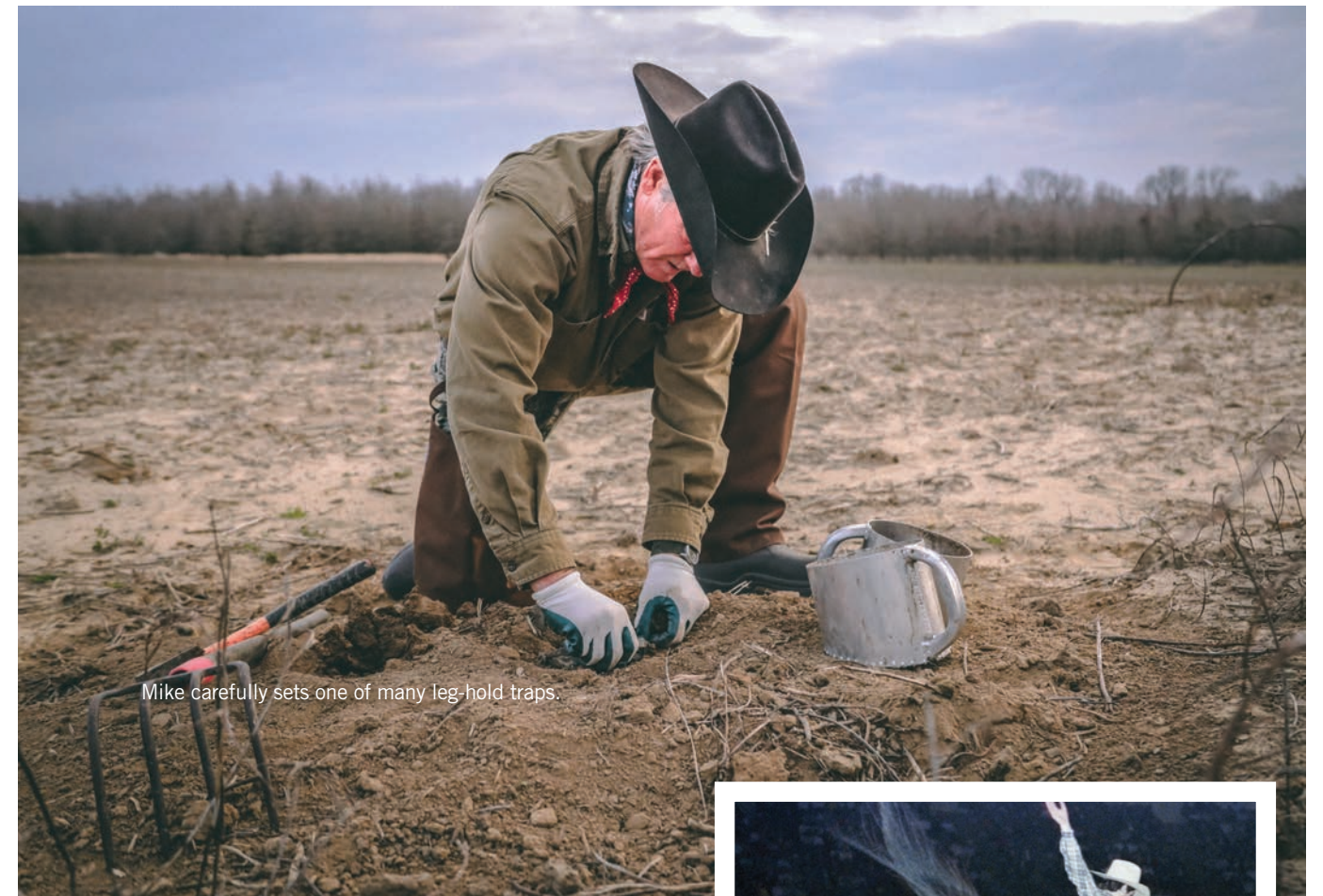


We're Caught in a Trap

Resolving wildlife problems and keeping balance in habitats by using relocation and wildlife management

BY JOSHUA R. QUONG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE DEVAZIER



Mike carefully sets one of many leg-hold traps.

Mike Merchant loves animals. And for over a decade, he has become the South's premier animal control specialist whose skills and personality have garnered an almost cultish following. These friends and fans within his orbit know him by such monikers as "The Animal Man," "The Critter Getter," and "The Cowboy Trapper." But Mike's success at bridging the gap between humanity and the wild world did not come about *ex nihilo*. It has manifested through a contemplative recognition of nature's complexities and the hard work it takes to maintain her balance.

Reared on a farm in rural Scott County, it was quite apparent early on that Mike's wild spirit would light his rugged path. According to his father, "Mike didn't want to ride anything that didn't buck." So it only follows that Mike would break his first pony at three years of age. This would spark a life of traveling hours upon hours across the continent in cars and trucks packed with cowboys and saddles only to cling for mere seconds atop snorting horses or bulls in the middle of rodeo arenas. During his career he would win a collegiate national championship and rank in the top twenty worldwide during his time on the pro circuit.

Of course, not all bucking leads to the breaking of the animals one rides. "A bull named Firecracker was the first to break my bones when he flung me," recalls Mike. "I was fourteen, and it was then I learned that sometimes you're the buck-a-roo and other times you're the buck-a-ree."



JERRY GUSTAFSON

Gustafson Photo
©2013

Mike, a member of the Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association, competing in the Saddle Bronc competition at National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colorado.

Trapping also seemed to come not only naturally to Mike but also genetically. "My grandad raised eleven kids during the Great Depression as a mink trapper, and he was well known for his skill," Mike says. "I wanted to impress him, so when I was thirteen, I trapped my first animal... a mink." Plus, "cowboys and trappers are one in the same," he continues. "That's how the West was settled. Cowboys wrangled their livestock as well as wrangled varmints. Back then, the best way to keep a pack a coyotes from killing your calves was by trapping them. Ain't much changed since." So in between rodeos, Mike worked as a trapper for the United States Department



Mike loads nuisance bobcats and coyotes into a specially design transport trailer to relocate them to their new habitat.



of Agriculture's Wildlife Services program. During this time, he became adept in dealing with the imbalances and divides that exist between the animal kingdom and modern man. He also recognized imbalances within himself.

"In rodeo, as well as in life, where you look is where you go," Mike says. "If one is in the habit of looking at the ground or to the bottle, then that's where one ends up until they make a habit of focusing elsewhere."

One of the things that helped Mike regain focus and balance was the birth of his sons. "When the boys were born, I realized what my purpose was in this life," Mike says. "They've raised me as much as I've raised them."

The other was the creation of his own wildlife damage management company called Wildlife Resolutions based out of Oxford, Mississippi. "The first private trapping I did was for the Episcopal Church in Oxford," Mike recalls. "They had a horrible infestation of squirrels that were ruining their very expensive organ." A quick call to Mike and all the vermin were relocated. By the next Sunday's service, there was a joyful noise once more in the sanctuary.

This bit of divine intervention was just the impetus Mike needed to help validate what he had felt all along. "I saw where people not only needed help to resolve their nuisance wildlife problems but that they also needed someone to develop effective strategies with long-range goals in focus. I didn't really see anyone else doing that."

Yet there are those who look at what Mike does as a negative endeavor. "Folks hear 'trapper' and think about those giant Looney Toon traps with razor sharp teeth," Mike says. "That's antithetical



Coyotes await transport to their new homes.



A side-saddle Mike heads to the next trap line loaded down with all the tools a trapper needs.

to what I'm trying to accomplish. I'm looking to hold a coyote the same way I'm looking to hold on to a bucking bronc: as firmly as I can without either of us seriously hurting one another."

Mike's view is that the natural world has teeth everywhere and those teeth are always set to bite. The action used to sustain life is the same action used to defend it, hold it, and even carry it. An animal's entire existence depends on knowing when and how to bite—one momentary hold necessary for release. There cannot be one without the other. Life's energy depends on this dichotomy. Mike puts this metaphysic into action with every grappling grip and every clasp trap.

And for Mike, Wildlife Resolutions has done much more than just "keep the peace" between animals and humans. It has provided a huge platform for education and conservation. He is never too





The Stare Down: Mike approaches trapped coyotes calmly and deftly.



MIKE MERCHANT



MIKE MERCHANT

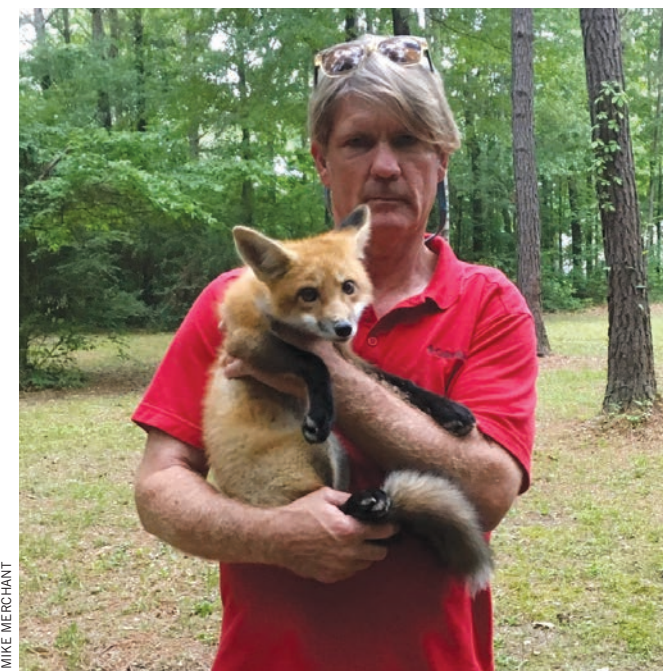


MIKE MERCHANT

busy to visit school classrooms or neighborhood children to show and tell them about the motherless baby raccoons or bobcats he's found while working. Nor does he miss an opportunity to converse with his clients about the behaviors of the furry and scaly residents in their attics and yards.

Mike has also been able to play pivotal roles in helping to maintain the natural balance in large ecosystems like the Williams Plantation in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where for the past several years he has trapped coyotes and bobcats and relocated them as part of the farm's wild turkey reintroduction efforts. His countless hours of patterning predators, baiting traps, and mentoring local outdoorsmen have bolstered the flock numbers.

But this should be no surprise. For Mike Merchant, the flock is ever growing. His love for the animal world is infectious. Whether he's reeling in giant marlin in the Galapagos with his sons Marshall and Michael or motoring side-saddle atop his ATV loaded with buckets of bait, Mike Merchant is the quintessence of the philosopher cowboy—an old friend we've all just met whose words and adventures capture us for a while then turn us loose again into our natural habitat. **DU**



MIKE MERCHANT