

## Henhouse Skunk

An old fellow I met while hunting at Hart Mountain had been a logging camp *push* [boss or foreman], and one evening around my fire he started telling a story about needing to hire help during the Depression: "I told the woman there at the employment agency to send me five men, but if they were wearing caps and belts, she'd better send ten." He was then wearing suspenders as did all of the loggers I knew. Belts were for cowboys.

I, too, wore suspenders while I lived on the Coast, but over the years I found a belt a little easier to maintain. So when I attended a Stihl chainsaw service school in 1982, and the technical rep offered each of us our choice of suspenders or belt buckles with Stihl's logo on them, I took a buckle, which was four inches long, two and half inches high, and heavy. It was cast from white-metal and then bronze plated. It was also a buckle I could wear and not be ashamed of around acquaintances: it wasn't silver, and it didn't have Alaskan gold nuggets tacked to it here & there as if its wearer had all of his taste in his mouth.

Over the years, the buckle wore out a couple of belts.

I bought an older house south of Pocatello in 1991, when Idaho State University offered me a Doctor of Arts fellowship. Then when my daughters, all still in Fairbanks, told me I was old enough to leave home (I jest, but not really), I married again, and once again began to keep a flock of laying hens ... I live at forty-seven hundred feet elevation. Nights are always cool, even in July. Nevertheless, my new wife wants to sleep with windows and doors open. And one night she jabs me in the ribs and says, "Something is wrong with the chickens."

I wake up enough to hear that the hens are squawking about something, but since I leave a light burning in the chickenhouse all the time and the hens often squawk at night, usually about a cat walking on the roof of their house, I am not too concerned about the hens carrying on as they are. Nevertheless, not wanting to get up, I do: I step to the open backdoor from where I can see into the lighted house. And yes, the hens are certainly having a fit about something, but they are all on their roosts and I can't see anything on the floor. The door to their covered pen is shut. So I head back to bed.

I have no sooner lain down than my wife says, "You gotta go out there and see what is wrong. Something is wrong."

Because of the coolness of the nights, I have taken to sleeping in a T-shirt.

I get back up, pull on my jeans, and slip my bare feet into a pair of oxfords. So with shoelaces flapping and holding my jeans up with one hand—I don't take time to buckle my belt—I hurry out to the henhouse to satisfy my wife that everything is okay.

Stars shine as only they can at higher elevations. There isn't a light on anywhere in town other than in my and my neighbor's henhouses. (We live in a town of 700.) No one is awake at 12:30 Sunday morning.

When I open the gate into the chicken yard, I smell skunk! Not too strong, but I shouldn't be smelling any *skunkiness*. Now hurrying, I step into the henhouse

and find a skunk in a nest box eating eggs, and I wish I had a gun with me.

A big female, the skunk has apparently sprayed with her butt against the inside of the nestbox when I opened the gate into the chicken yard. She sprayed too early, thereby missing me. She sprayed before I saw her, and would have gotten me if I had not paused for a moment when I first smelled her. But I don't realize she has sprayed until I see the sputter of green droplets that occur when a skunk tries to squirt after having fired and before the gland has fully recharged its load.

For those individuals who have not been sprayed by a skunk, the odor is discharged as a green mist that travels a dozen feet or more. The green droplets can be more easily seen than escaped, but once a skunk has sprayed, it is not able to discharge more than a few droplets for some minutes afterwards.

I'm not as quick or as foolish as I was when I once grabbed, by the nape of its neck, a trapped raccoon growling at me. I might or might not be able to grab this skunk without being bitten, but too many skunks here carry rabies and I am not interested in getting the shots. So I pull off my belt in one continuous motion which is almost as fast as Dad could get his belt off—and turning my belt around, I swing the heavy Stihl buckle as hard as I can at the skunk's head as she tries to jump down from the nest box.

I just miss her skull, hitting instead her snout.

She twists back around so her butt again faces me, but she hasn't recharged her scent sack. All that she can discharge is that sputter of green droplets that doesn't carry far.

I stand behind her, poised to strike again. The thought never enters my mind to let her escape. If I had let her go, she would have been back within a few days. The eggs are too tempting.

Neither the skunk nor I know what to do. She is inside the box so I can't hit her head with the heavy buckle, and she has to expose her head to escape. Her sack is empty, but will refill within a few minutes. But even when it fills, I don't know that it will deter me for my nose has become accustomed to the odor.

Again she tries to jump out of the nest box. Again I strike too early, hitting her snout instead of her skull.

She now bleeds from the side of her snout.

When I selected the Stihl buckle a decade and a half earlier, I never imagine it being put to this use.

My wife comes to the backdoor in her sheer purple nightgown to see if everything is all right—to see why I haven't returned to bed.

"Bring me a rifle, the .250. There's shells for it in the red box."

Minutes pass with me poised, the skunk sputtering, and the hens squawking. My dogs have started barking, which starts neighbor dogs barking as far away as the ranches at the edge of town. But still no lights come on in neighboring houses although I can't imagine why not.

Holding the little .250 Savage upright as if it might bite, my wife enters the chicken yard, but won't come into the henhouse. I take the rifle from her, and hoping that I don't awaken neighbors, I dispatch the skunk with one shot.

Even after the report of the shot fades, no light comes on anywhere in town. Except in my henhouse and in my neighbor's, the town is dark. Only stars shine—

and the yardlight of one ranch across the river.

"You're not coming into the house with those clothes on," my wife says as I step onto the back porch. I look around to see if I can be seen as I drop my jeans on the porch and strip off my T-shirt. If there is anybody looking, they are doing so from darkened houses.

\* \* \*

[\[Home\]](#) [\[Back to Essays\]](#)