



Wildlife pens may be littered with old refrigerators and freezers that serve as makeshift shelters for coyotes and foxes retreating from dogs in hot pursuit—but only if they can escape quickly enough.

No Escape | A Florida family fights to end the brutal practice of wildlife penning

For Christin Tank and her husband, their 2005 purchase of a house on 4 acres in Holt, Fla., seemed like a dream. Tank's parents would build another home on the property, and the adjoining tract of undeveloped woodland promised the quiet country life they all craved. Even when the neighboring land was leased to a hunting operation two years later, they weren't overly worried.

"I remember people going in and out and doing lots of work on the electrical fencing," says Tank. "We were told they had coyotes and foxes and that they would be exercising their dogs a couple of times a week on these animals." The operators assured her that the coyotes and foxes were fed and cared for like pets.

But within a few months, Tank knew something was terribly wrong. What she discovered turned her family into accidental activists, determined to stop a grisly blood sport in their state.

In August 2008, Tank was alone at her parents' house when the quiet morning gave way to a din of barking and growling. Behind the fence of the neighboring property, seven dogs had pinned a coyote on his back. "They were literally ripping him apart," Tank says.

She screamed and banged on the fence, hoping to stop the attack. Eventually, two men drove up, pulled the dogs away, and tossed the coyote's limp form in the back of the truck.

"I was crying and told them that this is not what I was told it was, that this is wrong and I have children who should not have to witness this," Tank says. But over the next several months, the maulings continued.

In wildlife pen competitions, as many as 600 hounds are set loose to chase down wild animals in escape-proof enclosures; dogs are judged on their speed, aggression, and persistence, says Casey Pheiffer, manager of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign.

Following the establishment in 1980 of the first known pen in Georgia, she says, "these operations began to grow before wildlife agencies really knew what they were about."

To supply live bait for the competitions, wild foxes and coyotes are trapped, packed into cages, and shipped hundreds of miles with no access to food or water; those who survive the trip live in constant stress until their brutal deaths. The dogs don't fare much better. They're typically housed in large packs, unsocialized, and kept painfully thin to enhance their speed and prey drive; Tank has seen dogs with bones protruding from their hips and backs.

Despite the blatant cruelty, these operations—known as "fox pens"—exist in many states and enjoy loose regulations and infrequent inspections. They're most prevalent in the Southeast; North and South Carolina have more than 100 permitted commercial pens each. But since many facilities lack permits, the exact number in the U.S. is unknown, says Pheiffer.

The HSUS has been trying to change these realities, pushing for state bans and working with local activists to promote tighter regulations and more frequent inspections. And authorities in some states have begun to take notice, with investigations in Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama bringing numerous arrests.

Before the operation moved in next door, Tank didn't know such cruelty existed. While she and her family aren't opposed to most forms of traditional hunting, they were deeply disturbed by the senseless cruelty they witnessed.

Complaints to the pen operator and landowner didn't help the situation. "They started running the dogs 24/7 throughout the week, one group of hunters after another," Tank says. Her 4-year-old son began to sob in fear whenever he saw people drive through the pen's front gate.

After Tank and her mother, Judy Maines, contacted the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the operation was shut down for violating its permit, which allowed the use of foxes but not coyotes. But less than two months

later, another participant received a permit to run foxes on the property, and the operation was back in business.

Encouraged by her brother and sister-in-law, Jeremy and Noni Maines—who were in close contact with The HSUS for advice and support—Tank and her family continued to file reports with the FWC that coyotes were still on the property. They sent letters and e-mails to friends, commission officials, state representatives, and the governor. They also created a website—*endthehunt.org*—and a Facebook page on the issue.

Still, the pen remained open, coyotes and all. “It was never a minute’s rest for us or the animals,” says Judy Maines.

In August, they witnessed another mauling: a coyote with a gaping wound on his hip was trapped against the electrified fence, trying to defend himself from the dogs. Using a motion-activated video camera and night camera, Tank and her



The maulings witnessed by Christin Tank and her family prompted their many appeals to wildlife officials, who shut down the operation next door and promised to examine others in the state.

mother documented the cruelty and sent the evidence to the wildlife commission and several media outlets. The FWC shut down the operation once again.

By this time, the family was ready to take their battle to the next level. In September, Tank and her brother drove 14 hours

round trip to testify before the FWC, which put a moratorium on new permits and promised to look more carefully at the pens in operation.

It was a partial victory for the siblings, who remain determined to shut down the six permitted operations left in Florida. They can make a fiscal argument for their case; Jeremy Maines notes that operators don’t have to pay for their permits or even acquire hunting licenses, “so it brings in no revenue to the state, yet our tax dollars are paying for the inspections,” he says. And they can also appeal to Floridians’ compassion: “I want people to know how cruel and inhumane wildlife pens are,” Maines says, “and that they are a black eye on our state.”

— *Ruthanne Johnson*

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Who Saved Whom? Rescued dog provides the best medicine

When Shiloh moved in with HSUS member Brenda Larrabee of Snead, Fla., the first thing the black Lab got was a stern warning: Larrabee wanted none of the fence jumping, car chasing, or excessive barking that had precipitated his departure from previous homes.

Larrabee’s son had adopted the dog from an animal shelter but was later hospitalized for several months. Various family members cared for Shiloh until he eventually ended up at Larrabee’s door. Determined to keep her new friend from going back to the shelter, she read him the riot act, telling him, “If you want to live at this house, you’ll abide by my rules.”

Evidently, Shiloh took the lecture to heart, because in the four years since, he’s been a model dog. And he has a particular talent that has made him an invaluable companion for Larrabee, who suffers from multiple sclerosis and seizure disorder.

“About 10 minutes before a seizure comes on, he starts making a deep woofing sound. Not a bark exactly—he’s never barked since I got him,” she says. “And he starts pulling or nudging me.” Larrabee can’t prevent the seizure, but she’ll sit or lie down so she doesn’t get hurt. Shiloh lies across her legs until the episode is over.

Larrabee first observed Shiloh’s unusual behavior about four weeks after bringing him home. The nurses at the clinic where she received in-



Shelter dog Shiloh’s fence-jumping days belied his hidden talent for predicting the future—one that has helped owner Brenda Larrabee stay safe.

fusion treatments also noticed. “Shiloh would stand up and get very restless,” recalls nurse Joyce Shiler, who treated Larrabee frequently. “He would start whining, and a few minutes later Brenda would have an episode.”

How dogs recognize an oncoming seizure remains a mystery.