



# In Defense of the “Grip and Grin”

By Jim Heffelfinger

**G**ripping and grinning are two common elements in the pictures we take of our harvested animals. For the last few generations, these photos were only shared among fellow hunters who understood the context from which these images came. To see these images in any type of media, you had to actually purchase a hunting magazine or catch one or two hunting shows on TV. Fellow hunters understood that the kill was not what the hunt was all about; to the contrary, it is what *ends* the hunt and forces you to go home. More recently, social media has changed the dynamics of sharing these photos with others. Now, at the click of a button, hunters share these images with the world, forever. The audience that now sees these pictures is no longer a small group of like-minded individuals

who understand the context, but rather a global community of people who have never spent a single day pursuing an animal with the intention of eating it.

Americans are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and that is clearly illustrated in recent decades as the hunting industry has become a commercial venture for many. Commerce is driven by marketing and that results in our harvested animals becoming unwitting participants. Pictures of beautiful specimens of all species of large animals are used to sell many things and this has also changed the dynamics of how we share pictures with others. These changes have sparked a discussion about these types of photos and what they represent. Images, and what they mean to different people, can be both a positive and nega-

tive force for the future of conservation that is so intimately intertwined with the consumptive use of wildlife.

## Image Conscious

If you've been following major social media channels recently you may have heard discussions about whether the traditional grip and grin photo is potentially harmful to the future of hunting because of how they are perceived by the non-hunting public. Some have sworn off ever taking, participating in, or sharing these types of images out of fear they will be seen by many as a crass celebration of the death of an animal and portray hunters more as conquerors and dominators than conservationists.

There are tangible examples of these kinds of photos sparking outrage among

anti-hunting groups that resulted in policy changes, job loss, laws being passed, and closing of large social media accounts. In one recent example, publicly posted grip and grin photos of the legal harvest of nonnative, invasive goats in Scotland even had the parliament discussing bans on hunting there. In the scientific community, an associate professor from University of Victoria with strongly negative personal views about hunting published a paper with an undergraduate student whereby they viewed nearly 3,000 grip and grins online and characterized whether the hunter had a “true smile” or “false smile.” They concluded hunters smiled more with large carnivores than small herbivores. What passes for “science” these days is disturbing, but the point is some people are actively using our photos to mischaracterize (in their words) “trophy-seeking-and-displaying behavior common among contemporary wildlife hunters.” We can expect more of this sort of nonsense from those with personal feelings in opposition to hunting. This particular university program has been a constant source of negative papers about hunting based mostly on Internet searches and a biased mischaracterization of hunting.

Some species are perpetual lightning rods for criticism and outrage. Bears are high on that list, as are any animal you had on your wallpaper as a small child. Female hunters are often the victim of anti-hunter outrage, perhaps because they so effectively threaten the macho dominator narrative. The size of the horns or antlers influences how the photo is perceived by a non-hunter. Large mature male animals lead the uninformed to think dominance and conquest must be the hunters’ motive, while a yearling buck is often seen as a hunter simply bringing meat home for the family. There has even been some discussion about whether it is appropriate for wildlife researchers to pose with their sedated study animals.

Personal intent is of fundamental importance when composing and taking pictures of harvested animals. If your intent is to publicly post a photo to



Photo: Levi Hefelfinger

*If meat is the most important thing, we have all been taking pictures of the wrong end.*

show everyone what a great hunter you are then it will be seen as just that and not garner many supporters among non-hunters. If you want to capture the beauty of the animal and its surroundings for friends and family who were not there, or as a personal record for future reference and remembrance, it will likely show in how you share that with others.

Regardless of all else, you must do your best to capture the respect you have for the animal by composing the photo appropriately. That means no tongues, minimal blood, no awkward body contortions, no alcohol, no sitting/standing on any portion of the animal, and a natural background. Your audience is no longer other hunters, but rather the non-hunting (and referendum-voting) public. In terms of your audience, don't forget you have the power to control who sees your photos through the security settings on social media platforms.

#### **Grip without the Grin**

Because of the concern over hunter image, and in an effort to not assault the sensitivities of non-hunters, there is an emerging trend to take photos of our harvest without grinning at the camera. Hunters look at the animal seriously, and sometimes even sadly, to show respect and to reflect on the seriousness of taking a life. The intent of these new grip and not-grin photos is to create an

image that is more acceptable to those who do not understand why anyone would be smiling next to wildlife they just killed.

Honestly, some of these photos look staged and silly to me. I fear the non-hunter sees this trend as artificial, maybe even a contrived attempt at appeasement or a cry for acceptance. Some non-hunters might even ask, “If you are sorrowful about this dead deer then why did you kill it?” I don't know how to tell the difference between “Fake Blues” and genuine reverence in a photo, but if you have to wipe the smile off your face to take the picture you probably have your answer. It seems clear this new type of grip and stare photo is a direct reaction to criticism of the old school photos and this causes me to question its authenticity.

I just know I am pretty excited when all my hard work and planning comes together and I am able to share the harvest of an animal with my family and friends. I would have to try hard and wait a while to conjure up a serious or sad face for a photo after trying my best to get meat in the freezer for a week or a few years. The meat might spoil while I tried to get the smile off my face. We need to be honest and transparent about our emotions above all else or we will be rightly labeled insincere, dishonest, or

manipulative. Grins and genuine reverence are not mutually exclusive.

A new variant of the grip and grin with hunters holding large slabs of meat is part of the new trend intending to show the audience (note there is an audience involved) that the meat is more important than the antlers. I wonder though if gripping a large chunk of dripping meat just carved out of the back of an animal is really more palatable to a person who has never eaten venison or seen a dead deer.

Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram was a picture of one of his backstraps on my cutting board next to the German steel knives inherited from my Uncle Bert the butcher. Somehow, I had no interest in sharing a picture of his antlers and I'm still not quite sure why. I just wanted to sit that one out. In previous years, I have taken pictures of my animals from the rear, getting the camera angle just right to show off that big beautiful hindquarter pushed out towards the camera to exaggerate its size.



Photo: Levi Hefelfinger

*Recently there has even been some discussion about whether it is appropriate for researchers to take grip and grin photos with their research animals.*

Our audience is not other hunters, our audience is the 95 percent of the population that doesn't hunt. All hunters need to think about their photos before posting and sharing. If you don't care about the future of hunting then just keep sharing photos of tongues hanging out, blood all over the bed of the truck, gaping chest cavities, people sitting or propping feet on animals, hats or sunglasses on animals, or alcohol in the picture. We need to try our best to add context to the image with accompanying text and strive for an accurate depiction of our respect and honorable intent.

These pictures capture the moment of success after a period of patience, perseverance, and hard work that you can't see in the final image. If done tastefully they reflect our excitement after a lot of hard physical and psychological work. I had four boys in Cub Scouts and through the years we probably made more than 15 Pinewood Derby cars. The only pictures I have of all those years are pictures of my sons and I posing with the finished cars, grinning ear to ear. I have no pictures of father and son working together in the garage cutting the shape of those cars, weighing, sanding, painting, and strategizing to be successful; and yet that is the entire purpose and value of the Cub Scout Pinewood

Photo: Jim Hefelfinger



*The grip and grin photo is not inherently disrespectful, quite the opposite – it represents successful planning, cooperation, knowledge of the animals, experience in the landscape, and hard work.*

### Coming to Grips with Grinning

I must confess, despite the title and above discussion, I am somewhat conflicted about this topic and apparently, I'm not the only one. Some people have sworn off the grip and grin, only to post one on Instagram a short time later. My office is at a university, so I don't live day-to-day in a hunting echo chamber of like-minded people. There are not many hunting photos being shared around the water cooler. I think this gives me a different perspective and helps me see things through the eyes of others.

Two years ago, I harvested a beautiful 3x4 desert mule deer and took a few pictures smiling at the camera (one of us was anyway). It was the second largest buck I had ever killed and yet the only photos anyone ever saw by print, email,

I have taken a lifetime of grip and grins, but almost none were mature animals. Many people talk about how it's all about the meat and if you saw the horns and antlers my family brought home over the last two decades you would see how honestly true that is for us. Female deer and elk are fully represented in our pictures.

The grip and grin is not inherently disrespectful, quite the opposite – it shows we value that animal greatly, even in death. For the average hunter, it represents the culmination of planning, cooperation, knowledge of the animals, experience in the landscape, and hard work. No doubt, we need to clean up our imagery in most cases. Photos must be respectful with an eye for minimizing obviously offensive components.

Derby program. Those final pictures of us grinning with the finished cars is all that remains to represent the fun time we spent together working on getting to that final point. These two types of grip and grin photos are not the same (no one is disgusted by the sight of a small wooden car), but there are fundamental similarities in what the final photos represent.

I understand the concern about how non-hunters see these pictures, but let's not jump at shadows by refusing to take them altogether. Abandoning the traditional grip and grin photo strikes me as an exaggerated response to a small subset of the general public who find it offensive to see smiling in a photo with a legally harvested animal. Whether it's an individual in the Scottish Parliament or your local PTA, some people will always question or attack photos of harvested wildlife, but this minority does not represent a serious threat to the future of hunting. We often give them more credibility than they deserve. The latest (2019) research on Americans' attitudes towards hunting revealed we are at an all-time high of 80 percent supporting legal hunting with an upward trend since 1995. In fact, 92 percent of Americans said they support the right of others to hunt legally regardless of their own personal opinion of hunting.

With this level of support, I think there may be more understanding of the grip and grin across society than indicated by the periodic venom we see in some social media comments. With a new generation of social media platforms doing a very good job of carrying a positive hunting message I think the future is looking brighter than a decade ago. With the entrance of foodies, curious millennials, locavores, and adventure seekers this support is more likely to increase, and with it, an increasing proportion of the public that might understand why the subjects in the photo are grinning.

Even if we are not grinning our hunting heritage into the ground, it doesn't mean we can't do a much better job with our message. Our motivations for hunting



Photo: Jim Heffelfinger

*The author's second-largest buck, a beautiful 3x4 desert mule deer.*

strongly drive varying levels of public support. Hunting for meat has an 84 percent approval rating among Americans, but only 29 percent support hunting for trophies. The importance of our motivations and the context we provide with our photos cannot be overstated.

Some are risk averse and willing to give up anything that presents a small or future risk. Others may hold onto practices far longer than is prudent for the good of the order. Opinions about this particular topic fall along that continuum. On one end of the spectrum we have people who would post a picture of a dead and bloody anything with tongue hanging out and not care in the least what anyone thinks because no laws were broken to harvest that animal. These people mistakenly think hunting is a right and not a privilege and if people don't like to look at their pictures they can "unfriend and unfollow." On the other end of the spectrum we have people who will not be seen in a picture with a dead animal for fear they might offend a non-hunter.

I don't think we need to "smile shame" those who prefer the traditional style photos, but we should be applying strong peer pressure on those who have not yet learned how to take a tasteful, respectful photo of the animal they harvested. I don't believe the grip and grin is the Achilles heel that will be exploited in any organized way to bring an end to hunting, but it can be damaging if

we are not thoughtful about it. Where on the spectrum you fall is a personal choice, but a choice that should be made after thoughtful reflection of the power and repercussions of the grip and grin.



*Jim Heffelfinger is a Certified Wildlife Biologist who has worked for the federal government, state wildlife agencies, universities, and in the private sector. Jim has authored or coauthored more than 220 magazine articles, dozens of scientific papers, and 20 book chapters in regional, national, and international publications.*

*He is Chair of the Mule Deer Working Group, Full Research Scientist at the University of Arizona, Professional Member of the Boone & Crockett Club, 2009 MDF Professional of the Year, and is currently the Wildlife Science Coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Instagram: @Jim.Deere*