

Chapter 10

After arriving at camp, the two men made themselves a cold meal. They didn't want to build a fire tonight, as the smoke and smell of cooking might disturb the night time visitors they hoped would show themselves. Jason took out a pack of beef biltong – thin slices of beef, marinated with herbs and air-dried. He offered the pack to Will, who gladly took a few slices for himself. Will had made himself some pemmican, with minced beef, dried fruit and bone marrow. He passed some across to Jason, "Here, try this," he said, "It's made by my own fair hands."

Jason took a lump and bit into it. "My compliments to the chef!" he said. "How do you make it?"

"Well," said Will, "it's not too difficult. Even you should be able to manage it!" I just make it from dried beef, but venison is good. I dry it out and crush it to a powder. Then I mix it with an equal amount of hot fat – usually beef fat. I often put in dried berries to give it a bit more flavour."

"So, not too good if you are counting the calories then," commented Jason.

"No, but it's great if you're out in the wilderness," answered Will, and then continued to explain the process.

"I usually get about a pound and a half of lean meat. I let it firm up in the freezer. Then I slice it as thin as I can and add salt and pepper – particularly pepper and easy on the salt. It's not too good for the old ticker! Once that is done, I set the oven to the lowest possible temperature – around 150° - and lay the strips of meat onto the rack. I leave the door open just a crack to stop moisture building up. Once that is done, I put a handful of frozen blueberries on a small oven pan to dry out with the meat."

Jason nodded as he listened.

"I let it dry out for about 15 hours, until it's nice and crisp. Then I put it through the blender until it's a powder. Then in go the blueberries and powder it again. Now you're ready for the fat. Put it into a pan and cook it over a very low heat. You must make sure to stir it and keep it from burning. When the fat stops bubbling, your rendering is done."

"Use a strainer. You just want the pure, liquid fat. Mix your meat and berry powder together and slowly add the hot liquid fat. Just pour enough, so that the powder soaks up all of the fat. If you pour too quickly, add a bit of almond meal – I like that – and let it firm up. Then cut it into squares."

"Sounds easy enough. I think I'll give it a go, when I get home," said Jason, enjoying his lump of pemmican. "How long does it last?"

"Oh, pemmican will keep for yonks," said Will. It's mostly just pure dry protein and fat. It's very stable. I don't worry too much about it going off. You'll know when you bite into it!" Will chuckled. The agent bit off a chunk and considered. "I might add a few more herbs and spices next time."

<http://www.marksdailyapple.com/how-to-make-pemmican>

Once the meal was over, and Mother Earth spread her cloak of darkness, the two men made their way, silently as ghosts to the spot they thought would be best to watch the badger setts. They moved along the woodland ridge – not along the top, where they might be spotted against the horizon, but just below. They made sure the wind was blowing from the sett to them otherwise the badgers would know they were there before they even emerged. Will loved to feel the wind in his face.

When they felt that they were in the best position, the two settled down with their backs to trees, to wait for the evening performance.

They wondered if there might be foxes living in one part of the sett, as they'd seen a vixen standing on the spoil heap earlier in the day. She was a truly lovely animal.



Did she have cubs in the sett? It wasn't impossible. Badgers will allow foxes to live in parts of their setts. They don't mix, but they are happy to live as landlord and lodger - but there's only one landlord! In an argument, there is only ever one winner - the badger!

You can often see if a fox is in residence, as you might find bits of food strewn around outside the sett. Bits of birds and old bones; that sort of thing. You'll never find that if it's only badgers living there. They are very clean and hygienic!

The evening wore on and nothing in the wood appeared to move. Jason nudged Will and the two men sat as still as a kestrel's shadow. They hardly dared breathe, and hoped the wind wouldn't change. Of course, as they were living in the woods, they didn't use any perfumes - aftershave or deodorants - as the badgers would smell them from many metres away!

Slowly, Jason moved his head towards a sett entrance on his left. A grey ghost stood, alert, ears pricked and nose twitching, on the sett. It was a fully-grown female badger! Another soon followed it into the fresh air.



Soon, the badgers came closer to the two men, and they enjoyed good views of the pair. A couple of handfuls of peanuts and raisins ensured that the badgers stayed for a little while, before moving off to forage in the fields.

The badgers obviously had no idea that they were being carefully watched, and continued to Hoover up the treats that had been left for them.



After a short while, another badger emerged from the sett, and settled down to groom. The agents were even more pleased by this sighting, as it was a young badger! Brilliant!



After a quick groom, the young animal picked up the few peanuts and raisins the adults had missed, and then wandered off after them to forage. "What a fantastic night," Jason breathed. "I just can't get enough of badger watching!"

"I'd love to go to the Badger Group's hide for an evening, once all this lot is over," said Will. Jason agreed!

The two men were just about to make their way back to camp, when a movement on the sett alerted them to another visitor. They watched as the vixen trotted back up to a hole a little distance away. She yelped. The two sat, unable to breathe. Would there be yet another sighting this evening?



As the two men watched, a couple of little faces appeared at the mouth of the hole the vixen had yelped into.

"She's got a couple of cubs!" Jason whispered.

"Yep! It's all happening at this sett!" agreed Will. The two SOU agents watched as the cubs came out and greeted their mother. She licked them both and then sat down to groom herself. The cubs

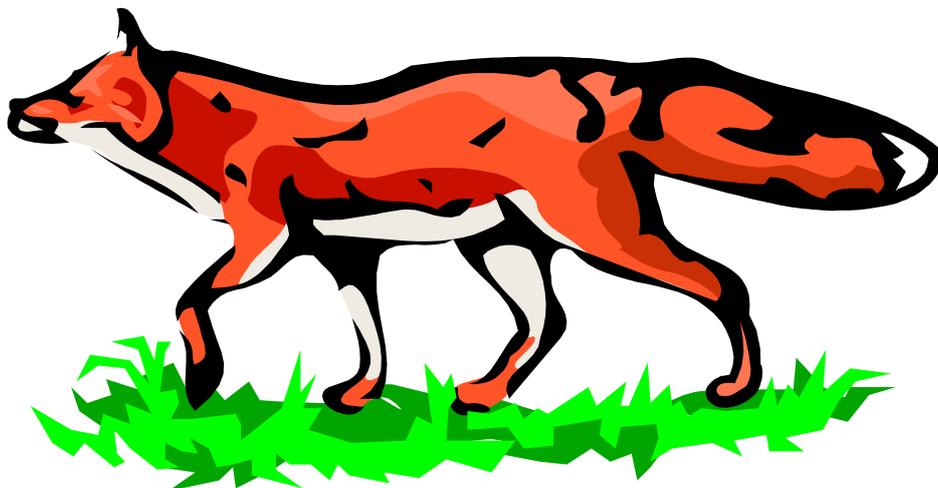


now did what children all over the world do. They just wanted to play! They chased each other around the sett, (or 'earth' as it was the home of a fox), and took great delight in mock fights. They ran up and jumped on poor Mum. They ran around her, jumped over her, chased her tail and nipped at her with tiny teeth. Poor Mum sat patiently and watched her youngsters.

Eventually, however, it was obvious that she was running out of patience! After one particularly painful nip at her flank, she turned and bit the cub sharply on its rump! (She was careful not to do any real damage, of course.) The cub squealed and ran under a bush, quickly followed by its sibling, so that the two cubs sulked for a few minutes.

Of course, it didn't take long for them to forget Mum's annoyance, and they continued their high-jinks. A short time later, Mum barked at them and they fell into line behind her as she trotted off to find something for supper. That was the last the two men saw of their foxy neighbours, but they were sure that *their* vixen would be a good mum, and bring her cubs up to adulthood.

The two retired back to their camp, tired but happy.



Could you draw this lovely fox? Try drawing a 1cm grid over it. Then draw what you see in each box.