

KILLING

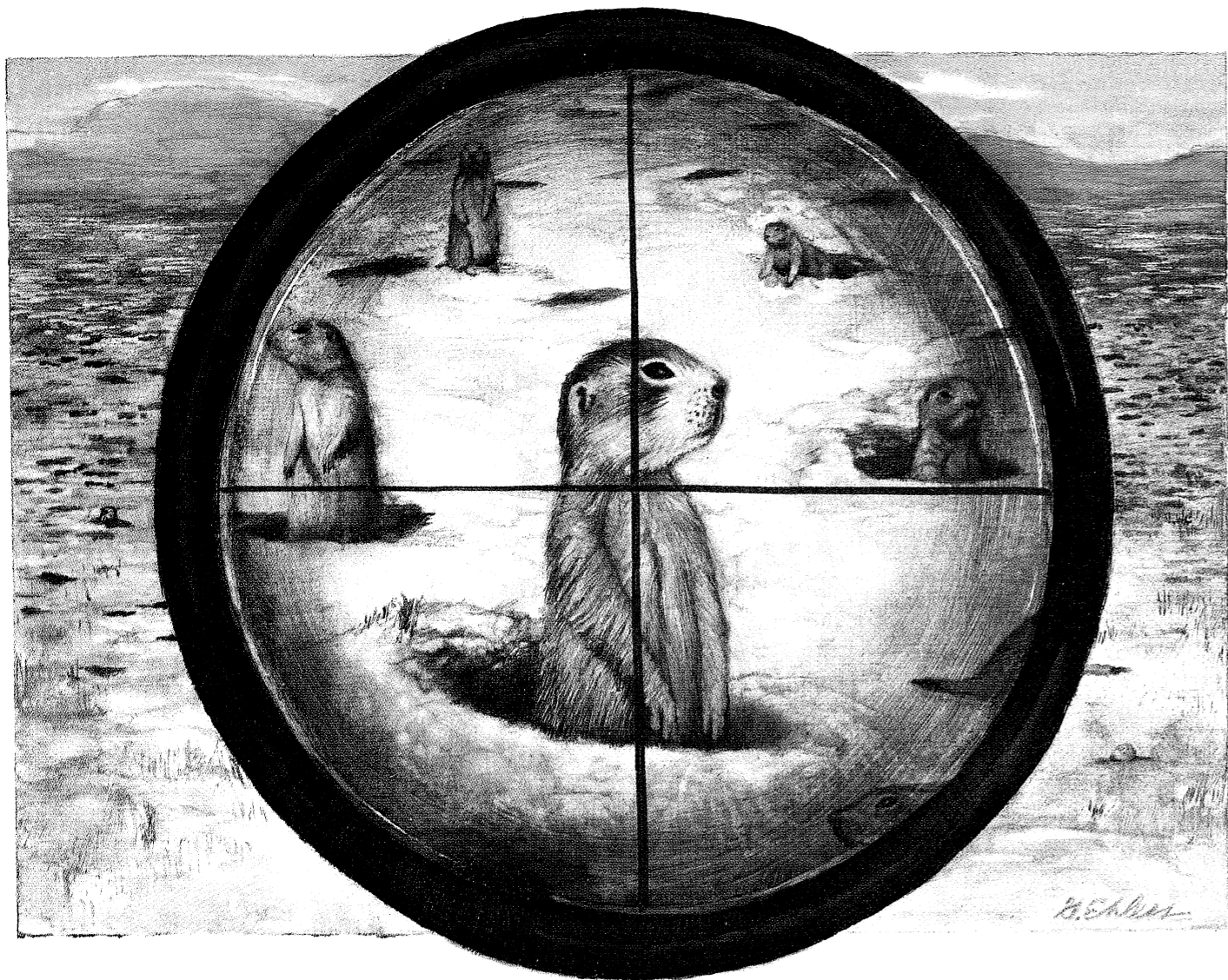


ILLUSTRATION BY GARY EHLERS

FOR "FUN"

DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, AMERICAN TRAIN passengers sometimes entertained themselves by leaning out of windows and, as the train moved on, taking shots at bison. Today most Americans would consider such wanton slaughter of bison utterly repugnant. Nevertheless, our society continues to permit contests and other events that feature killing animals for "fun."

In present-day killing contests—usually orga-

nized, as a fundraiser, by a local gun club or other private organization—participants receive points and prizes worth up to \$10,000 for killing animals. In some contests thousands of animals are killed each year: at Nucla, Colorado's Top Dog World Championship Prairie Dog Contest, 3,000–4,000 prairie dogs; at Labor Day pigeon-shooting events in and around Hegins, Pennsylvania, approximately 13,000 pigeons; at

BY
BETSY
BIRD

the Sweetwater, Texas, Jaycees Sweetwater Rattlesnake Round-up, an average 18,000 rattlesnakes. Onlookers cheer as the prairie dogs, peeking out from their holes, or the pigeons, just released from their cages and only beginning to fly upward, are shot.

Clearly some people consider such events harmless entertainment; they are often promoted as family events, and children may be encouraged to participate in the killing. During pigeon shoots such as the one held in Hegins, children are employed to wring the necks of birds whom contestants fail to kill cleanly.

In our view, blood-sport contests represent callous cruelty, teaching indifference to suffering and pleasure in destruction. These festivals of cruelty represent an unjustified contempt for animals branded as "varmints" or "pests."

Misguided wildlife "management" policies reflect the same unjust and irrational attitude—that animals of some species may be persecuted and brutally destroyed because they are "undesirable" or because their destruction will supposedly benefit members of more valued species. Many western ranchers have long perceived coyotes, rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, porcupines, and other so-called varmints as threats to humans and livestock. Consequently, the government, ranchers, and some hunters have felt justified in their efforts to annihilate these species in the name of protecting ranching interests.

Coyotes have routinely been hunted, trapped, and poisoned. Although most coyotes do not prey on sheep, the mere possibility of a coyote doing so has provoked many senseless and cruel programs aimed at killing coyotes. (The same irrational behavior led to the near-extinction of wolves and grizzly bears in the forty-eight contiguous states.) Because of run-ins between porcupines and cattle or sheep, many ranchers dislike porcupines as well.

Prairie dogs are regularly poisoned or shot. Since 1900 their population size has been reduced by over 90 percent, through habitat loss to "development" and through ranchers' efforts to destroy them. Ranchers contend that prairie dogs ruin grasslands and compete with livestock for food, but prairie dogs—unlike cattle and sheep—are native to western grasslands. They play a crucial role in preserving their ecosystem. Indirectly the slaughter of thousands of prairie dogs has led to the near-annihilation of black-footed ferrets, who feed almost exclusively on prairie dogs and use their burrows.

Since colonial times rattlesnakes have been persecuted throughout the United States for reasons stemming as much from superstition and tradition as from any purported threat to humans or livestock. Despite our society's growing appreciation for wildlife, and our knowledge that rattlesnakes are important to their ecosystems—for example, in controlling the number of rodents—they are more likely to be persecuted than protected.

Rattlesnake roundups now occur throughout a wide geographical belt of the southern United States. Organizers of these roundups contend that the contests do not deplete the snake populations, citing the consistently high number of snakes captured each year. However, experts believe these high numbers may result from increased numbers of participants and a larger hunt area rather than from rattlesnake-population stability. In any case, snake hunters employ an extremely cruel method: in order to drive snakes to the surface, the hunters gas their dens. Philosopher Jack Weir, Ph.D., of Morehead State University, has compared rattlesnake-hunting techniques to burning a fenced-in forest with only one exit and then shooting the deer as they try to escape.

Like so many other killing contests, rattlesnake roundups harm the environment. While seeking snakes, hunters disrupt the natural habitat of lizards, rodents, and many other animals as well; this, in addition to the harmful effects of gassing snake dens, may

make many dens unsuitable for use by future desert dwellers. Gassing dens also kills many desert animals other than rattlesnakes. A rattlesnake "control" officer in South Dakota has noted that for every 100 rattlesnakes killed by poisoning of their dens, 40 snakes of other species are also killed.

Killing contests damage the environment, needlessly cause animals to suffer and die, and encourage an acceptance of destruction and brutality. In 1984 Nevada's assistant attorney general wrote an opinion stating that, while the state is permitted to kill pigeons in certain circumstances (for example, those in which the birds are considered pests), the intentional mutilation and injury inflicted on pigeons during shoots is unjustified. Several states—including Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Ohio—have specific provisions in their animal-cruelty statutes that pertain to pigeon shoots. In New Jersey, for example, it is a misdemeanor to "use a live pigeon, fowl or other bird for the purpose of a target, or to be shot at either for amusement or as a test of skill in marksmanship," or to shoot at a bird at an organized event. Michigan accords broader protection; there, it is illegal to use *any* animal for target shooting.

In many cases, however, state animal-cruelty statutes—intended to protect animals from abuse, neglect, and wanton destruction—have not been applied to killing contests. Although Colorado's anti-cruelty statute declares it unlawful for any person to needlessly mutilate or kill an animal—and although the court determined in the 1896 case *Waters v People* that shooting captive doves for the purpose of improving marksmanship, for sport, or for amusement is unjustified under the statute—Colorado officials have failed to halt the Top Dog prairie dog shoot.

Because killing contests continue despite state anti-cruelty statutes, many people have sought to end these events through the public pressure of protest demonstrations. Unfortunately some of these efforts have backfired. During a recent Top Dog prairie dog shoot, for example, protest commotion apparently prompted more prairie dogs to emerge from their holes in order to investigate. The prairie dogs were then easy targets. Protest demonstrations may also increase event publicity, attracting more people as contest participants or spectators.

How, then, can we stop killing contests? Citizens should inform their state legislators of their objections, in order to prompt more effective enforcement of existing anti-cruelty laws and the creation of new laws. In April HSUS President Paul G. Irwin wrote a letter on behalf of our members to Governor Mark Racicot of Montana alerting him to a porcupine-hunting contest. Mr. Irwin expressed our concerns about the hunt's brutality, the message that acceptance of such brutality conveys to society, and the hunt's potentially detrimental effects on the porcupine population. Following our protest, the porcupine-killing contest was canceled.

In 1991 the San Juan Coyote Hunt was proposed as an entertaining way of killing coyotes who, it was believed, reduce the number of deer available as hunters' targets. Prizes would have gone to those who killed the most coyotes. The HSUS urged our members to protest against the hunt and express concerns about the "management" practice of increasing one "game" species at another's expense. As a result of public pressure, the hunt was canceled.

Currently The HSUS is also examining ways in which federal legislation might be used to ban pigeon shoots and other forms of "hunting" of captive animals. We believe that killing contests epitomize human abuse of animals and the environment—and should be banned. ■

Betsy Bird is HSUS research associate, Wildlife and Habitat Protection.