

# In the Heart of America's

## *Foxhunting and land stewardship*

by Beth Hester

### The Backstory

Several autumns ago during a research-related tour, I traveled the scenic byways of Clarke, Fauquier, and Loudoun counties, taking side trips to explore the region's treasured network of largely unpaved, rural roads. Loudoun County alone has approximately 300 miles of these extraordinary passages, including the Beaverdam Creek Historic Roadways District. I drove around for miles admiring the traditional dry-fit stone fences, the architecturally appropriate structures, and the stunning fall foliage. I basically had the roads to myself. There was the occasional pickup truck/horse trailer combo, and a handful of drivers who were probably running errands, leaf-peeping, or heading out to various farm markets, field trials, and wineries. I wasn't so much traversing the rolling countryside as

*"If you don't think ahead, it's impossible to stave off the bulldozers coming across the fields."*

—Dr. Jack van Nagell, Current President of MFHA & Joint-MFH, Iroquois Hunt, KY

savoring the illusion that the landscape was slowly unwinding before me. There were no dreadful strip malls, tacky housing developments, or 'improved' roadways that didn't improve anything. But, I realized, all this open land isn't an accident.

I was in hunt country, where equestrian pursuits and field sports are entrenched in the culture, and where field sport participants and landowners will fight for their sport, and for thoughtful land management practices that help to preserve the countryside way of life. Foxhunting and point-to-point events

necessitate large swathes of open land. Well aware of the various threats to open land in the commonwealth, I was inspired to explore the intersection between foxhunting, and land conservation initiatives in selected areas of the piedmont region. Does foxhunting exist because of open land, or, does open land continue to exist because of foxhunting and other field sports? The answer is both. It's an interdependent relationship.

### Foxhunting in Virginia Today—Pressures and Partnerships

Currently, there are 29 hunts in Virginia, more than any other state, including Kentucky—which is surprising to many people. Divided into two districts, the majority of the hunts are located in the Piedmont. To get some initial perspective on the state of foxhunting in Virginia, I turned to Lt. Col. Dennis J. Foster,

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# n's Hunt Country

*ship traditions are alive and well.*



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In Middleburg, the fox is everywhere. Below, a scene from the Bull Run Joint Hunt, crossing the Robinson River. Left, a lovely view of the pastoral Farmington Hunt Foxridge Conservation Easement in Albemarle County.

U.S. Army (ret.) who is Executive Director, U.S. & Canada, of the Masters of Foxhounds Association (MFHA). This organization headquartered in Virginia is responsible for qualifying each hunt, ensuring all abide by strict codes of conduct, and stringent organizational rules. The MFHA encourages and recognizes land conservation efforts through the sponsorship of two major conservation awards:

- ♦ The Hunting Habitat Conservation Award: to recognize those foxhunting clubs, individuals, and organizations that have made significant and enduring contributions toward the preservation of rural countryside and its flora and fauna.
- ♦ The District Conservation Award: to recognize conservation efforts in the various MFHA districts, and to inspire future land conservation efforts among members of the foxhunting family.

The MFHA is also responsible for enforcing the Territory Policy, which is key to the MFHA's existence. In the very early days, there were numerous hunts all competing for permission to hunt on someone's land. That competition resulted in conflicts between hunts and disgruntled landowners who often got tired of their attempts to get permission. Dennis explains: "For example, one hunt would wine and dine all the farmers around another hunt's kennel, and pretty soon you had no place to hunt and upset landowners who sometimes because of it wouldn't let anyone hunt. The MFHA helped to change all that."

When the MFHA was first formed, there were only three rules:

- ♦ All member hunts were assigned territory boundaries exclusively theirs to hunt. Compliance with this rule takes the pressure off landowners from other hunts that want to hunt on their land.
- ♦ No other member hunt could hunt in another member's territory without permission from the landowner and the member hunt.
- ♦ The MFHA provided a hound registration so that serious breeders could improve the breed.

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The Hunt and Hound Review, Middleburg Christmas Parade



John Birdsall responds to the call, Tally Ho.

I asked Dennis to weigh in on the current foxhunting scene: “First, it is good to dispel the elitist label that foxhunting seems to have. Fox hunters are not rich bastards. The fact is, *any* enthusiast of *any* sport will do whatever is necessary to pursue that interest. Fox hunters come from all walks of life.”

Indeed. I suppose that if I were to tally the funds I’ve spent over the decades on shotguns, shells, clay, fly rods, line, reels, tying materials, high-end optics, field guides, outdoor clothing, travel, watercraft, and other gear, I would find that I could have acquired a small estate with enough money left over to outfit and maintain one or two fine horses. It’s a matter of perspective.

Dennis continues: “The survival of foxhunting in Virginia, as well as other field sports, depends largely upon local and federal government entities. Attitudes toward growth differ from county to county. For example, Fauquier County considers itself to be primarily agricultural, and the local government is conservation-minded when it comes to open space and keeping urban sprawl within limits. By contrast, Loudoun County, being so close to D.C., is under a great deal of pressure to develop more of the county. The landscape in Loudoun looked very different 20 years ago. The foxhunting culture around Middleburg is so ingrained in its fabric that it’s the main reason more land hasn’t been given over to development. Middleburg is a

mecca for foxhunting and equestrian sport enthusiasts. Fox hunts and other events keep land in and around Middleburg open. Large concentrations of foxhunters have migrated to the area over the years. The fact that foxhunters and hound enthusiasts exist has a beneficial collateral impact on the region and anyone who appreciates the aesthetics of open land.”

Another important factor impacting large parcels of land are tax situations. Taxes often compel heirs to sell off parcels of land, breaking it up into a mosaic of smaller pieces which then become horse farms, farmettes, vineyards, etcetera. While these new incarnations can contribute in positive ways to the maintenance of a ‘working landscape’, and don’t always disrupt the viewshed, the contiguous areas of open land once conducive for equestrian pursuits ceases to exist.

In Virginia, because of specialized conservation organizations like the Piedmont Environmental Council (PECVA), and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), resources exist to help landowners navigate estate issues and explore the benefits of donating land via conservation easements. Not surprisingly, these preservation organizations have staff and field coordinators with strong ties to field sports, foxhunting, and rural culture, and also understand the connections. Kristin Jones, assistant director of easements for the VOF, explains the

exchanges that often take place during hunts: “Many people who move to our region of the Piedmont come to love the land and the rural way of life through foxhunting. They may have moved here specifically to foxhunt and then decided to purchase land to both preserve, and hunt over. While out hunting, much of the conversation centers on how to preserve open land and provide for wildlife. Once people become aware of the multiple ways they can aid land preservation efforts, they begin to implement good conservation practices.”

Though it is difficult to say with certainty exactly how many acres of preserved land in the Virginia Piedmont have a direct correlation to foxhunting or equestrian pursuits, conservation easements have proved to be the most robust tool currently available to ensure protection of a property. Every easement, every preserved parcel of land makes a contribution. Rex Linville, land conservation officer, PECVA, shares his perspective: “The key thing is that by preserving land from development we have made sure the land will always be available for rural activities like hunting, agriculture, recreation, and scenic enjoyment. When the land becomes ‘lost’ to development, those options no longer exist. I would argue that in one way or another, *all* protected rural land benefits the hunt by preserving options for the future.”



## Preservation Profile

Virginia foxhunter, Farmington Hunt member, and PECVA board member John Birdsall came to foxhunting after being introduced to the sport by his wife, Charlottesville native Mary Scott Birdsall, when they were both students at UVA. He'd been an active quail hunter in Florida during his youth, and working with canines was second nature. Fifty years after first engaging in foxhunting, he says that the sport has become a part of his DNA. The Birdsall family placed their first property in conservation easement in 1984 and since have donated over 1,700 in combined acres across multiple easements.

Birdsall is considered a driving force for open space conservation in his region, inspiring others to consider land donations. When asked about the current state of conservation around the Farmington Hunt region in Albemarle County, Birdsall shared the following: "Much has changed since 1984. Much land which was open to foxhunting has been lost to intensive development. There was a dramatic acceleration of donated conservation easements post-2000 when the commonwealth created the preservation tax credit, and I believe that absent that particular tax credit, far more land would have been lost, perhaps to the extent that foxhunting would not have survived in western Albemarle. I'm obviously grateful for what has been accomplished, and I do think that there is an evolving mindset to preserve. Even so, I can't help recalling the bumper sticker that reminds us that farmland lost is lost forever."

In 2011, The Farmington Hunt and J.B. Birdsall received the MFHA Hunting Habitat Conservation Award. Other award winners and their contributions can be viewed on the MFHA website.

## Looking Forward: Tack & Tactics

Though a land conservation mindset is part of foxhunting culture, and hunt organizations by and large have members who, each in their own way, champion preservation causes, success going forward will depend upon landowners and field sport enthusiasts of all varieties adopting a triadic approach: creating conservation easements on their own land, participating in outreach and education efforts, and direct political action.



Morven Park, Leesburg, is home to the Museum of Hounds and Hunting.

In our efforts to protect open land and preserve the countryside way of life, we're not so different from our counterparts across the pond. After all, our ancestors brought to the East Coast of America both their hunting traditions and their hounds. An important study completed in 2003 by scholars at the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, University of Kent, Canterbury, concluded:

"We found that landowners participating in field sports maintained the most

established woodland, and planted more new woodland and hedgerows than those who did not, despite the equal availability of subsidies. Voluntary habitat management appears to be important for biodiversity conservation in Britain, and similar activities globally, may benefit from considering their utility as incentives to conserve additional habitat on private land."

In an article covering news of the 2011 Farmington Hunt/Birdsall award, Norman Fine wrote of foxhunting: "Arguably no other sporting culture has done as much to preserve land and natural habitat." Given the large tracts of land needed to pursue equine sport, and the passion that foxhunters have for their way of life, this may well be true. ❧

*Beth Hester is a writer and freelance photographer from Portsmouth. Her passions include reading, shooting, kayaking, fishing, tying saltwater flies, and tending her herb garden.*

## RESOURCES

- ♦ Masters of Foxhounds Association & Foundation: [www.mfha.org](http://www.mfha.org)
- ♦ The National Sporting Library & Museum (Middleburg): [www.nationalsporting.org](http://www.nationalsporting.org)
- ♦ *The Horse in Virginia: An Illustrated History*, by Julie A. Campbell (see review on pg. 41)
- ♦ The Museum of Hounds & Hunting of North America at Morven Park (Leesburg) [www.morvenpark.org](http://www.morvenpark.org) and [www.mhhna.org](http://www.mhhna.org)



The Farmington Hunt takes place on conservation easement land.