



Matthew Cook walking hounds near the Farmington Hunt Kennels (Photo by J.Christopher Middleton, DVM)

A HUNTSMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Matthew Cook of Farmington Hunt Club in Charlottesville, Virginia

by Elizabeth H. Sutton

On a hot midsummer afternoon, I caught up with Matthew Cook as he rode up to meet me on a green John Deere lawn mower. Cutting grass is just part of the work it takes to maintain the grounds and kennels at the Farmington Hunt Club, home to 60 noisy, rambunctuous foxhounds. Nearby in the stable, three horses and a gang of house dogs and cats milled about as Cook's wife, Julie, and eight-year-old daughter, Pippa, fed the staff horses before turning them out in nearby paddocks. Chores are a family affair, carried out all year long in all

weather, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, during the heat of the summer through frozen days of winter. As summer winds down, the professional huntsman's work to prepare the pack for the coming season is about to begin.

Cook and his family are British by birth and Virginians by choice. Trained in England, Cook started his professional career after high school as a gamekeeper, then later moving into hunt service as kennel man and whipper-in and ultimately moving to America after an intermediate assignment with a private hunt club

outside Rome, Italy.

When the position of huntsman opened at Farmington, the Cooks had young children and enough youthful energy to move cross-country with their own dogs and horses in tow. In the summer of 2013, they took over the job left to them by a fellow countryman, Daron Beeney, who had served for more than a decade and left big boots to fill. Coming from the Los Altos Hunt in northern California, the Cooks faced a new set of challenges, both in topography and local culture. They were learning the



Matthew Cook with hounds in Albemarle County near Charlottesville, Thanksgiving Day, 2016. (Photo by Cathy Summers)





Matthew Cook heading home after a hunt, Horseshoe Bend Road near Charlottesville in February 2017. (Photo by Elizabeth H. Sutton)

new job in the shadow of the 40-year reign of the revered Jill Summers, whose practice and policy of hunting only foxes laid the foundation for Farmington’s hounds: The pack was bred and trained to stay away from anything non-vulpine. Coyotes were a growing threat to the ecosystem in Virginia, and Farmington remained one of the last recognized hunt clubs in America that had not yet loosened its rules and submitted to the pressure of coyotes moving into the area.

Cook arrived with the right experience. He had hunted coyotes almost exclusively while working in California and Nebraska. Coyotes were moving into Virginia and the fox population was adapting. “It was frustrating for the hounds, and for the staff to have to continually stop them when they’d get on [the scent of] a coyote. It just seemed like time to make a change,” Cook recalled.

Asked about some of the challenges he faces in his job, Cook focused on territory and expense. “Territory — you always want more,” he said. “Ours is constantly threatened by development.”

Farmington hunts over land in southern and northwestern Albemarle and Greene counties that is designated by the Masters of Foxhounds Association, an international association that governs all



hunts in North America and Canada. Permission to hunt is granted by private landowners willing to allow access to their farms. Joy Crompton, joint master of the Farmington Hunt Club (FHC), said, "Permission to allow foxhunting is not so much a service for the farmer but a field sport for the enjoyment of the landowners who ride and the people who support the conservation of the land required to fox-hunt. Killing the fox or the coyote is not the goal so much as the challenge and fun of the chase. It's a privilege and pleasure getting out in the beautiful countryside that we have, and appreciating the natural environment, with the desire to preserve and protect the wildlife that live there."

Cook echoed Crompton's words: "Enjoyment," he said. "I just want to see people out here, enjoying the sport."

But getting people out there is a challenge. "It's an expensive hobby," Cook said with a smile. "Let's face it, it's a big commitment." To meet this challenge, Cook encourages junior riders through the local 4-H programs and welcomes youngsters and interested members to join in non-mounted hound walks. He has

also participated in youth programs offered through the hunting associations such as the Junior Field Hunter Championships held last fall in Kentucky. It's also a family commitment: Eight-year-old Pippa has been riding with Farmington since she was old enough to sit on a pony, and last year competed in the Kentucky championships and in junior handler competitions at hound shows.

It is quite a challenge to get a group of hounds to work well together. Over the last three years Cook has culled the older hounds that were no longer able to keep up, trading them to neighboring hunts and taking on other hounds that showed potential. By participating in performance hound trials, such as the event Farmington attended in Belle Meade in Georgia last January, and entering regional hound shows, such as the Virginia Hound show held each year in Leesburg in May, he has strengthened relationships with other huntsmen with whom a fair bit of trading and interbreeding of hounds takes place.

According to guidelines set by the Masters of Foxhounds Association

(MFHA), foxhounds are not sold; transfer of ownership is done by breeding and trade between clubs under the direction of masters in cooperation with the professional huntsman.

Cook consults with other hunt masters to breed Farmington hounds for desirable traits such as good voice (the term used to describe a hound's bark). Much of Farmington's territory has smaller parcels of farmland interspersed with woodlands and streams with steep and rugged banks that can play havoc with sight and sound. "When they are hunting along the river or behind a ridge, I can't always see them, but I need to be able to hear them!" Cook said.

He is pleased with the pack's progress. "I think the pack is starting to come together," he said. "It takes three years to make a good hound. It's a real investment. Ideally, in order to compensate for the natural attrition due to age, infirmity and changes in circumstances that account for an annual turnover of about 20 percent, I would like to have up to 40 couple of hounds in our pack, and that takes time."

This year, Cook will start the

Assistant kennel man Grady Collier (L) and Matthew Cook parade the pack from the kennels to show visitors and members at the annual Farmington Hunt Puppy Show, May 21, 2017, Free Union, Virginia. (Photo by Cathy Summers)



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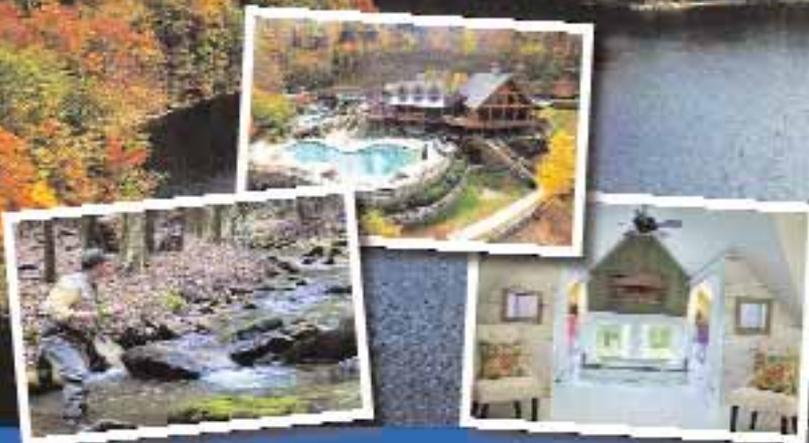
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hunting year designed to train both young hounds and fox cubs to hunt, in early September with a pack of approximately 28 couple of mostly American hounds. As the weather turns cooler and the farmland is cleared of harvested crops, the formal hunting season will begin. The season will continue throughout the winter until mid-March, just before the next generation of fox kits are born, and the cycle of life and growth begins anew.

For more about the Farmington Hunt Club, visit www.farmingtonhunt.org.

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