

The Elusive Hunter

It's a way of life that dates to the dawn of the nation. But hunting is on the wane in America. A sportsman's lament.



By Steve Tuttle

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Dec. 4, 2006 issue - I remember the first time I ever killed something. It was a rabbit, and I was about 12 years old. I put my gun to my shoulder and aimed—taking care to lead the target—and pulled the trigger. The animal seemed to tumble end over end in slow motion. I ran up to him excitedly and he looked up at me, shaking and still alive and making a little whimpering sound. My father reached down, picked up the rabbit by its hind legs, and gave him a karate chop on the back of the neck, killing him instantly. He looked up at me and said, "Good shot, boy!" and handed me the rabbit.

I was proud and devastated all at once. The rabbit felt warm in my hand, and I was trying really hard to fight back tears. The other men in the hunting party came over and slapped me on the back. Little did they know that I would have given anything to bring that rabbit back to life. I would feel sad about it for weeks. I went on to shoot a lot more game over the years, but none ever had the same emotional impact, nor did I ever get teary-eyed at the moment of the kill. In my culture, in the rural America of western Virginia, that was the day I began to change from boy to man.

There aren't that many boys today who grew up the way I did—kids who are willing to put down their Gameboys, pick up a rifle and head out into the field. Hunting in America has entered a long twilight. The number of license holders—roughly 15 million through 2004—has actually shrunk by about 2 million people since 1982, when the population was 230 million (versus 300 million today). Since 1990, the number of license holders in Massachusetts has dropped by 50,000, or 40 percent; in California since 1980 the number

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has fallen by almost half, from 540,000 to 300,000. In Michigan, there were 1.2 million licensed hunters in 1992—but fewer than 850,000 in 2004. Hunters are aging: about seven in 10 are older than 35 (in 1980, only four in 10 were over 35). The reasons for hunting's decline are pretty basic: fewer fields and streams and hills full of game to hunt (Census data show that urban America more than doubled in acreage from 1960 to 1990); more restrictions and lawsuits; more videogames and diversions to keep junior (and his dad) on the couch.

Many people are not sorry to see the hunters go. Groups like PETA, the Fund for Animals and the Humane Society of the United States have long lobbied to curtail hunting around the country. The Humane Society's Web site describes hunting for sport as "fundamentally at odds with the values of a humane, just and caring society." To city dwellers and suburbanites, hunters can seem bloodthirsty. The people who live in hunt country are also wary of reckless weekend warriors. Farmers have been known to hang this is not a deer signs on their cows.

Where I grew up, on the slope of the Blue Ridge

Mountains in Bath County, Va., my father was a game warden who would investigate hunting accidents, and he

brought home stories of careless hunters falling out of deer stands or tripping over fences and blowing their limbs off. One of my neighbors got shot just by stepping out of the passenger's side of the car. His buddy, the driver, had illegally laid his rifle across the car roof to steady his shot. According to the International Hunter Education Association, there were some 800 total hunting "incidents" involving shooting in the United States in 2002, the last year for which complete statistics are available. Seventy-five of those resulted in fatalities.

Most hunters, however, are taught to be careful. I learned, like most boys do, from my father, Bill. With him, there were strict rules to follow as you worked your way up the gun ladder, from BB gun to .22 rifle, to .410 shotgun to .20 gauge, and finally to 30.06 deer rifle. If you didn't respect the gun or what he said, you didn't get to move up or go hunting. Every time you picked up a gun you checked to see if it was loaded and the safety was on. You never mixed drinking and hunting. You always stored the gun and ammunition separately, and never kept a loaded gun in the house. You always knew where your buddies were, and you shot to kill, so the animal did not suffer.

Hunting where I grew up was a ritual of male bonding, but the whole community was caught up in it, boys and girls alike. School was let out the first day of hunting season in late November. On opening morning you could hear the shots popping off in the distance, one after another, all day long. The population of my little rural county swelled by thousands (my school friends and I called the city slickers in their fancy new gear "Fudds," as in Elmer). Men grew beards and didn't shave them until they got their first buck. Men who shot



Gun Club: Tuttle's grandfather (second from left) and father (in plaid coat)

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and missed a deer had to cut their flannel shirttails off—or their buddies did it for them. (In rural Scotland, ancestral home of many of these Appalachian men, young boys still have grouse blood smeared on their faces after their first kill in the field.) You learned to skin and eat what you killed. I hated gutting and cleaning animals and always wondered if I were the only one, and was happy to see my grandfather, Colvin, gag as he dressed a deer. He had been a veteran of Omaha Beach, so it gave me cover.

For rich and poor alike, hunting has been part of the daily rhythm and routines of American life from the beginning. Andrew Jackson was an avid hunter; so was Theodore Roosevelt. When the country was founded, the colonists who left England were not allowed to hunt in their home country "because the game belonged to the Crown," says H. Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Poachers could be hanged. Hunting is "not just a freedom here, it's a right," says Hall. But it is increasingly becoming the privilege of rich men who can afford it. The rights to use duck blinds in California and Arkansas can cost thousands of dollars. The truly rich buy their own ranches, like the private spread in Texas where Dick Cheney had his hunting accident. They load up on expensive gear, some of which takes a bit of the sport out of hunting. Wealthy deer slayers have been known to shoot out of helicopters, and duck hunters can buy something called a "Robo-duk," a mechanized contraption with whirling wings that attracts more ducks than an old-fashioned wooden decoy. The rest of us can settle for vicarious thrills. On PlayStation 2, you can play a game called Dangerous Hunts that promises "You'll realize first hand what every hunter fears most in terrifying 'Kill or Be Killed' hunting action never before available!" The more laid-back can watch hunting shows on the Men's Channel or ESPN2 or cooking shows on the Outdoor Channel like "Ready, Aim, Grill!"

If hunting turns into a videogame, more will be lost than male bonding. Fees and taxes from hunting licenses and gear and gun purchases funnel more than a billion dollars a year into creating and maintaining wildlife refuges and other conservation efforts. Hunters are among the most determined and effective conservationists. During the Depression, when the jobless were going into the woods and hunting to survive, we nearly wiped out whole populations of elk and white-tailed deer and many kinds of wildfowl. Since then, governments and private groups have worked to protect birds and animals in their natural habitats. Since 1934, the federal government has collected \$700 million from hunters buying Duck Stamps that allow them to shoot birds; the money is plowed back into conservation. (Some people might be surprised to learn that not all hunters reflexively oppose gun control; some can accept restrictions on handguns, while others worry, along with the NRA, that any such limits would embolden the government to come after their hunting rifles.)

Judging from polls, most people are at least vaguely supportive of hunters—as long as they (and their guns) stay far away. Protective of bunnies and Bambis, suburbanites increasingly restrict hunting from getting anywhere near their mini-mansions. The overabundant wildlife, in turn, attracts coyotes and more aggressive predators. Children have been mauled by bears who wander into backyards, and in Florida recently, three women were killed by alligators. In March, a coyote was seen in Central Park, in the middle of Manhattan.

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So what are hunting's champions doing to save the sport? Some states, including Wisconsin and Michigan, have introduced legislation to lower the minimum hunting age (some impose no age limit at all, so long as a child can pass a hunter-safety course). To attract more female hunters, the Wild Turkey Federation sponsors a "Women in the Outdoors" program, and the NRA hosts "Women on Target." Alaska, where hunting is on the rise, runs the "Mobile Shooting Sports Trailer," which roams the state offering hunting clinics.

Programs like those give hunters hope. In many rural areas, the sport is still thriving, and even the most anxious advocates have faith that hunting is here to stay. "The state game agencies have taken this [problem] to heart, and I think the biggest damage has already been done," says Mark Duda of Responsive Management, a hunting research group in Harrisonburg, Va. "I predict a leveling off or an increase in the next 20 years."



Young Buck: The author as a lad - Courtesy Steve Tuttle

Where I grew up, I was so close to nature that I once leaned out my kitchen window to take aim at a deer that had stepped into the backyard (the animal bolted before I could shoot). Now I am a city dweller, too busy and too far away from the country to do much hunting. But I have a son and daughter of my own now, and I would like the chance to pass on some of what my father taught me. It's hard to write this without sounding a little mawkish, but what I learned from hunting is that things in life aren't always black and white, and that they're not always easy, but the effort put in has a direct correlation to your success. You have to do it right. You respect the gun, you respect the animal and you respect the rules, and that translates to real life.

It's hard to kill something, but you develop deep appreciation of animals and the outdoors when you do it regularly. I know nonhunters think that's absurd logic, and I understand why. But if it's part of your culture and part of the road to being a man, you find a way to face up to the hard parts and the raw emotions of it and you do it honorably. Shooting an animal is often a gut-wrenching act, and not one that's taken lightly by anyone I know. You respect it, you honor it and you never waste it. Most of all, you just give thanks for it.