

The Herbivore Wars

By John Kelly

Introduction

For the 41 years, save the snow seasons, that we've sojourned in Laraway Hollow, we've been beset by beasts. I look back on continuous combat against a diverse horde of creatures who want what we have in the flower, vegetable, and fruit (soft and hard) line, and, unhappily, the strength and instinctive cunning to get it. I've long thought that it could be helpful for those who follow, particularly those who garden the hills, to sketch something of the campaigns, battles, and skirmishes we have known, in victory and defeat, with the hope that, somehow, sometime, someone may draw a useful lesson.

Unfortunately, the full story, given the duration of the fight and the number and diversity of the brutes in question----and we're talking towards a dozen mammalian species alone---would require volumes--think *Decline and Fall*. Giving due recognition to the patience of the Friends, the first realistic order of the business following requires the limitation of the scope of the enterprise.

Start by defining out the bugs. To be sure, there is much lurid history in that direction that's hard for an author to let go of. The ravages of the Gypsy Moths---bits of leaves and droppings pattering down like rain in the woods of the Hollow---and the frightful, wall blackening, invasions of the Bag Worm caterpillars, could alone fill volumes. Not to speak of the pages required for adequate descriptions of the voracious beauty of the Japanese Beetles, the sabotages of the Carpenter Ants, the sallies of invading Termites, and the disgusting and costly creep of the Slugs. On top of all these, there are the ones who attack the farmer, if not the farm, such as the wasps, hornets, yellow jackets, deer ticks, spiders, mosquitoes, successive zooming squadrons of divers species of biting black flies, and even, for effect, the June Bugs and their kamikaze dives. Finally, the too numerous to enumerate veggie browsers---the thrips and the mites and the hoppers and the aphids and the beetles and the caterpillars and the cut worms and the cabbage worms, and the weevils and the earwigs, but in this connection remembering with gratitude our ally, the lady bugs. We have known them all but will not, today, limn on them.

These banished, further exclude by fiat the other non-mammalian phyla, not that the fish, or the reptiles, or the amphibians, have attempted much assault upon us. The birds are another story. If I could steel myself to it, I could recite awful tales of crows and corn; perhaps in a subsequent study where I could also treat of the numberless, chattering, flocks descending on the cherries and on the berries, black, and goose, and the raspberries and on the currants, and, yes, even the plums. I could give vivid word pictures of the Laocoon entanglements and howls of frustration attendant on the use of bird netting. And the sorry dissolutionments attendant on the divers scare-crow scams. I won't treat of these today, but in closing them

out should probably put in one word of gratitude for the owl, and, while distributing credits, one to the distinctly non-avian toad and his work on the slug population.

This leaves the mammals. But first excise the carnivores. This history chronicles the enemy, and always remember that your flesh eater is your gardener's friend. He, with his mate, prey on those who eat plants, and, enemies of our enemies, they are our allies. For the record, however, the carnivores that we have known, through brief appearances in the Hollow, are, roughly in order of size, the Coyote, the Fox, the Weasel, and the Bat. I also believe that, sitting in the loo, door open, I once saw the Fisher undulating between me and the pond, but won't swear to it, and—still unsworn--I have always entertained the belief that, unseen but heard a number of times on the other side of the gully in our earliest days here, was a wildcat. Feel free to include the feral cat and wandering dog, if you insist on definitive enumeration.

Bringing us finally to the herbivores, and I include in this category the numerous mammals that swing both ways—I refer of course to the omnivores. Here is the roll of the dreaded enemy of both persuasions, in no particular order: the juggernaut Bear; the sinister dark Vole; the beautiful but treacherous Skunk; the slow and arrogant Porcupine; the too clever Raccoon; the pompous, corpulent, Woodchuck; the amiable but ravenous and mischievous Chipmunk; the evanescent but troublesome Red Squirrel; the uber herbivore, the White Tailed Deer; and, finally, the Field Mouse and the House Mouse—the former in the Vole category and the latter beyond the scope of this study as a domesticated creature—a house mate after all, though the object of a continuing campaign as contested as any other here recorded. Again, for the record, we have once glimpsed a creature in the ponds that might have been either a reconnoitering beaver or a muskrat; not competitors for food, to be sure, the mere presence of either one, given their penchant for subterranean housing in an aqueous environment, will deprive any pond keeper of peaceful slumber.

The critical reader will point to the rabbit, a legendarily hungry herbivore, as a significant omission from this list. Oddly, in view of their prevalence in the Valley, these chronicles will stand as testimony that we've had almost the same number of rabbit sightings in the Hollow as we have had of puma. Maybe we once saw one rabbit hopping up the road, but, in my view, a single, unrepeated, rabbit is in fact better than none, proving that the Hollow is not sustainable territory for their notoriously fecund tribe.

Chapter One--Woodchuck

Inevitably, the saga must begin with the Woodchuck, our local member of the marmot clan, also known, though not so much around here, as the ground hog. I choose him partly because of the iconic character of the Chuck in these hills. The

beaver may be our state animal, but the Chuck is the manifest symbol and mascot of Laraway Hollow. Their influence is so pervasive there and in our whole locality that, in fact, human beings who are birth-right locals in the Township are frequently referred to—less frequently to their faces—as Woodchucks. The other reason is personal anger management---to try to deal with the corrosive feelings that take hold when I see the look of total self-satisfaction and convinced entitlement on the face of a Chuck squatting on his haunches and gazing arrogantly over his paunch and down his snout at his presumed estate and me, the pillaged observer. I'll note that it's gone so far that I have in fact tried the classical Indian remedy for vanquishing an enemy and have eaten of the Woodchuck. This did not help, and,

as a meal, it was generally like a particularly tough bit of aged mutton. This might have been the cook, but in any event, the solution is clearly not a culinary one.

In the beginning, when we had no real idea of whom we were fighting, we put in a garden fence, hewing to the remains of the one Rudi Meyer, our predecessor, had constructed maybe 10 years before we came. It was sturdy 1"x 2" steel mesh three feet high on steel posts, and it did not, as far as we have ever been able to tell, work. Against anything.

Anonymous depredations began as the seedlings appeared. One expedient that we tried—and still use on occasion—was the construction of more or less rectangular cages, each the size of a garden row, made by bending the same fencing mesh. The deer, at least, seemed to be put off by these, but we would still see



--- *A healthy, sleek, adolescent, woodchuck. Not unattractive, but consider the too eager eye and the too long claws. He, or she, is at this point looking forward to a summer browsing in the Hollow with the ambition to end the season as the paunchy reprobate familiar to all of us.*

evidence of the cages being nudged and even holes scooped out into them in the soft garden soil. Further holes under the fence itself made us begin to suspect Woodchucks—they seemed to have been created by a stronger agency than, say, a rabbit. We dug down and dropped wire and metal into the trench without success. A workable expedient was to lay, running out from the fence and flat on the ground, a strip of 2" chicken wire maybe a foot wide, with the garden side twisted into the bottom of the fence. Your Chuck tends to waddle, nose down, towards the smell of veggies, and will stop at the junction of fence and wire strip, try to dig, and be foiled by the wire. He won't, to my observation, back off a foot and dig under. One



They begin to emerge, to play, or to train and marshal for the invasion?



problem with this defense was that on the gully side of the garden there were areas without any horizontal space, and, as important, when it comes time to remove the wire for one reason or another, and likely after a season or two of weed growth, getting it out is impossible without hours of grunting over a crowbar prying up and cutting out the entangled chicken wire inch by inch. I'll point out in passing that cages can be very effectively draped with translucent "row cover" to make mini greenhouse to start and protect young plants.

There were periods when the fence, so bolstered, defended against tunneling. Unfortunately, the Chucks had a simple riposte at hand; they simply swarmed up and over the fence. A three foot fence was no obstacle; in fact, the literature—consulted after the fact—indicates that they will even climb trees when motivated. Technology suggested

that an electric cattle wire stretched along the top of the fence on ceramic insulators could discourage them at the very top of their climb. As we have no power in the hollow, we used batteries, both dry cell—very expensive and short lasting---and wet cells which tend to be awkward—to power the charger which raises the voltage from 12 volts to full shocking capability. It's not a serious shock, but it is an unpleasant jolt. You jump, and stamp, and swear, in that order. I have never had a season when I did not receive at least one such shock, and usually a number. As these pages attest, it has perceptibly enhanced my acuity, but also made me realize that employment in the electrical line is not an option. There is one manifest satisfaction in getting shocked, however, and that is the realization of what the jolt would feel like to the moist black nose of a critter with bare paws grounded in moist earth or clutching a steel fence. There was no more swarming of fences, except, of course, when the batteries ran down, or the wire sagged or got shorted out by the weeds, or I forgot to turn it on. I'll add here that we turned much later to portable solar energizers and that they are far superior to batteries.

These expedients having been put in place, we began, for the first time since we curled up with the seed catalogues the preceding January, to again have visions of fresh, dewy, veggies about to be plucked. Approaching the garden one early morning, however, we saw the Chuck inside one of the cages, happily nibbling sprouts under the protection of his bespoke cage, crafted by me for his exclusion, not his security. As I approached, brandishing a rake and screaming invective, he simply disappeared, as if supernaturally. In my frustrated rage I saw myself an exemplar of man against beast. Not, however, an Ahab against whale or matador against bull, but, I fear, a pathetic figure of fun: a Mr. MacGregor vs. Peter R., an Elmer Fudd vs. B. Bunny or, on a more accurate and depressing note, a Marshall Petain standing tall behind the Maginot Line. I could only pound dirt.

What had happened was that, the garden being on the bank of the gully, the Chuck had constructed a den going straight back into the gully wall and then, I suppose as an amenity, maybe looking to sublet, dug a vertical tunnel opening precisely into the cage where he could breakfast with total convenience and safety on the sprouts at hand and disappear when threatened.

We were thus forced—the record shows we did not choose—to chemical warfare. In that era you could buy at Agway—I suspect no more—a bomb looking much like a shotgun shell with a fuse. The procedure was to light the fuse, shove the bomb as far as possible into the hole, slap a wet towel over the entrance and simply wait. The bomb did not explode but gave off a thick white, quite poisonous, sulfurous cloud within the tunnel. Unfortunately, there was one other aspect of this strategy which was necessitated by the fact that your Chuck always builds a back entrance to his home. That entrance had to be sealed as well, but that entrance never seemed to be discoverable. [The passage into the cage had been long since covered over by us, and its alternative was not visible.] In the event, however, and call it terror if you will, for the rest of that season, at least, we saw no more chucks.

But your Chuck is a peripatetic sort and doesn't seem to occupy the same home in successive seasons. Further, reinforcements are always available to him from the surrounding territories and his and her own loins. He reappeared from time to time, irregularly but too frequently and damagingly, for a number of years, his holes always invisible to us. Desultory trapping—more on this later—did not seem to work. Neither did the application of various repellants sifted around the garden. Expensive, and, as far as we could tell, useless. I suppose I should have had an inkling when I noted that one of the most popular brands of repellant had silhouettes of the creatures supposedly repelled, which silhouettes significantly omitted the Chuck. More on repellants and attractants later.

You ask, why not shoot 'em? Setting aside doctrinal issues of the gun debate, on the one hand, and the likely quality of my marksmanship on the other, this was not a practical expedient. They did not appear in territory surveyed by the windows of the house, and the idea of setting up and sitting in a blind in the cold, moist dawn—or even more dreadful, at cocktail hour—was to put hunting ahead of living, Nimrod ahead of Bacchus, if you get my drift. Plus, a hunter may be satisfied by bagging one buck in a year, but one or two dead chucks, a successful haul for the likes of us, would be a drop in an ocean of hungry, buck toothed, avidly eating and reproducing, mammals.

Maybe a dog would have worked, but we had none, and we did have some allergies, including, apart from the canine itself, that to walking a beast twice a day in the city in the off season, that precluded this avenue. There is a question in any case as to its utility; I have known people who have dogs and people who have chucks, and, it must be written, as many people who have both dogs and chucks.

So we sought advice from others. The local stores did not lack confidence but were devoid of suggestion other than to flog a variety of products, mostly repellants, some sprayed, some dusted about, all expensive, that were tried, and were ineffective. Scattering human hair about the beds was a supposedly infallible folk remedy that, however, failed to take into account the desire of the hunter to preserve his dwindling tresses, not to scatter them. Possibly, some of these concoctions worked in the lab, but we were never sure even of this as rain created a tabula rasa every week or so, dissolving every trace and requiring a fresh anointing of priceless ointment. Seeking desultory advice from neighbors only publicized our agrarian ineptitude and, in the event, mainly retraced plowed ground.

We finally approached a real farmer. A gentleman, likely known to you, whose family has farmed the Valley for generations. Yes, he was fully aware of the chuck issue, and, yes, it was a subject he'd studied and pondered for many years. In his case, the problem was much more serious, as, while we were concerned simply about nibbling, albeit heavy, around the edges, he was concerned about cattle breaking legs in chuck holes. Had he, a professional, and, so to speak, a Chuck himself, solved the problem? I'll note now that he has high credibility. Like many country craftsmen, largely self taught, he is not afraid of admitting to his own error, and, in fact can relish exaggerating it to the extent of myth. Have you heard

a Manhattan doctor or lawyer admit to mistake? I digress. He tends to smile and squint when he instructs the likes of us, and, after a pause, solemnly allowed that over many years he had duly tried trapping, poison, bombs, shooting, and setting the dogs on them. He paused, and stated that only one thing he knew to work. At this point we quickly poured him another beer, and gathered expectantly, acolytes before the guru. He said with simple certainty that the only riddance to the chuck was the coyote. And added that you only get enough coyotes when their population spikes, noting further that this was both an infrequent and always uncontrollable event.

At about this time—the nadir of our marmot despair— shopping for electric fence energizers for the deer wire--another saga and another chapter--I ran across an ad for electric netting. This is a light fence two or three feet high made of a mesh of electric wires woven into 3 or 4 inch squares. You unroll it and support it on small stakes simply pushed into the soil. It's used, for example, for poultry where it can be put down and removed quickly to sequentially fence off areas for feeding. The holes cannot be entered by a chuck without a touch and a highly direct chastisement. The smaller size can be stepped over to work the garden, but only with great care, as a stumble at this particular juncture necessarily exposes a personal area fully as sensitive as the nose of a chuck. I have become a fan of electric netting and note that it will also keep the raccoon from the corn patch. The deer are a different question. This may be the point to note that an electric wire, whether used against deer, chucks, horses, goats, and other beasts, wild and domestic, is not intended—except possibly in the case of the pathologically vindictive—to damage the animal. It is pedagogical, intended to teach the brute in question that this is a place and thing best avoided, and, indeed, the slow learner may hit the fence several times before the lesson gets thru. Also, I note in passing, please don't think that the normal fence will do bear. I've been there, and it won't. And I'll add that bears love corn---but only just at its perfect moment of ripening. They share this with the 'coon. And with us. Full disclosure finally requires that I add that I've read that the fence charge frequently won't get thru the coarse fur of a chuck. One hopes that they continue to lead by the nose.

So it began to appear that the war would end in victory, and it is fact that we have since kept the chuck, and the coons, at bay using the netting and solar energizers. It's easily unrolled and set up by two people and can be arranged by one, albeit with a modicum of tangling and invective. It must be tended to keep the weeds off—I string it over straw mulch rows to help—and also inspected to make sure that it hasn't sagged so that the lower strip shorts out against the ground. In the quiet of the morning or evening I walk past and listen for repeated snaps where it has touched a ground—a plant, a metal post--and shorts and will readjust it with a dry, non-conducting, stick. I'll note that these fences work by sending a jolt every second or so—they don't run continuously.

However, you will see by the discouraging fact that this chapter continues, that the war did not end at that point. And, though I am loath to bring socio/political dogma into an agrarian study, the reason relates to what some might

call male chauvinism. All of the above speaks of the vegetable garden, which, in the proper order of things, is managed by the author. His spouse, also as is meet, does the flowers. Now think of flower beds. They wind and they sprawl and they are sculpted and tucked into little circles and squares and kidneys. And the flowers they harbor come up at odd times in the season and when they do, also sprawl and lean and sometimes creep. In short, they cannot be contained in a fence, and, even if they could, the aesthetics would be dismal. The vegetable gardener, smug in his own victory, had not considered the flowers; had fought only his own battles; had forgotten the war. The flowers remained exposed.

It was, in fact, that, at about the time that the borders of the vegetables had finally been secured, we experienced perhaps the greatest influx of chucks in our history; we sometimes call it the year of the Chuck Hotel. It started when we saw one or two mature chucks on the front lawn in early Spring; this was not usual territory for them, and it is hard by the flower beds. And then, before long, we saw an infant chuck grazing happily next to its mother. Weaning among the chucks seems to take place in the den, and when a baby chuck appears in the sunlight, he is a fully operating eating machine. And then another, and another, and another mother, and on. At least six, even eight, at one time. Laraway, we have a problem. Or at least a partial problem, because we did see a chuck or two disappear into the shrubbery next to the veggie plot, followed by a squeak and a sudden backwards scuttle; the line there had held.

But before discussing that problem and its ultimate solution I must testify briefly, against all, wholly justifiable, bias, in favor, somewhat, of the chuck. The chucks came out to browse the lawn at length, morning and evening, and we observed them at length, usually from the house, but we were able on occasion, without spooking them, to sit in lawn chairs and watch and drink with only the minimal necessary, practiced, movements of arm and wrist. The conclusion: they very much like young grass. Quite probably more than flowers or veggies, except occasionally. And of course it's the opportunistic occasions that get you. If we could only reason with them, I feel certain that a treaty relegating them to the grass to which they are entirely welcome could be negotiated.

The first inquiry regarding this influx was, from whence? It took little time to discover that they were coming from the crawl space under our small scullery extension. Not good, as there were a number of possible entries and exits there, and none susceptible of easy blocking. We have friends over the hill who, once ridden by chucks, found a chuck single entrance under a porch and retained a special forces unit from the pest company who basically jammed a trap into the entry and waited. Effective, if inelegant, but not available to us. We did try to think of remedies aimed at the crowd under the extension, but, within days, found that there was a further entrance under the landing for the back door; then, one, or more, under the front porch; and one under the side of the house. The suspicion was that these communicated with each other; that closing off egress was impossible; and that unspeakable acts were occurring literally beneath our feet. However, they didn't smell or make noise—again, to their credit, if not their redemp-

tion. Their effrontery is a different issue; the pups gamboled happily on the large slab that is our, and their, doorstep. We could sit in the doorway and, almost, pet them; like all furry babies they are a winsome lot.

So once again we turned to the traps. The HavaHeart trap is a most satisfying mechanism, coming in sizes from chipmunk on up. What you have is a wire box, large enough for a chuck or coon to enter without squeezing, with an opening in front with a door that swings down from the top and snaps shut. The door in turn is connected to and held up by a lever. Another lever is connected to a sort of hinged paddle towards the back of the trap on which bait is placed, and the ends of the two levers, slightly flattened, are carefully placed one on the other. When the enemy touches the paddle its lever tilts, and the levers fall apart and release the door. The satisfying clang and snap can be heard from a distance. It is not easy, however, to place the bait, which is a full arm's length into the box—a length that can only be realized by lying flat on one's belly--without springing the trap. The familiar sounds of frustration again filled the Hollow. We finally bought grocers' tongs to gingerly, and successfully, manipulate the bait onto the paddle.

Shall we talk bait? The interface between mechanism and brute is the bait; the requisite to bring them together. We read and we experimented, having some good idea at this point of the appetites of the chuck. We first tried vegetables. String beans were widely touted; they lasted a couple of days but did not inspire the customers. Lettuce, tender and fresh, or spinach, lasted only a couple of hours and failed as well. Coarse root vegetables seemed to be merely insulting to the audience. Grapes didn't do it. We began to reason that the chuck wanted more than fresh; he wanted growing. This, after all, was the condition of the plants he plundered. So we invested at no small expense in flats of cabbage seedlings. These could, if properly watered, last for a week or more in the trap, exuding the scent of fresh, fleshy leaves across the Hollow. The denouement of this expedient was quick, familiar and consistent.

So, as was the case with the fencing episode, we turned to science. Even as there are repellants available, allegedly to discourage browsers, so the manufactories—maybe the same ones-- are churning out attractants to encourage them into traps. Choosing to forget our experiences with the repellants we began to shop the web and the journals. If you were to go to the back pages of certain magazines on country living—of the sort that talk of self sufficiency on an acre and show on the cover a two million dollar ranch house and a forty thousand dollar tractor posed against snow covered Montana mountains—you would see certain ads that appear to stem from a bygone era. Go past the grinning face of the rural gentleman sponsoring the nail rot remedy, and the equally grinning face of the lady of a certain age pushing the attractant qualities of her human pheromones, and you will find, unillustrated, certain small ads for attractants. Said to call to the deepest instincts of the brutes and bring them, panting, to the trap. The one we first settled on flogged two elixirs; one, a jar of a green, seemingly rotted, substance with a powerful smell—a manifest repellant as far as we were concerned—that you slathered on the chosen bait itself—but was supposedly to a

chuck as hollandaise on asparagus. The second was sold in a tiny bottle with a cost roughly equivalent to an equal quantity of Chanel No. 5. This was to be placed, drop by drop, along a pathway leading the chuck, inexorably, to the trap and the bait, enhanced by the first remedy. A Hansel and Gretel sort of strategy by lure, said to be totally effective. The result of this application, repeated many times—and of the alternative potions tried later--was, of course, consistent with our other experiences.

The last attempt was set in motion by a neighbor who hunts the area and holds forth with much ancient learning about the game animals, edible and otherwise, of the valley. He said, you want to go to Peck's and buy some of the shiniest and reddest Red Delicious apples that you can find, and use them whole. We did so, though we, ourselves, find the Red Delicious soft, mushy, pithy, and glitzy and abjure it. We set the trap in the orchard, so called, quite near the scullery window. We then put out one apple on the grass some feet from the trap, fishermen would call it chumming, and the other in the trap. It took only minutes when the chuck emerged from under the blueberries—they don't, to their credit, do them—and began to nose about. I whispered loudly to the spouse, and we stood still at the window, gripping each other in a death clutch—and watched without breathing. He sniffed of the first apple, took a desultory bite, and then waddled in a straight, confident, line to the trap. He entered without hesitation, and, bang and snap, was captive. The bait, the procedure, worked and would work many times, and, taken with the electric netting and eternal vigilance, has fairly effectively ended the chuck problem; at least for the moment

You ask, what became of the caught chucks? As you are aware, these chronicles, rich with detail beyond unassisted recall, are based on meticulous note taking and records maintained over many years. To answer that final question, we turned to the nethermost file in the battered "Woodchuck" cabinet in a drawer labeled "Extraordinary Rendition." It had been rifled. We have no further recollection on the subject, but, happily for all, the files on the deer and the chipmunks and all the others remain, to this point, untouched.

John Kelly, May 16, 2013