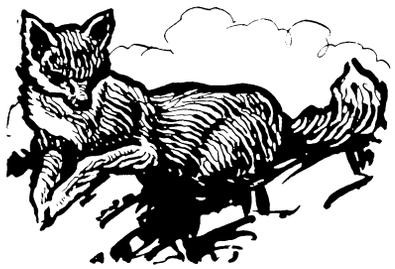
ZOOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone



Cherished Nuisances

MEDIEVAL England, like the modern world practically everywhere, looked upon foxes as plain, unmitigated nuisances. They stole the farmer's poultry, and they were very hard to trap for their fur. The balance of favor was decidedly against them.

Horseriding and hunting gentlemen of that time (and all gentlemen then were horsemen and hunters) did not care much about riding after foxes. They had bigger and better game to hunt—big, antlered stags, that could furnish finer trophies, beautiful leather, and large quantities of good meat. The attitude of the huntsman, even as late as the beginning of the sixteenth century, is exemplified by the scornful allusion of Roderick Dhu, in Scott's "Lady of the Lake":

"Tho space and law the stag we lend
Ere hound we slip, or bow we bend,
Who ever cared how, where or when
The prowling fox was trapped or slain?"

But presently deer had pretty well vanished from all parts of Britain where hunting on horseback was practicable. Sport-loving gentry still had their horses, and they were unwilling to give up the fun of chasing something, behind a pack of bell-tongued hounds. What to do?

There remained the fox, which had survived the cutting down of the forests and the spread of agriculture and grazing—had, indeed, even thriven upon the change, as foxes have done in this country. Why not ride after foxes?

Fox-hunting seems to have had some vogue in southern England at an earlier date, even before the last of the stags had been brought to bay. The sport is mentioned by Chaucer, that faithful portrayer of polite and common life as it was lived in and around London in the fourteenth century. Whether the gentlefolk were altruistically aiding their farmer tenants to get rid of a nuisance, or whether they had already learned to value fox-hunting for its own sake, is a little difficult to say.

At any rate, as the deer disappeared and the fox was left as the best quarry, Reynard began to be prized—and protected. Only farmers, poachers and other vulgar commoners would trap a fox, or kill it in any but the orthodox and ceremonial way. To say that a man would shoot a fox was to brand him as no gentleman. The fox, once a plain and unfriended nuisance, had become the gentry's pet—because it was so much fun to kill him in the approved manner.

Science News Letter, March 14, 1942

The United States crude *birthrate* increased sharply from 17.9 per 1,000 population in 1940 to 19.0 in 1941—this provisional rate is the highest since 1928, the Census Bureau states.