

Officials Allege Violations at Hunting Ranges

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[Virginia](#) wildlife officials have joined a multistate investigation into the illegal buying, selling and possession of foxes and coyotes for use on private training preserves where hunters pay to run their foxhounds.

After surprise inspections Sunday of 41 training preserves, Virginia game officials temporarily closed 31 for alleged violations of the permits that allowed the organizations to keep the animals on their properties, Col. Mike Bise, chief of law enforcement in Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, said yesterday.

Many of the preserves are mom-and-pop operations across rural Virginia where fox hunters pay a small fee to train their dogs in fenced compounds that range in size from 100 acres to almost 1,000 acres, Bise said. The object is generally not to kill the fox but to follow the chase by listening to the pack of baying hounds. But evidently so many foxes had been dying at some training preserves that officials became concerned about their conditions and worried that an interstate fox trade had sprung up, Bise said.



These foxes were among the more than 80 animals seized Sunday by Alabama wildlife officials. (Courtesy Of Alabama Wildlife And Freshwater Fisheries Division)

William Goodman, who has been operating the Rolling Hills Fox Pen in Virginia's [Louisa County](#) for 35 years, said the state has overreacted to the excesses of the biggest operators by shutting down almost all training facilities. He said he and his wife Frances' permit was suspended because game officials could not find records of addresses for every dog owner who used his facility.

"They're trying to paint a picture that we're slaughtering foxes," Goodman said. "The idea is not to kill a fox. A dead fox won't run."

Officers in [Alabama's](#) Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, which began an investigation two years ago that now spans the Southeast, said they arrested 18 people Sunday in Alabama as part of "Operation Foxote" and seized 55 foxes, 25 coyotes, two bobcats, 33 cardinals and one moonshine still.

Allan Andress, chief of law enforcement for the Alabama Wildlife and Fisheries Division, echoed concerns that the larger operations were violating regulations about conducting field trials so that the animals sometimes died, thereby creating a market that paid as much as \$100 per live fox.

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"I can't say that they intentionally let the dogs rip into the animals, because every animal killed is more money lost," Andress said. "It's really not in their best interest to catch the animal."

But Andress said some operations may have been earning "over six figures" a year by charging as much as \$25 per dog or allowing too many dogs in the preserve at once.

Goodman, 57, who keeps about a dozen foxes on a 210-acre property in Bumpass, Va., said hunters pay \$2 a day to run their dogs inside the compound, and his foxes are never harmed. He said one of his foxes is 14 years old.

Some English-style foxhunting clubs from Virginia's horse country have trained their foxhounds at his facility over the years, but most of his clientele are local hunters who haul their foxhounds into the woods in the back of a pickup and follow the chase on foot, seldom, if ever, killing the fox.

Goodman said his foxes can roam widely in the compound and eat well enough -- about 300 pounds of dog food a week -- that they've become too fat and happy to kill the rabbits in the enclosure. "They're taken care of better than in the wild," he said, adding that he even worms them from time to time.

But Goodman was critical of larger operations across the state, saying they have turned a country pastime into big business, with one operator charging as much as \$30 per dog and holding field trials with as many as 800 dogs.

"What it amounts to is, we've got a little country store, and he's the [Wal-Mart](#)," Goodman said.