

# Defiling an Enchanted Place

By Hope S. Buyukmihci

I heard the hounds as they bayed and thrashed through the brush in a small patch of woods separated from our property by a dirt road. A cottontail rabbit ran out into the road before me. He stopped once to glance back, then came toward me, rose on his hind legs, seeming to entreat me before he crept in among the sheltering underbrush on our land.

Just then a man with a gun stepped out of the woods across the road. "You seen a rabbit?" he called to me. I did not answer.

Some years ago, my husband Cavit and I bought 300 acres and posted it as a private wildlife refuge. We wanted our children to grow up in natural surroundings, and I needed a place where I could study nature, take photographs and write about animals.

Our land is peopled with fascinating creatures: raccoons and possums; chipmunks and squirrels; beavers and muskrats; foxes, rabbits and deer. Marsh birds nest along the edges of the pond and a host of other birds inhabit the woods and fields.

One June day as I walked along the edge of the woods a bobwhite quail whir-

red from almost under my feet and sailed away. Looking down to a clump of dry grass where the bird had been hidden, I bent to part the grass when a second quail burst forth, her wing brushing my hand. I could see 12 white eggs in a sheltered nest, and at the entrance the worn spot where the father had stood guard.

Another day, a mother quail darted from weeds at the edge of my garden and raced across the rows, her small feet stirring dust. At a little distance she turned toward me and began to flop about, uttering heartbroken cries. As I stepped in among the weeds, another quail erupted right at my feet and madly hurled himself along the ground. He also threw himself down as though mortally wounded, and cried piteously.

These parents were trying desperately to lure me away. Just then dry "leaves" came to life as a dozen or so young quail sped off in all directions, peeping excitedly.

The refuge for me is a place of enchantment. The sight of a rabbit feeding beside the path or sitting up to wash his face on a dew-drenched morning fills me with joy.

One mother rabbit built her nest in my small kitchen garden. One day she left hurriedly, without covering her young with leaves and grass. I saw four

babies, ears folded down, eyes not yet open, nestled in soft fur from their mother's breast. I left, and an hour later came back to find the nest once more looking like a drift of windswept leaves. The mother had returned to cover her brood.

Such are my daily adventures among the wild friends I love. I take photographs, write stories, and feel enriched by a thousand blessings.

But then comes hunting season. For five months of the year our refuge is besieged by hordes of hunters who tear down our signs and sometimes threaten to kill us. They hang rabbit entrails upon our fence, stuff butchered fawns in our mailbox, leave headless quail beside our driveway ... all because we do not allow hunting within our borders. Outside, they kill every animal they can find.

Autumn scene: Two boys dressed in red walked along the woods' edge, guns ready. Through trees where I crouched unseen, the late sun cast pink light across the fields. A shot rang out, so close it made me jump. (I have often been sprinkled with shotgun pellets.)

"I got one!" The boys paced back and forth, trying to locate the wounded quail. "Here's feathers" they closed in. "Don't let it get away!" They chased the crippled bird through weeds next to the refuge.

One boy caught the quail and held her. The other said, "Get your knife." They did something with the knife, but the quail still struggled. Laughter. "The damn bitch!"

"Put it in your coat." A pause. "Hey, it's still alive in your bag." More laughter.

In the peaceful evening light, the young hunters walked on, guns ready.

During deer season, my husband and I don blaze orange to openly patrol our acres, from before dawn until after dark. Through the years many sympathetic persons have volunteered to help, and with us have faced hunters' guns and stood their ground before threats. They have watched gangs surround woods adjoining the refuge, heard the wild calls of "Yo, buck!" as men drive deer toward

ambush. They have seen the bleeding forms loaded into jeeps to be displayed as trophies before the local sportsmens club. And with us, they have wept.

In spite of everything, I believe things will change. Human slavery has been abolished and women are making headway in their uphill struggle. Now a crusade is underway to recognize the rights of other beings in the chain of life.

Meanwhile, every year I'll defend my little corner of New Jersey to maintain a haven for the wild animals I love.

HOPE SAWYER BUYUKMIHCI and her husband have their wildlife refuge in southern New Jersey.

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red; my first syndicated article. How was the meeting in Louisiana? Best wishes, Love, Mom