

The descriptions below relate to fox hunting, but the principles apply equally to hare hunting (with beagles, bassets and harriers), stag hunting and mink hunting.

The function of the horn

The use of a horn by the huntsman is integral to fox hunting and other hunting activities where hounds hunt their quarry by scent. It is employed as a signal from the huntsman to his hounds or followers to indicate what is required or to denote what is happening.

Normally only the huntsman uses a horn during the course of a hunt. However, his assistants, known as 'whippers-in', may carry a horn and use it on rare occasions when they need to communicate with hounds in an emergency.

The huntsman will put more or less excitement into his horn calls according to the tempo of the chase. Short notes, often repeated in quick succession, are used when there is a need to hurry the hounds. Longer, slower notes are for pauses; for instance, when a fox has run into an underground sanctuary, when hounds have failed to find a fox or at the end of the hunting day.

Types of calls

Hunting horn vocabulary falls naturally into three groups:

'Signal' calls

These comprise single notes used to convey some routine signal from huntsman to his hounds, his staff, or his field.

'Disappointed' or 'sad' calls

These are longish wails that are used to indicate a blank covert, losing a fox in a covert, calling his hounds to him or blowing "going home" at the end of a day's hunt. They have a slow, mournful tone.

'Doubled' calls

Blown during moments of excitement and encouragement, in contrast to 'disappointed'.

Specific horn calls commonly used:

Brackets indicate which of the three categories the calls fall into.

Moving off (signal)

This call is sometimes blown at the onset of a day's hunting. It is a quickly delivered double note.

Drawing (signal or doubled)

'Drawing' means 'to look for a fox with hounds'. The horn may be used sparingly by the huntsman while hounds investigate and sniff out a scent. Calls comprise merely

light touches on the horn. The aim of this employment may be either to:

- (1) get the fox onto its feet and moving, or
- (2) to keep hounds in touch with the huntsman in a situation where there is distance and or obstruction between the parties, or
- (3) to keep hounds drawing in the direction which the huntsman wishes to go.

Calling hounds out of a blank covert (disappointed)

This horn call is a long and mournful wail which may be repeated three or more times in an undulating manner. It is used by the huntsman to bring hounds out of a place where they have been searching which does not hold any foxes, and may be known as 'blowing out'.

These notes may also be used at any other time when the huntsman is missing his full complement of hounds and wants to gather them in.

Doubling the horn (doubled group)

Doubling the horn is recognised as a series of short rapid staccato notes. Doubling the horn only takes place when a fox has been roused and is moving. It is an encouraging signal from the huntsman to his hounds urging the animals to hurry. Doubling may occur when a fox is being chased within a wooded area or other place (such as gorse or a field of maize), or when a fox has been seen by a member of the hunt running in the open away from hounds and the huntsman wants to hurry them together to give chase quickly as a unified body.

Blowing away (doubled group)

Similar but different to doubling the horn; it is a series of quick, pulsating doubled notes only blown by the huntsman when the fox has left his refuge, is running in the open and the hunt is on. It is often described as a thrilling sound, and apart from communicating a sense of urgency to the hounds it serves the important purpose of letting the person in charge of all the horse riders know that their moment has come to gallop across country in pursuit of the hounds.

Stopping hounds (disappointed)

This is a long, even, repeated note. It is blown to stop hounds from hunting something other than the chosen quarry. Unless the pack of hounds is extremely well drilled this call, although useful, is seldom enough to stop hounds on its own. It is usual to combine 'stopping hounds' with whip-cracking and stern shouting (known as 'rating').

Calling the whipper-in (signal)

This is a quick note followed by a rapid double (like: "one, two-three"). This call may be repeated and can be open to interpretation from different huntsmen.

Variations on this theme may summon other officials, for example the second whipper-in, terrierman, or second horse-man.

Gone to ground (disappointed)

This slightly sad, long and wavering note is repeated three times when the hunted

fox has eluded hounds and taken refuge in an underground dwelling, animal hole, culvert or man-made drain. It may include a tremelo, which is blown by shaking the mouthpiece of the horn against the lips.

The kill (sad)

This is an extended wavering note blown as a tremelo. Although it is not a doubled note, and by definition sad sounding, this call is sounded by the huntsman when hounds have caught and killed their quarry as a signal of congratulations to them for doing their job.

Blowing for home (disappointed)

Blown at the end of each days hunting, this is a long and mournful wail. Historically, some huntsmen have sounded this call in an especially extended and extravagant manner at the end of the last hunt of the season.

Blowing for the pack

This call is unique to the sport of stag hunting. It is an instruction from the huntsman to the whipper-in that a small group of select hounds (called 'tufters') have separated the hunted stag from other deer and have got him up and running in the open. It is a long note blown with wavering undulations, and sounded in combination with a white handkerchief which is held aloft as a visible signal.

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