

# LARCENY

in the henhouse



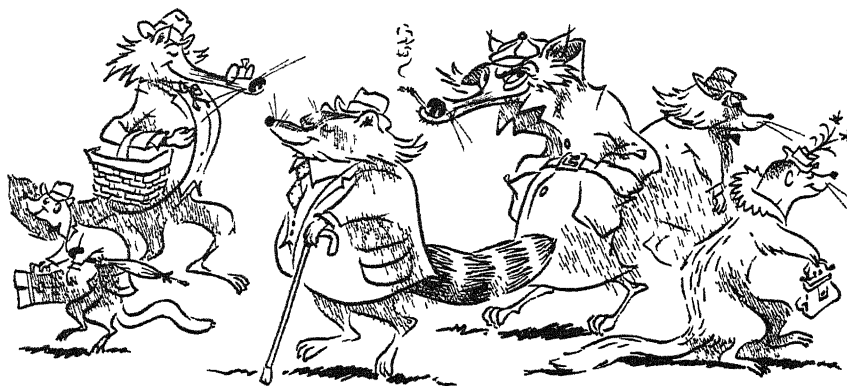
Agricultural Extension Service  
Ohio State University

# Larceny in the henhouse

By R. K. Davis\*

Fox, mink, weasel, raccoon, and other predators often are the culprits that commit larceny in the henhouse. Predators are like people, however—neither all good nor all bad.

They live by preying on other animals. When those animals or insects are destructive, the predators' work is beneficial. When predators turn to man's flocks, however, their destruction must be controlled. This bulletin is designed to help the poultryman prevent damage or, in case of damage, to identify the culprit and get him.



## Preventing Damage

The poultryman can prevent most predation losses. Locking the door before the hen is stolen makes good horse sense.

## Management

If he suspects predators are on the prowl, the poultryman should shut his birds in their houses from sundown until sunrise or later. Birds that roost on open range or that venture out on the range before sunrise invite trouble.

The poultryman should dispose of sick birds and dead ones so no animals—wild or domestic—can acquire a “taste” for poultry. Use poultry disposal pits for this purpose.

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## Building Construction

The flock owner should predator-proof his poultry house. This means closing all openings through which predators can enter. Hardware cloth, poultry netting, sheet metal, and concrete are predator-proofing materials. Open windows need a cover of half-inch mesh hardware cloth. The smallest openings in the siding and about the foundation also must be closed.

A weasel can slip through a hole only 1 inch in diameter. A mink may glide through a rectangular hole  $1\frac{1}{2}$  x 2 inches. If mink and weasel are not a menace, 1 x 2-inch mesh wire fabric or 1-inch chicken wire is adequate.

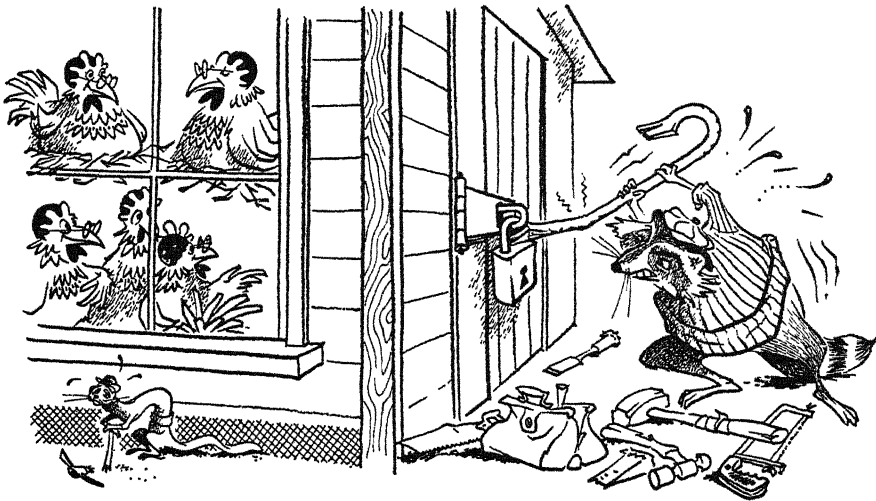
Raccoons find unusual ways to enter henhouses. A full-grown raccoon can pass through a 3 x  $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch opening under the eaves.

## Ratproofing

Ratproofing and rat control are "must" jobs for the poultryman. He can use the same materials for ratproofing as for predator proofing. Ratproofing, however, must take place inside the house as well as outside.

When building a poultry house, put foundation footers 2 feet deep. Eliminate double walls and bad floors. They are rat harbors.

Gas rat burrows with Cyanogas, use poisons containing Warfarin, and clean up trash. Trash piles or carelessly stored grain, lumber, and supplies, favor rats. Rats attract weasels which like chicken, too.



### **Range Protection**

Some folks tie their dog on the turkey range at night to keep predators away. A dog must be active if he is to succeed. Lanterns and floodlights on the range may help prevent predation. Turkey roosts should be 6 to 8 feet from the ground at the rear.

### **Fencing**

The flock owner can fence predators out of poultry pens by burying the bottom of the fence and stringing a charged wire at the top. Plowing a furrow against a turned-out strip of fence wire is the easiest way to bury it. Two-inch poultry mesh will turn the larger predators but openings smaller than 1 inch in diameter are necessary to turn weasels.

Poultrymen use a simple, 2-strand electric fence to repel some predators. The bottom wire should be 6 inches from the ground. Proper safety precautions for electric fencing should be followed.

### **Natural Controls**

We may lose poultry to predators because we have upset nature's balance. If predators find too little food, they take some of ours.

One sure way to balance harmful and useful wild animals is to balance the wildlife food and cover on farms. Local soil conservation districts offer assistance in balancing farm wildlife plans.

There are natural controls which any poultryman can use. Do not connect poultry housing or range to woods, streams, or other wildlife land by a strip of cover—a "travel lane"—such as a shrubby fencerow or bushy draw. Keep poultry from these lanes. Clear away any convenient perches for hawks or owls within 100 yards of the poultry range.

### **When Kills Occur**

If predators manage to slip through a poultryman's defenses, he must weigh the threat of future damage against the effort and expense of control. He must know what animal did the damage and how it did it so he can select the right control method.

### **Identifying the Culprit**

By noticing certain, easily recognized signs the poultryman can put the blame for a poultry kill where it belongs. The following key will help. Look on the bird for answers to the questions.

## How was the bird killed?

1. Teeth marks span back between wings?—see “FOX”
2. Was bird attacked about head and/or neck with:
  - a. Little or no damage—just a small injury on the neck? See “MINK” and “WEASEL”
  - b. Head attacked and/or pulled off, crop eaten, feathers cut off—not pulled out? See “RACCOON”
  - c. Neck, head, and body showing large talon marks, feathers pulled out? See “GREAT HORNED OWL”
3. No definite point of attack but:
  - a. Entrails eaten from rear? See “OPOSSUM”
  - b. Large teeth marks in center of the back, much destruction and mauling? See “DOGS” and “SKUNKS”

**Foxes**—Foxes work in the gray of dawn. They kill the bird by biting it over the back between the wings. They usually eat warm entrails and the breast. The fox may kill only one bird and carry it to its den. Common months for their poultry raids are from April to August. Large kills occur in June when a mother fox is teaching her young to hunt and kill.

**Mink and Weasel**—The mink and its vicious little cousin, the weasel, attack the bird on the side of the head or the neck. They usually leave only a small injury in the neck where they remove the blood. They may eat some of the head and leave teeth marks under the wings. Mink and weasel may kill large numbers at one time.

**Opossum**—The opossum usually is not an important poultry predator. When it does attack a fowl, it usually pulls out the entrails from the rear and eats them. It may eat other parts of the bird. Two or three birds are the maximum raid for one opossum. Opossums also steal eggs.

**Skunks**—Skunks do little damage to any poultry. A skunk will get sick chickens which roost on the ground outside the house. He is likely to attack and start eating anywhere on the chicken. The same methods control skunks and opossums.

**Rats**—In many cases, rats destroy more poultry than other animals. They do more than they are blamed for. They kill chicks or weaklings and drag them under cover if possible. The odor of decomposition may be the first sign of the kill.

**Raccoon**—A raccoon kills a bird by attacking the head, pulling it off, and eating into the crop.

**Dogs**—The work of dogs is marked by much destruction and mauling. Their heavy teeth marks also will differentiate their work from that of foxes. Dogs may enter the poultry range in daylight.

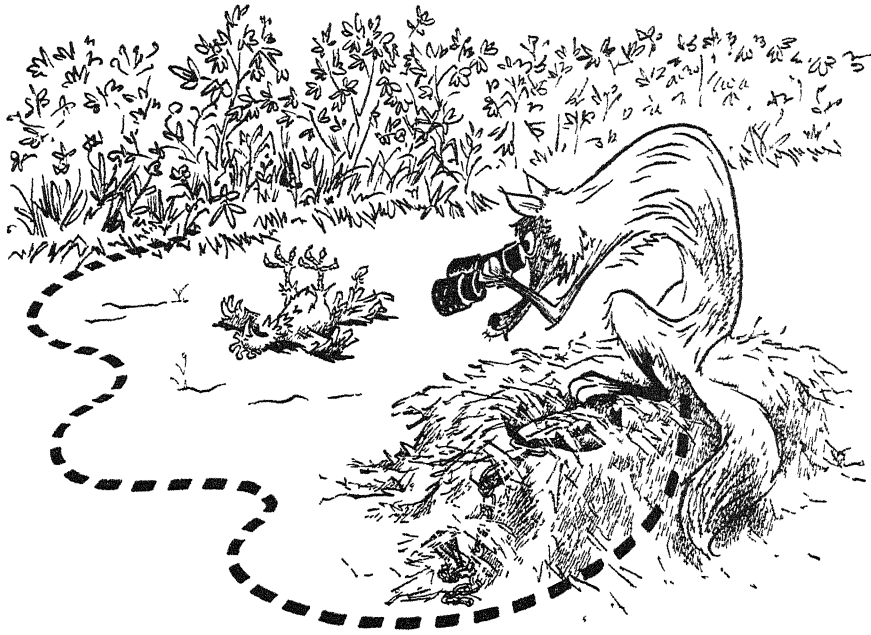
**About Hawks**—It is old-fashioned to call all hawks “chicken hawks.” Modern poultry methods have removed them from the list of poultry predators. Today, hawks pick up only stray birds or weaklings.

These dashing and powerful members of the bird clan deserve our respect, not only for their wonderful abilities but because they consume hordes of rats, mice, and insects. Ohio law protects hawks except when they are caught in the act of doing damage.

**Great Horned Owl**—The great horned owl may do some damage for which foxes are blamed. The owl attacks the bird’s head, driving its talons deep into the brain and spine sometimes puncturing the jugular vein and the windpipe. Big talon marks should be evident on the back of the bird. The owl pulls feathers from its kill, scatters them, and rips deep into the breast meat.

Do not confuse the large horned owl with the trim, monkey-faced barn owl, the little screech owl, or other harmless owls.





### Trapping

Trapping is to get the culprit that killed the bird. Some poultry predators are easily trapped. After you determine what did the damage, select the trapping method which will get him. There are methods that fit certain animals.

**Fox**—A carelessly set trap will not catch a fox. Traps and areas around them must be free of suspicious odors or signs.

A fox likes to get up on an elevation such as a log to observe something about which he is curious. Take advantage of this.

Wearing clean gloves, place the carcass of a fowl, recently killed by the fox, about 10 feet from the fencerow, gully, or other cover lane which the fox uses to approach the area. Cover the carcass lightly with weeds or straw.

Put a bale of straw about 20 feet from the cover lane. Use one or two No. 2 traps. Dig a bed for them in the bale and cover them with straw. Use new traps which have been boiled, stored outdoors, and handled only with clean gloves. Anchor the traps to the bale.

See your county wildlife agent for more help.

**Mink and Weasel**—A simple set to get mink or weasel raiding a henhouse is the leaning-board set. Lean a 6- to 8-foot, 10-inch plank

lengthwise against the henhouse foundation. This creates a dark runway irresistible to mink, weasel, and rats. Conceal two number 1 steel traps in this runway. Located near the entrance used by the thief, this set should get him.

**Raccoon, Opossum, Skunk**—A bait-pen set is good for catching these animals. Make a V-shaped pen about 7 inches wide at the open end and about 11 inches long from open end to V. It should be 12 inches high and roofed with tin, a flat rock, or sticks. The pen may be constructed of stones, logs, bricks, or anything handy.

Locate it near the scene of the last kill—along the trail the animal uses. Bait the pen with meat—all the better if it is smelly. Sardines, salmon, or a piece of the recently killed chicken attract raccoons.

Set the trap in a shallow depression in the open end of the V with the jaws nearly flush with the ground. Cover it with chaff, leaves, or loose soil. Be sure that nothing gets under the trap pan to keep the trap from springing.

### **Protection Against Great Horned Owls**

Prevention is the best protection against this bird. Poultrymen who permit birds to roost in trees or in houses with open windows invite attacks by great horned owls. Since this bird usually returns to its kill, steel traps set near the carcass and concealed by litter or feathers should catch it.

Keep traps set only at night to avoid taking scavengers which operate in daylight. The pole trap catches everything but the bird doing the damage. This makes it illegal.

### **Trapping Caution**

A trap set near a kill may get the culprit. It may get an innocent victim, however, since other animals and even pets may visit the carcass.

### **Shooting**

Shooting may solve some fox problems. Most foxes raid in the gray of dawn. A concealed person using a .22 rifle or a shotgun loaded with No. 2 or No. 4 shot can shoot the fox as he approaches the poultry range. A full-choke gun usually will kill a fox up to 45 yards.

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