

Teaching a Boy to Hunt



From his retreat in the brush on the Semlike Plains of Uganda, the lion snarled his displeasure at being awakened from a mid-morning nap. Belly distended from a huge meal, all he wanted was to sleep. But the eight spearmen who had spotted him entering the brush and summoned the Americans from the camp nearby were not impressed by his threats. Pelting him with clods of earth, they drove him roaring out into the open.

The hunter aimed. At the boom of his .300 Weatherby, the lion fell flat on his back, feet pawing the air. It looked like a perfect shot. But as it turned out, the bullet had only broken a front leg near the shoulder and the lion was on his feet in an instant. Now, his patience exhausted, he turned on the men as fast as his three good legs could carry him.

"He's charging," the hunter said in a matter-of-fact voice as he calmly took a kneeling position for a second shot. The Weatherby boomed again and the lion went down for good. Not an unusual story, one might say, but it did have an unusual angle: it was the hunter's 14th birthday, as he reminded me. I had no hesitation in allowing George to shoot an African lion because at that age, he was already a cool and deadly shot, a veteran of a hundred big-game hunts in Pakistan, Africa and the United States.

Boys in their early teens are capable of remarkable muscular coordination, as their performances on the ballfields demonstrate. Why shouldn't they be equally capable in shooting and hunting? My experience with George leads me to believe that most boys would develop a love of guns, hunting, and the outdoors if given a chance.

The father willing to spend the necessary time with his son will provide himself with an excel-

From an air rifle
at age 6 to big game
hunter at age 14

By Robert F. Wallace

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lent companion. He will introduce his son to a source of enjoyment that will last a lifetime. And in these troubled times, the day may come when the boy's personal safety may depend on his skill with firearms. The training of a young woodsman will provide social benefits as well.

The first step in introducing a boy to shooting is to allow him to develop his own interests. I had no planned program to teach my son about hunting. George's interest developed as a result of the boy's natural interest in whatever his father does. When he was too young to go with me on trips, I told him about my hunts and read him stories and books about the outdoors.

FIRST DEER HUNT

When George was seven years old I took him along on a deer hunt. I was careful to make sure the camp was comfortable, and I wrapped him in blankets when we settled down in our stand in the pre-dawn darkness. It is especially important that a young boy not be uncomfortable or overtired on his first trips afield. A father can destroy their son's enthusiasm by overdoing it at an early age. I was fortunate in having an unusually reliable deer stand where a buck usually appeared within an hour after daylight on opening day. On that morning we had our deer by 7 a.m., and George spent the rest of the morning playing around camp at whatever interested him. The father should not be too upset if, after an hour or so of waiting for deer, the boy wants to roll stones down the mountainside or float sticks in the creek. For the father, patience is essential.

After the boy has developed an interest in hunting and the outdoors, the next step is to teach him woodsmanship. This knowledge tends to arise naturally from experience in camping and outdoor living, but where danger may exist a certain amount of systematic training is necessary. No boy should ever be allowed to go into the woods without a map and compass and the ability to use them. He should also be taught to wear ad-

equate clothing and footgear in fall and winter and to carry matches in a waterproof container. One or two small candles carried in a pocket are excellent fire starters and are very light in weight. Map and compass and the ability to start a fire can mean the difference between life and death in the winter woods.

I have never forgotten returning from an opening day of deer season in the Blue Mountains of Washington to learn that a 14-year old hunter from a nearby camp had become separated from his hunting party in a storm and was lost. The snow continued for weeks and I thought of the anguish of the parents as the search parties returned empty-handed, night after night. This boy, who was never heard from again, might have been saved by a half-hour's instruction with a compass and a map available from any Forest Service headquarters.

In addition to survival training, which is a must in the West and the North, a boy must also learn how to outwit the game. In big-game hunting he must learn to be observant, to move quietly and slowly, and to develop the patience simply to sit and wait. But he must also learn that sometimes he must walk long distances to get to the game. He must be made to realize that the most successful big-game hunter is usually a lone hunter. Being alone does not come naturally to most young boys. Woodsmanship training need not be limited to the brief weeks or months of hunting season. It should be continued throughout the year whenever the father can take the son on camping trips and hikes. During the off season the young hunter will come to appreciate fully the importance of being quiet when he sees how relatively easy it is to approach undisturbed animals.

A boy tends to learn sportsmanship from his father's examples, but here too, certain specific rules should be made clear. A boy must learn proper conduct toward other sportsmen, property, and the game itself. In big-game hunting, few problems arise in re-

gard to other sportsmen. However, in bird hunting of all kinds other hunters enter the picture. The most obtuse upland bird hunter knows it is extremely rude to cut into a field or woods where another party is already working. But otherwise polite men think nothing of spoiling everyone's chance at ducks or geese by firing when a flock is 100 yards out of range. Range estimation is one of the first things a boy should learn. Experience will teach him that straining a shotgun barrel is as futile as it is ill mannered.

The main rule regarding property is to get permission before entering. I should want my son to feel uncomfortable hunting without permission on any land. There are always landowners who do not allow anyone to hunt, but the majority usually give permission with proper controls. I always tried to teach George respect for the birds and animals, too. This means shooting only what one can use. It also means being careful not to fire if not sure of a killing shot. When George was 13, I saw him pass up his first chance at an Indian leopard because he would have had to shoot it in the hindquarters. I was more proud of him then than when, a few nights later, he managed to bag a fine male leopard.

Probably the first rule of gun safety for a youngster learning to shoot is never to handle firearms unless his father is with him. If this rule is made clear at the outset, a boy is never too young to start learning about firearms. No matter who came to play with George in my absence and no matter how much other boys begged him to play with his guns, he never broke the rule. Guns were part of a separate world that he entered only when he was with me. Play was something else.

Later, when the other boys

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of his age carried pneumatic pellet guns around the outskirts of the city where we lived, George seemed to have no temptation to use the gun on forbidden targets. By that time, he was an experienced big-game hunter, fully understood firearms, and treated the pellet gun with far more respect than most of the other boys. I have always attributed this to early training with firearms. The second rule of safety that I taught George was never point a gun at anything you don't want to kill. The third rule was to unload the gun before entering a vehicle or a house.

If these rules are emphasized early in a boy's training it should rarely be necessary to mention them again in later years. In all my hunting with my son, I don't remember him pointing a rifle or shotgun in my direction. I can't say this about many of the adults with whom I have hunted.

INTRODUCTION TO SHOOTING

I believe the best way to introduce a boy to the world of guns is with an air rifle. When

he was six, I started George with one. An air rifle gives a boy the feel of a firearm without subjecting him to the noise that might bother a young child. With an air rifle, a father can establish all the ground rules of safety so that transition to the real thing involves few adjustments.

In our case the .22 rifle came sooner than I had expected. Since George's arms did not seem long enough to mount the air rifle to his shoulder, he held the stock under his armpit when he aimed and fired. When he asked when he would be allowed to have a .22, I told him he would have to wait until he could mount the stock properly at his shoulder. With this stimulus he

managed to make the adjustment in about a week.

I strongly recommend a .22 single shot, preferably a bolt-action, for a boy's first rifle. The bolt introduces the young shooter to the action he will most probably use in big-game rifles in later years and the one shot capacity will help him learn the importance of each shot. If the new shooter is very young, his father will probably want to buy him one of the fine boy's rifles designed especially for this market. George's first .22 had a short stock with a 12 1/2 inch pull. As an added safety feature the rifle must be cocked by pulling the firing plunger back by hand after the bolt is closed. I recommend a large aperture peep sight in place of the open rear sight usually supplied on such inexpensive rifles. Some fathers may wish to install a scope on a boy's first .22, but I feel it is a good idea for a boy to learn to use iron sights as well.

TEACHING GUN HANDLING

Training with the air rifle and the .22 is mainly a matter of teaching firearm handling and marksmanship. Actual hunting should come only when the boy has become thoroughly familiar with his rifle and skilled in its use. When George first learned to shoot, we lived in a small town where places to shoot could be found only a mile or so from home. During the long Northwest winters we put up a heavy wood backstop in our basement, installed good lighting and used BB caps in George's .22.

A family living in a larger city probably lacks such ready access to open country. On the other hand, the city family is likely to have nearby shooting clubs and ranges and other organized facilities for training and practice. Such facilities are especially useful to the many fathers who may not themselves feel fully qualified to teach their children all they need to know about shooting and hunting but who, nevertheless, are under considerable pressure from children attracted to these sports.

If the family lives in big-game country a boy may have to be content with target shooting for

several years before he is able to carry his own gun on a hunting trip, because many states place an age limit on big-game hunting. But in a part of the country where squirrels and rabbits are important game a boy can often start hunting as soon as he is able to shoot accurately. Any boy who can stalk squirrels successfully isn't going to have much difficulty in the woods with deer and elk. After a few months of practice on targets and plinking around camp, George was shooting well enough to take a heavy toll on Columbian ground squirrels, a ranch pest that is a favorite spring target of riflemen in the Northwest.

Special circumstances in our family enabled my son to begin big-game and shotgun hunting at an earlier age than most. In 1956, when George was 10, Washington State University, where I was teaching at the time, sent me on a four year tour of duty to the University of Punjab in Lahore, West Pakistan, just 15 miles from the border of India. Since the organized sports in which American boys usually participate would not be found in Lahore and since we would have to provide most of our own recreation, I decided to equip George for all kinds of hunting.

For his rifle I chose a specially stocked, lightweight .257 Roberts with a 4x scope with a reasonably heavy crosswire-type reticle. The heavy reticle proved especially valuable because much of our shooting occurred at dusk. At first we used the .257 only for target shooting until George became as familiar with it as he was with his .22.

If a boy is very young when he shoots his big-game rifle for the first time, I consider it inadvisable to allow him to fire a regular hunting load. He has heard his father's rifle and he probably thinks it is a pretty loud and awesome thing. Also, he has probably heard talk of guns "kicking." It is best to have him fire target loads. These first loads should be no heavier than needed for accurate propulsion of a very light bullet a relatively short distance. George soon developed considerable skill on targets with

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the .257, using 60 grain bullets with the lightest powder charge.

TRANSITION PROBLEMS

At this point, the transition to hunting involves few problems. As soon as the boy's marksmanship is in order, he can be given normal hunting loads. Having never to consider noise or recoil, he will surely never think of such things in the excitement of firing at game.

In all of the shooting we did in Pakistan, India, and Africa during the next four years, I don't think George ever fired a full strength load at a target, although he became a skilled handloader and prepared rather heavy hunting loads for both of us. While living in Lahore we hunted wild boar three or four evenings a week the year around. From the jungle along the Indian border only 20 miles from our home, these great beasts came out at dusk and provided us with daily live targets.

Because wild boar frequently charge when badly wounded, and since George preferred sitting alone much of the time, I bought him a .300 Weatherby with a variable power scope when he was 12. Because shooting was entirely at live targets, the transition to the heavier rifle involved no flinching problem. I believe that an actual hunting trip, even if for woodchucks or jackrabbits, is the best time for a young boy to fire his first hunting loads.

With an air rifle, a .22, and large bore training behind him, a boy is now ready for shotguns. The father then knows that when a boy first swings his new shotgun at a moving target, he is already generally familiar with firearms, has developed a certain amount of coordination, and knows the rules of safety. This approach worked very well for George.

Since shotgun shooting is more a matter of rapid, automatic reflexes than is rifle shooting, it is especially important that a boy's first shotgun fit him properly. A boy may accommodate himself fairly well to almost any rifle by stretching or twisting himself one way or another, but he is not

likely to become a decent wing shot with an ill-fitting gun. For this reason the small outlay that suffices for a boy's first rifle is likely to be false economy in a first shotgun. Shotgun shooting is tough enough for a beginner without the handicap of an improperly fitting gun.

When a boy is ready for his first shotgun, a complication may arise if he has discussed shotguns with other boys or with adults. He may have heard that the best combination is a long barrel of maximum choke, firing maximum loads. These are not for the beginner, especially if much of his hunting is to be for upland game.

GEORGE'S SHOTGUN

For George's shotgun I chose a lightweight 20-gauge pump with a 26" barrel of modified choke. If the boy is going to hunt mainly upland birds over a pointing dog, improved cylinder might be better for a beginner. If he is going to hunt both upland birds and waterfowl, it might be best to install a variable choke device. If the boy starts with a double gun, I would recommend improved cylinder in the first barrel and modified choke in the second.

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In almost every community the father will be able to take his son to a trap or skeet range where he can learn to hit moving targets before he goes hunting. Where organized ranges are not convenient, a hand trap is very useful. It was not necessary for George to practice on clay targets, as feathered game was available around Lahore in variety and abundance. Doves could be found almost everywhere at any time. Both gray Indian partridge and the black francolin were plentiful near the city and the season was four months long. But George's favorite was for wild ducks, on which he became an expert wing shot by the time he was 12 or 13. There is no bag limit or closed season on waterfowl in Pakistan, and, since very few people hunt them, the birds are amazingly unwary.

There are opportunities for fine shooting and hunting sport in all of our states. The father who introduces his son to these sports will create an everlasting bond between them. ▲▲▲

