

# MAKING ROOM FOR WOMEN IN THE OUTDOORS

By Jim Heffelfinger

"Women don't belong in deer camp," a friend told me many years ago. It made me laugh unexpectedly like a shock gobble. "I think you missed a software update somewhere along the way," I retorted.

In past generations, deer camp was a sacred place where men would embark on an annual pilgrimage to be men without the corrective guidance of their spouses that is so necessary in the real world. Deer camp was a place to let it all hang out; a place where boys learned words that were not on any spelling test as they transitioned out of adolescence.

Thankfully, we see a growing attitude of inclusiveness when it comes to time spent outdoors. Men like guns, women, and hunting and are finally coming to the realization that they all

mix quite nicely. With the evolving roles in society we are seeing a strong shift to more and more women involved in outdoor activities, either to accompany their



Photo: George Andrejko.

*The future of hunting, and all the conservation and protection it supports, will depend on how inclusive we are to everyone, even if they don't fit the traditional mold.*

boyfriend or spouse, or simply to experience adventure for adventure's sake.

## The "Herstory" of Hunting

Females do the hunting in the world of the African lion, yet in our own highly advanced social system that was not traditionally the norm. Perhaps this division of labor arose out of necessity thousands of years ago when early Humans maximized their survival by allocating responsibilities. The men hunted and the women gathered. Under this system all nutritional needs were met in an efficient manner. There is no doubt, however, that many times along the evolutionary trek a "gatherer" picked up a bow or spear and found the thrill of the chase was way more interesting than grubbing for roots and picking berries.

In fact, female hunters figure prominently in many societies throughout history. Almost all past cultures including the Medieval, Greek, Celtic, Egyptian, and Hindu societies,

left a written record of famous female huntresses (and some goddesses), who joined or led the men on the chase. No doubt many more never made their way into the written record as well. Perhaps one of the most famous was Diana, the Goddess of hunting in Roman mythology. She is usually portrayed holding a bow and quiver, accompanied by deer or hunting dogs. Still, in everyday society female participation in hunting has always been very low.

### Times Change

Society continues to evolve, but many trends are not in a direction that assures a solid future for hunting. Culture and social norms are changing too quickly along some fronts, too slowly along others. In an age where women have successfully occupied niches in almost every occupation and sport, we still see a curious lack of participation in hunting.

Ghosts of our evolutionary division of labor perhaps, but the latest survey in 2016 tells us that less than 1% of adult women in the United States hunt. Out of 11.4 million hunters in the U.S., only 1.1 million are female (9.7%). Although this is a small percentage of the population, both the number and percent of women who hunt has generally been on the rise through the last 15 years. This trend is in contradiction to the mostly decreasing trends among men. The last few demographic surveys indicate that women will play a more important role in supporting conservation in the future through increased participation in hunting and other outdoor activities. The hunting community and industry will need to recognize that women will have a strong influence on the future of hunting, and we all need to capitalize on that opportunity.

Encouraging more women to hunt may be a struggle against an evolutionary predisposition that has been reinforced since birth; boys are given Red Ryder BB guns and slingshots, but girls are not given anything that would make the neighborhood songbirds nervous. Other obstacles arise as the young girls grow older which makes it more difficult for them to participate in hunting.



Photo: Raghorne Media Group

*Lakeisha Woodard admires a buck she harvested that represents years of learning the skills it takes to be consistently successful.*

There are several barriers that must be broken down to make room for wider female participation.

### The Grass Ceiling - Barriers to Participation

Lack of female role models and society that views hunting as "a man's sport." Until recently, flipping through a magazine or watching a hunting show made it obvious that this was a male-dominated pastime. When young girls look up from playing to see a woman in camouflage on TV explaining how to place dove decoys or glass for deer, they realize that hunting isn't just a "boy thing." We have made great strides in this direction in recent years with some great female TV and social media hosts, but we still have work to do. Surveys by Mark Damian Duda of Responsive Management show that 96% of women said it is okay for women to hunt, so there is clearly widespread acceptance among their own ranks. Female hunters are as prepared, effective, and involved as their male counterparts in the pursuit of game and in proficiency with a firearm. This should not be surprising; good shooting is a combination of steadiness, concentration, hand-eye coordination, and patience for the right shot in the field. None of these qualities are the exclusive domain of one sex.

Expense or availability of suitable equipment. Shotgun and rifle stocks are sometimes too long for safe and accurate shooting by smaller-framed people. Some women are introduced to hunting with a rifle too big or too powerful to shoot comfortably. Bows with shorter draw lengths are not available in as great a selection at many local sporting goods stores. Part of an introduction to hunting should be guidance on selecting, or modifying, equipment so it works for the participant. Outdoor clothing lines were always designed with the male physique in mind (36"-46"-36"). Women in the outdoors may not be concerned with fashion while hunting, but it is important that clothing fit properly if you plan to stalk and glass all day or climb into a tree stand. In the last decade we have seen an increase in clothing lines specifically designed for women, but still have a long way to go unless you like pink.

Raised in a non-hunting family. This is a problem for young men and women with interests in hunting, but no mentor. Surveys show a majority of hunters were introduced to hunting by age 15. If a person is not introduced to hunting and the outdoors at an early age, they have a higher probability of not hunting consistently throughout their life.



*Brooklyn is lucky her dad could mentor her, but many women -- young and old -- do not have easy access to someone who can provide the technical support they need at the beginning.*

Even in hunting families this introduction has traditionally been father to son with daughters and wives not included. Thankfully, now we see many young girls in hunting families with equal access to the same hunting opportunities as their brothers, but those in non-hunting families have an even larger hurdle to overcome. For most female hunters, fathers or male companions introduced them to hunting, but without this direct family connection it is harder to connect to a mentor.

Image of sport as portrayed by anti-hunting movement. Today we have a generation that has learned much of what they know about wildlife from a hundred channels of unrealistic nature shows focusing on saving individual animals. Our parents and grandparents learned what they knew about the natural world through personal experience and accumulated more wildlife savvy than you could ever click on with a mouse. The general population in the U.S. is becoming increasingly urban, disconnected from nature, and empathetic to the plight of the individual rather than the health of ecosystems. These strong social trends away from

traditional support for hunting create barriers for everyone, but affect those more that come to hunting from non-traditional pathways.

Lack of information. Women interested in hunting have fewer places to find specific information on hunting equipment and techniques tailored to them. Ask any firearms instructor and they will tell you women make much better students because they don't know it all already. Sometimes teachers of outdoor skills spend as much time cleansing bad habits as they do teaching new ones. Unfortunately, some husbands, fathers, and boyfriends are good hunters but poor teachers, despite their best intentions. Walking into a sporting goods store can be intimidating for a novice with a lot of questions. It is always much

easier to learn from people who are not trying to sell you something and when accompanied by others who are at the same place on the learning curve. We currently focus on a lot of youth camps, but there is also a growing need for testosterone-free shooting programs and hunt camps where women can learn these new skills in a non-threatening and supportive environment.

In an effort to break down these barriers to outdoor recreation for women, Dr. Christine Thomas of University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point developed a workshop in 1991 she called "Becoming an Outdoors Woman." That workshop included seminars on everything from hunting and the shooting sports, flyfishing, photography, orienteering, canoeing, and dutch oven cooking. It was such an overwhelming success it has since evolved into an international program that expanded to 38 states and Canadian provinces teaching tens of thousands of women each year. Many other women-centric programs such as this have since been developed to provide a forum for women to come together and learn about the opportunities available and to enjoy outdoor activities with others that have similar interests.

## Motivations

The major motivations for hunting are similar for men and women: meat, solitude, connecting with nature, adventure, exercise, stress relief, etc. However, we all place more and less importance on different aspects of the hunt. Women are not as interested in the competition, trophy acquisition, or the conquering aspects of hunting. For them, being out in the field and participating with loved ones in the pursuit of game is much more important than killing something. In fact, the spotting, stalking, and tracking parts of the hunt are often much more important to women than actually "sealing the deal." Women are naturally more empathetic, a quality we all felt was real important when growing up (especially when Dad got home). As a result, it's important to female hunters that we show respect for the game we harvest and not be callous or cavalier about taking the life of a wild animal.

Human dimensions research and casual conversations with female hunters in your circle of family and friends reveals some subtle differences between men and women hunters. For Kristin, fresh meat is her main motivation, which is not unusual among female hunters. Surveys by Mark Duda's Responsive Management showed that women are twice as likely to say they hunt for meat and less than half as likely to say they hunt for "sport." After hunting some with her dad as a youngster, Kristin eased back into hunting in adult life.

One of her first hunts as an adult was a women's pheasant hunt, but those sponsoring the hunt processed all the harvested birds which was a huge disappointment and seemed to defeat the purpose of the event. It is important to her to be able to process the animal, know how it was handled, and to make sure every part is used. The highlight of the hunt is not the "Grip-n-Grin" photo, but in taking a wild, free-range animal and converting it into delicious meals. She would prefer pictures of camo-clad hunters holding a plate of venison steak from a mesquite grill and garden vegetables.



*Sales of outdoor equipment and accessories for women is now one of the fastest growing segments of the industry and companies are trying to keep up.*

Lakeisha started hunting with her husband more than 13 years ago, first simply to film his hunts and spend time in the woods with him. After spending a few years hunting with a camera in hand, her husband Henry convinced her to trade it for a shotgun on a turkey hunt. Ever since that day nothing can keep her from hunting whatever is in season, not even slowing down while pregnant. Lakeisha agrees that there are barriers for women, but if you have an experienced mentor to help you feel more comfortable and teach you one-on-one it is empowering. Without a mentor, women shouldn't be shy about soaking up all the information books, DVDs, the internet, and social media have to offer and start with small game to hone your skills. *"You can do anything you put your mind to,"* says Lakeisha *"embrace your inner strength and let your beauty become the beast"*

#### Our Future

Throughout history, women have been the glue that holds the fabric of our society together as the center of the family unit. Even Kings and Rulers were influenced more by their wives than they would admit publicly. That influence in the future will play a role in either strengthening or weakening hunt-

ing and conservation in general. It will be up to the hunting community and natural resource agencies to recognize and harness this influence to strengthen conservation.

Spouses hunting side-by-side is a great way to spend quality time together. Hunting should be something that binds families together, not a source of time spent apart. Spending time in field with a spouse or the whole family ranks high in the list of female motivations for hunting. We need more programs that not only cater to women, but make sure they are retained by offering follow-up activities and a supportive network of people who can continue to help them explore new opportunities and continue to learn.

More than half of students in university wildlife programs in the United States are female, which is a dramatic increase from a few decades ago. One would think that would translate directly to a high level of female participation in hunting, fishing and trapping that are so foundational to our great system of conservation. However, societal changes have altered the backgrounds and norms of today's young wildlife biologists – male and female. At a time of generally declining trends in overall hunter participation, stable to increasing trends in women hunters offer an opportunity to build important support for the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Many state wildlife agencies are starting to develop programs, not just for female hunters, but for adult-onset hunters who did not grow up immersed in the hunting culture. We lifelong hunters take for granted the information we absorbed by osmosis but we need to do a better job of being inclusive of all non-traditional hunters and bring them into the fold. Some states are doing a better job of that than others. As writer William Gibson observed, *"The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed."*

Women and other non-traditional hunters, such as locavores, are on the rise and not only are they contributing to

conservation, but this new class of hunters are the perfect bridge to the 95% of the public that doesn't hunt. Much of the public may not relate to hunters that look like me and my friends, but can't help to be intrigued by someone who was not raised around hunting and found it later in life. Women who find it satisfying and enjoyable to harvest their own meat are positioned to be the most important ambassadors to help the rest of the country continue to support scientifically regulated, self-sustainable harvest as the cornerstone of conservation.



For more information about opportunities to connect with other women in the outdoors, contact the following.

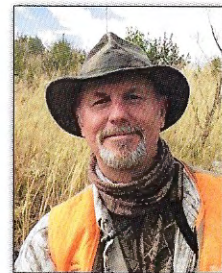
Becoming and Outdoors-Woman  
[www.uwsp.edu/cnr/bow/](http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/bow/)

National Outdoor Women  
<http://nationaloutdoorwomen.nfshost.com/>

Women Hunters  
<http://www.womenhunters.com/>

Women in the Outdoors  
[www.nwtf.org/about/hunting-heritage/wito](http://www.nwtf.org/about/hunting-heritage/wito)

Women on Target  
National Rifle Association  
<https://wot.nra.org/>



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