



Thermal turnaround



Mike Powell finally takes the thermal imaging plunge with the Pulsar Quantum. But is it worth the expense?

Quantum leap: Mike's resistance to thermal imaging finally crumbles

I always said I would never get one. One of the problems with reviewing equipment is that from time to time you come across something that really grabs your attention. I have used night vision for several years now, both digital and the more conventional tube type, and this type of equipment has totally changed the way I go about my business of controlling foxes. As I have said before, I have learned much more about the ways of quarry species from viewing them at night, and now I really wouldn't be without my night vision scopes and add-ons.

When thermal imaging first appeared in the shooting arena I was more than ready to say it was an unnecessary luxury and unless you were managing deer on an estate, for example, you just could not justify the cost. I made that statement and really believed it. I have to confess, though, that I had only once seen a thermal imager in action and that was at a game fair in bright sunlight. Then some time ago I



had a visit from someone who brought along some expensive night vision for me to look at, together with a thermal imager. Used at night, it really impressed me, so I had a word with the ever helpful Paul from Scott Country who kindly (and trustingly) sent me one of the Pulsar Quantum thermal imagers.

From the word go I could see the advantages of these units, particularly when used in conjunction with conventional night vision. The Pulsar is essentially straightforward to use, although like all night vision equipment it takes a bit of getting used to.

The first thing to strike you about thermal imagers is that you instantly see everything that has body heat within your radius. When using normal night vision, you depend on picking up 'eye shine' in the first instance, and while on moonlit nights it is possible to spot rabbits and foxes without the use of infra-red (which triggers the eye shine response), it is easy to miss seeing them if the ground is rough or they are stationary, or more often when they are not looking your way. The Pulsar, on the other hand, will instantly spot foxes out to 600 metres. Although clearly this is not shooting range, you do know what is about.

On the night I received the Pulsar, I walked up the lane to the field at the back of my



Lucky escape: On this occasion the vixen was fortunate Mike was out without a gun

house to see how it worked. This field gives a good view across the neighbouring poultry farm, which is a good source of foxes. Switching on the unit revealed, in the same field as I was in, a large badger about 100 metres away. Watching it for a few minutes, I was suddenly aware of a newcomer on the scene. A small fox that has been hanging around for some months suddenly appeared to my left and ran up to within a few feet of the badger, who totally blanked it.

I gave a small hand squeak, which had it running down the field towards me. Eventually I stopped it within about 10 metres of me, where it stood and glowed through the thermal imager, then off it went. I had no gun with me – a fact that would turn out to be of considerable significance. Thus far I had been impressed with the Quantum, but more importantly I could see the possibilities it offered both by day and by night.

The following morning I walked my fox-killing Labrador, Talon as usual but left a little earlier to give the Quantum a try as the light improved. Crossing the back field, I had a view across the chicken farm. I switched on the thermal and had a sweep across the fields. Apart from the odd rabbit and a bat, there was nothing except an odd shape in the middle of one of the large chicken enclosures. I couldn't

make out what it was, but my attention was quickly diverted to what was undoubtedly a fox running the inside of the perimeter. Somehow it had negotiated the mains-powered electric fence (probably over the top).

It was clearly in a panic – it seemed to be trapped. I couldn't let the dog in as there would be a good chance of him contacting the fence. As I was only a couple of hundred yards from home, I nipped back for the rifle. Sadly, as I suspected, by the time I got back it had gone. From what I had seen, though, it was the same little vixen I had seen the night before.

Letting myself into the run, I soon found that the odd object the TI had picked up was the remains of a freshly killed hen. Often when the farmer shuts the birds in, there will be the odd one left out. This was one such bird. I rang the farmer to put him in the picture and promised to deal with the fox as soon as possible.

About an hour later I had a call from the farmer to say that when he went to let the birds out, he was met with a scene of utter carnage. Small the vixen may have been, but she had really got stuck in to the birds. Gaining access by digging a hole under the house, she had slaughtered more than 50 hens and mauled a further dozen or so.



Crime scene: With over 50 killed, the henhouse resembled a slaughterhouse



There were only a handful of survivors...



The small vixen managed to dig under the house and force its way in



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By the time I got over there, the slain had been collected, leaving the pitiful survivors hunched up – and many of these would have to be killed. At £8 a bird, plus the loss of the eggs, it would have done no harm for the antis to have had a good look. Much money has been spent endeavouring to fox-proof the birds, but as so often happens, a determined fox will prove difficult to stop. This has been the second time in 10 years or so I've seen one do this much damage, probably triggered by the sudden dramatic fall in rabbit numbers owing to VHD and myxi.

This little killer would have to be dealt with, so that night I tied one of the corpses out next to a run that the local foxes have used for as long as I can remember, which leads close to the scene of the slaughter. Normally you can reckon on a fox that has killed returning to the scene of the crime the following night. But I was a bit doubtful in this case as I was sure she would probably have experienced a jolt or two from the fence – not a pleasant experience, as I know only too well.

I got myself settled into a good spot, which gave a good view of the bait bird – which, despite having been dead for at least 12 hours, still had enough warmth to register on the Quantum. There was also a good backstop. All of this was almost exactly 100 metres away. Arriving as darkness closed in, I did a five-hour stint until I was cold and, unusually for me, bored, then trudged home. Three rabbits and a couple of tawny owls aren't the most exciting company on a pitch-black night.

What did I think of the thermal imager? Firstly, it makes it much easier to pick out any living creature – if it's there, you will see it, whether it's Charlie or three boring rabbits and a couple of owls. It also picks out mice and rats, and bats.

There is no need to hold the rifle at the ready, either, as you will see your quarry long before it reaches you. If the smallest section of any living creature is not totally covered by something of substantial thickness, you will catch a glimpse of radiant white reflected back towards you.

It would be nice to recount that the vixen turned up on time and was duly dropped with one well-placed shot. Well, that didn't happen – there was no sign of her. I suspect my original thoughts about the electric fence had proved correct.

There was another factor: the positioning of the poultry units. The fencing and a road made positioning very difficult. I will get her, but



Determined: Despite night vision, foxes continue to do untold damage

it may take a while and many more hours with my three rabbits and the owls. I will keep you posted.

My first thoughts on the Pulsar Quantum thermal imager were positive to say the least. Is one essential? No. Are they expensive? Yes. But there seems to be little restriction on what people will spend on their chosen hobby or, in some cases, profession.

For keepers, professional vermin controllers and estates, I can see more and more of these devices being used. Doubtless the price will drop in due course, and second-hand items will gradually appear. As always with this type of technology, I strongly suggest you try before you buy.

I suppose my greatest endorsement of this product is that I bought one for myself. Mind you, there is no wife to question my profligacy, and the only person I have to answer to is myself. At my age I have had considerable experience of convincing myself, so really it was no contest. ■



Hunter: Labrador Talon does his bit to cull the fox population

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Acquired from: Scott Country ■ 01556 503587 ■ www.scottcountry.co.uk