been light for a good half hour and the sun was just beginning to peer over the horizon, meaning it would still most likely be another couple of hours

before the first keen Sunday morning runners, cyclists and dog walkers would make it this far down the valley. My mind focused on quickly covering the distance to the end of the bowl where this fox was headed.

With the fox out of sight among the trees and bushes along the base of the bowl I could cover ground quickly without being seen, although it also meant that I wouldn't know exactly where the fox was when I reached my intended vantage point.

Edging quickly yet cautiously around the fence line towards the hidden inner bowl of the valley, I was soon on the edge looking across to the bank where

I'd first seen my quarry. I was now only around 250 yards from where I'd first clocked it, with the bushes and thick nettles within the bowl only 150 yards in front.

From here, I could see the mouth of the bowl, the opposite bank should the fox double back up the hill, and the fields to either side should the fox come out of the dip into the valley. Practically, the only place I couldn't see was at my feet. I knew the fox was still somewhere in the bowl or I would have seen it out in the open by now. This is where, without realising it, experience gave me a helping hand.

Looking to the opposite bank and its

**BELOW: Mark glasses the distant hillside in search of crows and foxes**



PICTURE: DOM HOLTAM



PICTURE: DAVID MASON



**“THE FOX WAS MAKING ITS WAY PURPOSEFULLY ACROSS THE BANK, HEADING TOWARDS A LARGE GORSE PATCH”**



**ABOVE: Mark finds a vantage point where he can see across the valley to the far bank**

line of trees and bushes I knew that the area was popular with the rabbits, and from my first sighting of the fox I could tell it was actively hunting and this would be where it was headed.

The wind was blowing up the valley into the bowl and I knew the fox would want to be hunting into the wind. I could see a few rabbits peacefully grazing at the end of the tree line, and I was confident that as yet the fox hadn't hunted this stretch of the cover.

I quickly deployed the atlas bipod on my custom .260 Rem and set myself up for a shot from my position, knowing that if I pushed further on into the bottom of the bowl I was likely to bump the fox and send it bounding for the nearest patch of cover.

Just then a magpie voiced up from the branch of a hawthorn on the tree

line and I noticed a pair of rabbits further up suddenly sit up alert on their hind legs, sniffing the air and peering around. A second later, and everything came together. The rabbits bolted across the bank with a healthy-looking fox closely pursuing the nearest. The rabbit was too quick, leaving the fox standing while it quickly looked around for any other unseen victims within striking distance.

At this point, the young vixen was well within my own striking distance as she skulked back towards the cover of an overhanging tree. I watched her turn broadside to me through the Nightforce scope, before squeezing the trigger. With a thump she lay flat, stiffened, and stretched out briefly before she was still and the once peaceful dawn was replaced by the noise of crows

voicing their disapproval.

It was still early so I decided to stay put, as this was often a good spot for foxes and an area that causes us some serious problems in the lambing season. The 'us' I refer to is me and my shooting mate, Gary. We each have permissions in this valley separated by nothing more than a strand of barbed wire. During the lambing season (and a fair bit of the year as it goes!) we will often pair up to cover both our permissions together in a bid to reduce the considerable fox population in the area.

By now, the sun had well and truly risen and its warm glow on the grassy banks around me helped show up the coats of the rabbits, feeding on the edges of the patches of gorse dotted around the hillsides. The wind was also dropping to a fairly constant 5-6mph as I sat enjoying the sun and glassing the valley sides.

As the morning wore on I resigned myself to the fact that it was getting a little late to see another fox and that I might just have a few shots at some long-range rabbits or crows, before calling it a day.

I picked out a crow on the opposite bank that looked like it would make for a fitting target at around 400 yards. It's always good to take a few crows off these hills, again due to the menace they can cause during lambing when they are capable of mobbing and killing a newly born lamb.

As I double-checked the range I suddenly spotted a bigger and better target on the edge of my field of view



**LEFT: The young fox turns broadside to allow for a safe shot**

PICTURES: DOM HOLTAM

– another fox was making its way purposefully across the bank above the crow, heading towards a large gorse patch.

I instinctively ranged the edge of the gorse at 492 yards, before typing the range into my Kestrel wind meter with its ballistic software.

Quickly dialling in the corrected MOA for elevation and a 5mph crosswind onto my scope turrets, I wound the magnification up to its maximum 22x before getting comfy behind the rifle.

I adjusted the rear bag to line up on the edge of the gorse, closest to the fence line down which this fox was travelling. I checked the scope's bubble level and flicked forward the safety catch, just as the fox appeared in the end of my scope.

I had only seconds before the fox reached the sanctuary of the cover, or disappeared behind it and over the hill. As luck would have it, the fox caught the scent of something in the grass at the foot of a fence post and stopped to sniff. This was likely to be my one and only chance. I focused on the fine cross hair as it lay steady on the fox's shoulder and slipped into 'the zone'...

I couldn't hear the birdsong anymore

or feel the sharp edge of the piece of chalk digging into my ribs; at that moment it's like the world holds its breath with me, before the crack of the rifle breaks the trance.

I knew as soon as I fired that the fox was dead – seeing it crumple in the scope, a puff of mist from the dew hanging in its coat, just confirmed it.

After what seemed like an age, the thump sound of a solid impact resounded back across the valley to me as I ejected the spent and still smoking case.

I covered the fallen fox in the scope with a fresh round already chambered, but it wasn't necessary – despite the range and wind deflection, the hand-loaded Hornady ELD-X bullet had found its mark, making all the hours of load development and ballistics truing worthwhile.

With such open hillside on this ground that I take care of – and very little cover – I am often required to make shots that can be out to some extreme ranges if the wind conditions allow, and I have tailored both my

equipment and shooting style to maximise such opportunities.

However, the vast majority of my foxing is undertaken at night using night vision and thermal, although it often pays to be out in the early morning or late evening to catch the odd one out in daylight too.

Another technique we use to good effect is bolting foxes from cover with terriers, and shooting with shotguns. This can be particularly effective during the winter months when foxes pair up, as the earths can often hold several dog foxes when there's a vixen in residence. This is where an FAC-rated shotgun can be a great asset – you don't want to be fumbling for another cartridge as another fox bursts from cover!

This is a good opportunity to get fox numbers down prior to the lambing season as more foxes in the earths and less foliage around makes for easier shooting.

In next month's article I'll be covering some of the latest night vision equipment and electronic calls from Scott Country, and putting them to the test on some of the local foxes after dark. [RS](#)

If you want to check out Mark's YouTube channel, search for '260rips'. There are around 100 videos to choose from.

**BELOW: With very little cover, long-range shots are often required**

