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Most hunters look
forward to
fresh snow

during the gun deer season to get a better look at the deer, to see fresh tracks, and to help them find their trophy after the shot. In December, a snowstorm has a certain appeal as it gives us that "Christmassy" feeling. But after that the nostalgia quickly wears off. That is, of course, unless you're a bunny hunter.

All fall long, I anticipate that first big snowstorm of the new year, because I know I'll be out there looking for fresh bunny tracks. Last year when it started snowing, I sent my sister a text: "Do you see what I see? Some snow, some snow, some snow for tracking a bunny!" We met early the next morning, but not too early. That's another beauty of bunny hunting – you don't have to wake up early to be successful.

We circled the swamp behind the house, trying to pick up a fresh track, but there were none to be found. Thinking they were lying low, we took turns making some noise around different brush piles. It didn't take long before a good-sized cottontail came cruising out of the overturned roots and stumps, but it darted into another brush pile before we could get a shot. The chase was on!

Christy set up for a shot and I climbed on the brush pile. Out it ran, and three shots burst out. Three shots and he kept running. Here we go again. I drew the short straw, meaning that I was the first "beagle" quickly got on the rabbit's track, hoping to sneak up for a shot or to push the bunny to my sister, who was set up where we kicked up the rabbit in the first place.

The fresh snow made for easy trailing, but it tried every trick to lose me – backtracking, going into thick brush and out the same way, and then making a huge circle around the swamp. I never did catch up to that cottontail, but eventually, it started back toward my sister. As I got closer, the bunny zigged when he was supposed to zag and went through an opening, away from where my sister was posting. She took the trail and quickly chased him to the blowdown that didn't have any exit tracks. I posted as she kicked around the edges. Out it shot. Bang, and again it kept on running across the opening to the spot where we had started.

One lap down. Another lap going.

We started thinking about the previous year's attempt at the same location. Last year's attempt at a bunny wasn't too productive. Four hours, several laps around the swamp, a couple of missed shots (including one when Christy almost got ran over by a bunny), and the rabbit remained somewhere safely nestled in the woods. I say somewhere, because we had no clue where he was any more after overlapping bunny tracks combined with our tracks to create mass confusion for human trackers who don't have the nose of a real beagle.

My sister continued on the

trail after I blew the shot. I found a perfect ambush spot where the rabbit's figure-eight loop tended to cross. Christy disappeared into the woods and was gone for what seemed like an eternity. Pretty soon I saw her blaze orange hat and then a flash in front of me. The

bunny was about to run down the barrel of my gun, but it froze when it saw me about five yards away. This shot hit the mark, and we finally had the bunny that evaded us for so long that morning.

The bunny-tracking tradition all started when my cousin and

I were about 11 years old. We decided to spend a spring break in a screen house in Wisconsin. You're probably thinking that doesn't sound like the best idea, and you would be right. Let's just say it wasn't like Fort Lauderdale or Cancun. We woke up in the screen house

with the temperature hovering just under 32 degrees and a fresh inch of snow on the ground. We couldn't warm up, so we started walking. Armed with pellet guns, we set out to explore the 80 acres to which we had access. It wasn't too long before we saw a snowshoe hare track and decided to follow it. We quickly caught up to the "swamp ghost" in a blowdown. My cousin made a shot that would make a sharp shooter proud. We were hooked, and spent the rest of the day tracking and shooting four snowshoes.

It's amazing to see what bunnies try to do in order to evade the "two-legged beagle," and each lap gets harder as their tracks seem to be right on top of each other. But if you want to try something different this winter, check your local forecast. Wait for the next snowstorm and try to cut a bunny track. You'll have a great time exploring, you'll stay warm from tracking, and you'll beat the cabin fever that sets in during a long winter. Maybe you'll even get a bunny.

BETHEBEAGLE

FOR WINTER BUNNY HUNTING