

The Caretakers

"It is no secret that we have shot at Cavit Buyukmihci, threatened him, and tried to burn him off his land."

by Louis Mascolo

About 300 yards north of my parents' house was a forbidden wilderness. Its border was marked by a line of scrub oak trees, but it could have been the Berlin Wall. The Booga-boogas lived there. It wasn't our world. We were the De-

Felices, Lombardis, Monfardinis, Pustizis—farmers and hunters who tilled the land, planted crops, and stalked the woods for game. The Booga-boogas? We never knew where they came from. We knew only that they ran a wildlife preserve—300 acres straddling Gloucester, Atlantic, and Cumberland counties, with thousands of deer, fox, squirrels, and rabbits. And we couldn't hunt any of them. We knew what to do with wild animals: chase them out of the underbrush and shoot them. It wasn't a question of our survival. It was a way of life, and "polenta" and rabbit wasn't a bad meal.

Yet I never hunted or explored the forbidden wilderness as a child, and only recently did I discover that the fearsome Booga-boogas are Hope and Cavit Buyukmihci (Boo-yook-MUTCH-a), that the strange land they came from is Turkey, and that the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge they created in our midst is much more than swamps, ponds, and hidden prey.

When the Buyukmihcis settled on the periphery of our world some eighteen years ago, they were unaware of the resistance their presence would provoke. It is no secret that we have shot at Cavit Buyukmihci, threatened him, and tried to burn him off his land.

"It was seven o'clock in the morning," says Cavit, recalling one incident. "Nobody

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was around in the woods, and he [the hunter] claimed that I was patrolling on my own land and scaring the deer away so that he couldn't shoot them. He was so enraged that he said, 'I am going to kill you,' and he aimed his gun at me. I said, 'Wait a minute now. Let me talk to you a minute. . . . You and I are the only ones in this wilderness right now, and if you kill me probably nobody will know. This is fine. But how are you going to live with your conscience? Because, you see, I don't carry any guns. I don't carry anything, and you are on my land.' Finally, he realized that it wasn't the right thing to do. He lowered his gun and said, 'I'm sorry that I caused you a problem,' and he went away."

But threats and buckshot—there have been real shootings and mysterious fires on the Buyukmihcis' land—have only sharpened the couple's will to stay. Their commitment is all the more surprising in light of the humble, and almost accidental, beginnings of the preserve. Cavit met Hope, daughter of a naturalist and woodsman of upstate New York, while he was studying engineering at Cornell on a government scholarship. The couple married in 1946 and moved to Turkey, but the lack of even the most basic comforts proved too much for Hope, and after five years they returned to the United States. They made their first home in New Jersey in a trailer loaned to them by a friend. It had no electricity and no hot water, and Hope, who had children to care for, would heat water over a campfire. Eventually, guided by a local farmer, the couple found a farm house near Vineland about five miles from the present Refuge. From that house they watched as bulldozers methodically ate away the neighboring land.

"We could see the bulldozers moving in every direction," Hope remembers. "We would see a beautiful swamp or someplace that we thought was lovely, with birds and

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The Refuge has a varied terrain: swamps, forests, and fields.

animals, and pretty soon it was all bulldozed out and a bunch of houses took its place." The full force of this doorstep-destruction and disappearance of the wilds hit them when their 13-year-old son asked them what a bluebird was.

The Buyukmihcis started the Refuge, which was to anger us and frustrate us, in 1961 with the modest purchase of forty acres located at the tip of the Pine Barrens between Buena and Newfield. "They told me they were going to build a house on the grounds,"

says Armando Pioppi, the man who sold the Buyukmihcis their first patch of wilderness. "If I had known they were going to start a refuge and be such a problem, I would never have done it," Pioppi says. A hunter who has several expensive dogs, Pioppi knows firsthand that the Buyukmihcis are vigilant preservationists. Just last year when Pioppi's son crossed into the Refuge to retrieve their hunting dogs, the Buyukmihcis had him arrested. Although the judge threw the case out

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of court, hard feelings remain.

But forty acres was only the beginning. Four years later, the Buyukmihcis created Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, a nonprofit corporation, which according to its bylaws must preserve the land. Under this protective apron, the couple bought more land, until

today the Refuge includes some 300 acres of wilderness that harbors every animal, bird, insect, and tree indigenous to South Jersey, save the porcupine, the bear, and the wildcat. Even the nearly extinct tree frog is in residence there.

Partly by choice and partly by necessity, the Buyukmihcis have trod the preservation path alone, financing the Refuge from

"If I had known they were going to start a refuge, I would never have sold the Buyukmihcis this land."

Cavit's earnings as a metallurgic engineer, Hope's writings (she is the author of two books, *Hour of the Beaver* and *Unexpected Treasure*, and many newspaper and magazine articles), the remortgaging of their



The Buyukmihcis keep a close watch on the 300-acre preserve.

property, and a few donations. They refuse to apply for or accept any government grants to operate the Refuge: "Too many strings attached," says Hope. Nor do they seek the aid of organizations that would seem to be their natural allies. They go it alone because philosophically they stand apart from most other environmentalists and government

agencies as much as they do from the hunters and farmers who surround them. Neither Hope nor Cavit can find room for organizations that in any way promote or condone the killing, hunting, or trapping of animals. Tinged with some or all of these attitudinal impurities, apparently, are nearly all the generally accepted champions of wildlife:

the state Division of Fish and Game, the National Wildlife Federation, the American Humane Association, the Sierra Club, and even the Audubon Society. Fearing the opening of the Refuge to hunters and trappers of other groups, the Buyukmihcis protect, fund, and maintain the Refuge by themselves and with the help of volunteers. Cavit and Hope serve as guides to the Refuge, too; all that is required to enlist them is a telephone reservation.

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The Refuge takes its name from the road that passes by the preserve: Unexpected Road. Cavit, who at 55 still speaks with a peculiarly Middle-Eastern accent, insists that the name derives from the unexpected and beautiful view of the property afforded by a little hill. Hope's theory is a little less romantic: someone didn't expect the local government to approve the road, she believes, and when it did, the name just stuck. But whatever the origin the name is fitting, for inside the Ref-

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uge, sights, sounds, and even the quality of time surprise.

For those who accept the Refuge on its own terms, the wilderness acts as a brake on time. Life slows down here, and for once animals are allowed their proper place. Deer, opossums, raccoons, muskrats, rabbits, red and gray and flying squirrels, skunks, shrews, moles and voles, red and gray fox, weasels, and field mice burrow, nest, dig, and build their homes throughout the preserve. Quail, pheasant, Canadian and snow geese, heron, and innumerable songbirds take advantage of the varied terrain, abundant food, and more than 300 birdhouses to feed and nest. Beavers, Hope's special province, dam waters, breed, and play in Unexpected Pond.

But there is more to this wildlife management than simply letting nature take its course. Some species of plants and animals need encouragement, in the form of food and shelter, in order to survive even in the protected woods and swamps of the Refuge. The Buyukmihcis have taken care to plant wild rice for the ducks and to cultivate an orchard of poplar trees for the beavers. They have built a narrow boardwalk of two two-by-ten planks across the marshy boundaries of the

pond, so that they can examine the flora and keep an eye on the beavers. (The beavers usually build a new lodge every year.) In the oak forest, which lies some distance from the pond, Hope has neatly cordoned off a rare arbutus plant, a member of the heath family, in the hopes that her intervention will insulate it from fatal intrusions.

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Outside the Refuge, Hope and Cavit are also watchful. Realizing that their views may set them outside the mainstream of the environmental movement, they have both organized special interest groups that oppose trapping as much as they do. Cavit chairs the New Jersey Congress of Animals, which lobbies for the protection of wildlife. At present the group is fighting for passage of Bill A-1293, which would outlaw the use of the leg-hold trap, a contraption that Cavit contends brutally kills animals. One form of the trap consists of a bar that, when shoved under the animal's neck, prevents it from gnawing off its limbs

"After many years, Hope has succeeded in luring the naturally wary beavers which inhabit Unexpected Pond to feed from her hand."

to escape, while at the same time slowly killing it. "It sometimes takes the animal hours to die," says Cavit. Trappers, naturally, view the leg-hold trap differently. Jim Furlong, president of the South Jersey Fur Takers, a group 1,500 members strong, maintains that the leg-hold trap is nowhere near as cruel as Cavit portrays it and that trappers check the traps at least every twenty-four hours, as mandated by law. Unconvinced, Cavit presses for the bill.

Hope's outreach work concerns beavers—their habits, habitats, and need for protection. In 1970, she founded The Beaver Defenders, a group that now numbers about 400 dues-paying members. The Defenders circulate educational material on the animals and keep beavers before the public by distributing pins (one of which Cavit always wears pinned to his hat), bumper stickers, and other items extolling the animal's virtues. Unexpected Pond, with its own well-established beaver population, serves as an ongoing laboratory for Hope's writing and research. For herself, an added dividend is that, after many years, she has even succeeded in luring the naturally wary animals to feed from her hand.

Both beyond the Refuge and at home, the

Buyukmihcis' crusade seems fueled by a deep-seated belief that the world is somehow out of kilter with the underlying harmony of nature. Once strong churchgoers—Cavit was raised as an orthodox Muslim and Hope as a strict Seventh Day Adventist—both have abandoned organized religion, preferring instead to put their beliefs into practice in other ways. Their fast-held views touch on everything from diet—they frown on our carnivorous habits—to education. "The educational system is geared to the tradition that animals are meant to be used," says Hope. "Even religious teaching stresses that. . . . Man is the prime creation of God and everything else is made for man's use."

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They are aware, of course, that their belief in the sacredness of life—all life—makes coexistence with their neighbors almost impossible. "Prior to our purchase of this land, this was a hunter's haven," Cavit tells me, unaware that I grew up playing with the sons of hunters who trapped and poached on his land. "When we came and posted the place and started to patrol, it apparently made quite a bit of hardship on them. As soon as we put signs up, the next morning they would be gone, torn, shot up. We, of course, put them up again. . . . Gradually, they learned we were determined to stay here."

Signs of the uneasy truce between hunter and preservationist abound on the Refuge. A waist-high barbed wire fence borders one area of the preserve. And more than 400 signs are posted around its perimeter. "I put the wire up because they ignore the signs," says Cavit, apologetically. "They always tell you they didn't see them."

There is, perhaps, no more telling sign of the friction created by the two opposite ways of life when they rub against each other than the graveyard of mailboxes outside the Buyukmihcis' home. As the visible symbol of permanence, the Buyukmihcis' mailbox has become a fixed target of outrage. Five of the boxes, battered and vandalized, lie on the ground near the house. "I took to planting them in cement," says Cavit, shaking his head in disgust. "But it did no good."

As I leave the Refuge, I want to tell the Buyukmihcis who I am—that my relatives and friends are some of the very people they are fighting—but I don't have the courage. It is enough now that I am on their side. As I reach the end of the long gravel drive, I glance quickly at the new mailbox. Someone has shot it full of holes.