

# HUNTING FOR SUSTAINABILITY



*college students learn hunting skills to bring game from the field to the plate*

*Occasionally the bear lifted his head, revealing the telltale indented dish of his face, scanning the area around him before going back to being a bear. The cattle were doing what they needed to do to survive as well—at ease, heads angled low, munching on remnants of green grass scattered among a sea of brown as fall relented to the pending winter. A few of the cattle were bedded down, chewing their cud, seeming to enjoy the warmth of the sun on an otherwise cool day. The cattle knew the grizzly was there, as the grizzly knew the cattle were there.*

Seeing the grizzly was an unplanned surprise; most sightings usually are. Luke Coccoli, Boone and Crockett's conservation programs manager for the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch (TRMR), took a chance that the grizzly would be in the same area that he had been seeing it for the past month or so. He didn't exactly promise that it would be there, but his confidence was palpable as he led the two vehicles up the winding road to an overlook above a pasture that had been holding the grizzly. The students were excited as well, but it was difficult to gauge their belief that the grizzly would be there. Mutterings of various forms of *really, what are the chances* filled the vehicle.



Standing on the overlook, students gazed through binoculars, spotting scopes, and cameras, making it easy to see the large grizzly about a mile away. The bear stood on the outskirts of a large herd of Angus cattle, just inside the pasture fence. On the other side of the fence the flowing waters of Dupuyer Creek were hidden by yellowing willows and aspens. To the west stood the abruptness of the Rocky Mountain Front. Even from that distance it was easy to tell the bear was doing what he needed to do to survive. The grizzly's long claws dug deep into the earth, effortlessly turning the sod, likely unearthing sustenance critical for the bear to endure the coming winter. Occasionally he lifted his head, revealing the telltale indented dish of his face, scanning the area around him before going back to being a bear. The cattle were doing what they needed to do to survive as well—at ease, heads angled low, munching on remnants of green grass scattered among a sea of brown as fall relented to the pending winter. A few of the cattle were bedded down, chewing their cud, seeming to enjoy the warmth of the sun on an otherwise cool day. The cattle knew the grizzly was there, as the grizzly knew the cattle were there.

We were on our way to the rifle range that Sunday when Luke sidetracked our group to seek out the grizzly. It was the final day of an inaugural program that brought University of Montana (UM) students and numerous

volunteer speakers to the TRM Ranch situated along the Rocky Mountain Front outside of Dupuyer, Montana. Thanks to generous support from the Phil Tawney Hunters Conservation Endowment as well as support from the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF); Backcountry Hunters and Anglers; Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation; Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP); and the Boone and Crockett Club, the pilot program—Hunting for Sustainability—took place at the TRMR during the weekend of September 23-25, 2016. The goal of the weekend was to introduce hunting to young adults who had limited exposure to the sport earlier in their lives.

The program grew out of a grant proposal I drafted during a graduate seminar at the University of Montana. I was familiar with a comparable program in Wisconsin that has had great success on various campuses throughout that state. After numerous emails between myself and Keith Warnke, hunting and shooting sports coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, I thought it would be beneficial to start a similar program in Montana, particularly on a campus where the sustainable food movement has a strong foothold, and in a state where the tradition of hunting has such deep roots.

Although the focus of the program was to present hunting as a means of



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*Luke, pictured at right holding a shotgun, walked students through the field-dressing portion, allowing two of the students to experience the process for the first time.*



acquiring a local, sustainable protein, the underlying objectives for the program included those that are found in most hunter education courses. Regardless of the age of the participant, basic skills need to be introduced before one considers stepping foot outside in pursuit of their own meat.

“Hunting can mean so many things to so many different people, but no matter what, you must first understand the facts and the science behind it all. Ethics, population control, local food sourcing, state laws, proper care of harvested meat are all fundamental to becoming an educated, responsible, and sustainable hunter,” said Luke.

This is where volunteers—staff from MWF; Montana FWP; the University of Montana; and local residents—really stepped in and took the time (particularly impressive as it was late September in Montana, when most hunting seasons are underway) to share their wisdom and experience as hunters.

As someone who did not start hunting until my mid-20s, I could relate to some of the challenges one may face when considering hunting. I look back at my foray into hunting as similar to on-the-job training. I took to the fields and woods of Wisconsin with

friends who had hunting experience, and I learned via informal exposure as the hours and days afield began to stack up. I made mistakes. I got frustrated. I took shots I shouldn't have. But, eventually I learned enough to where I was comfortable calling myself a hunter.

Through the years I also discovered that what initially drew me to hunting was the camaraderie of friends. As those friends started careers and families and moved to various spots throughout the country, I found myself going solo on more hunts. I enjoyed the challenges of solo hunting but missed that connection to friends. As I reached the end of my thirties I found that I had stopped killing animals. I did not stop hunting; I just stopped pulling the trigger. I found myself, at least subconsciously, in a seven-year search for another connection as to why I hunt. As a former restaurant owner, food has always played a role in my life. But it would take that hiatus from killing game to help me truly realize the connection to food that hunting afforded.

For most seasoned hunters it is simple to make the connection between hunting and food, and I would guess that for most of those hunters that connection to food most likely developed after they started to hunt. But recent trends in the local food movement are pulling college-aged adults into the world of hunting and numerous state agencies and conservation nonprofits are utilizing the relationship between hunting and food as a way to connect new adult hunters to hunting.

When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released the results from its 2011 survey of hunter participation, many mass media outlets and hunting-related media were surprised to find that there had been a nine percent increase

in the number of licensed hunters in the U.S. since 2006. This growth was the first time in decades that the number of licensed hunters showed an increase. It is, however, vital to keep in mind that the long-term trend of decreasing hunter participation still continues. Specifically, the participation rate of hunting (the percentage of the U.S. population who purchased hunting licenses) in 1955 was at 10 percent versus just under 4.5 percent in 2011.

A number of media outlets associated the rising number of hunters with the increasing trend of “locavore” hunters. There may be some truth to this. Thanks in part to a handful of bestselling books such as *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, *The Mindful Carnivore*, and *Righteous Porkchop*, and numerous articles in mainstream media that have reported an increased interest in urbanites learning to hunt, many people are reexamining the ecological and ethical means of how they obtain meat. In one of our early conversations about a Montana program, Warnke agreed that the movement to eat locally produced food is helping to drive interest in hunting within the college-aged population, stating, “These folks missed the natural path into hunting through parents, but they certainly have a strong conservation ethic, a strong environmental orientation, and a realization that hunting is a really sustainable way to obtain your protein.”

Hunting as a sustainable use of a renewable source of meat may be a perfect fit for an increasingly conservation-oriented world. In particular, today’s young adults have demonstrated strong interest in lower-impact living, food co-ops, farmers’ markets, sustainable agriculture, and ‘slow’ food. Hunting may be

seen as a natural extension of this movement. But taking the step from avoiding factory-raised meat to that of becoming a hunter involves dealing with not only the ecological and ethical ramifications of a hurried, industrialized society, but also with personal beliefs and coming to terms with doing your own killing—there is a deep emotional distinction between hunting and shopping that should not be taken lightly.

And killing was one of the challenges the program organizers faced so that we would have an animal that would allow the hands-on presentation of field dressing, butchering, and finally, a freshly cooked venison meal. Thoughts ranged from trying to procure a road-killed animal to bringing in slaughtered domestic livestock just in case. In the end, we agreed that the most realistic solution was to take a chance that a deer would be harvested during the program. As it is in hunting, there was the possibility that we would not have a deer available.

As happens from time to time in hunting, things do fall in place to make the adventure a bit more successful. Jason Asselstine, a local pastor, was kind enough to use his antlerless deer permit to kill a deer for this portion of the program. In addition, having a freshly killed deer was a great opportunity for students to get exposure to following a fresh blood trail. Luke walked students through the field-dressing portion, allowing the students to experience the process for the first time. Donning arm-length gloves, two of the students worked their way through the steps, asking questions as they opened up the belly of the deer and removed the entrails.

## FROM THE DESK OF

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Much has been said and written lately about challenges facing wildlife management. Ensuring future generations understand the relevance of hunting to wildlife management and society is a primary concern. While strategies have been developed to address this issue, I was excited to participate in this Hunting for Sustainability program because it was directed toward university students. University students are a logical fit for such a program given their openness to new experiences, challenges, and opportunities. Further, understanding their motivations for participation in such programs may help with the relevance issue. As students of the program discussed their interests, some appropriately felt that as non-hunters they needed to better understand hunting culture and heritage to be effective in their professional wildlife careers. For others, I was impressed by their desire to harvest and process their own food as they described how they viewed harvested game as a local, sustainable, and natural food source. One student said, “I just never had the chance and want to see what hunting is about.” I see similar responses from students in my courses when we discuss wildlife harvest management. Non-hunting students want to learn about the role of hunting in wildlife management, strategies for managing the harvest, and are generally curious about hunting—many just never had a chance to hunt. By combining the “how to” part of hunting, processing, and cooking game with discussions that place hunting in a broader conservation and societal context, this learn-to-hunt program fills an important niche to an eager audience. Offering such programs to university students, from all majors, provides an appropriate opportunity to share the relevance of hunting to those entrusted with conservation in the future.



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Learn more about B&C’s Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in the Fall 2014 issue of *Fair Chase*. See how Michigan State University’s Learn to Hunt program is teaching students to hunt in the Summer 2016 of *Fair Chase*.



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Following field dressing, Bob and Nick Hjelm, a father and son from Conrad, led the demonstration on how to butcher the deer. Bob, the elder, is an avid hunter, and his son is the meat department manager at the Conrad Gary and Leo's supermarket. After watching the experienced butchers skin the deer and then remove a front and rear quarter, students took turns removing cuts from the hanging carcass. With quarters and primal cuts on a table, the father and son showed how to further break down quarters to produce various cuts, how to grind meat, and proper techniques for wrapping and storage of meat.

With the focus on hunting for one's food in the program, the remainder of Saturday afternoon was dedicated to preparing a meal using the venison that the students helped butcher earlier that day. Local cook Katie Lethenstrom planned a menu, complete with sides and dessert, and prepared the meal under the watchful eyes of the students. The tenderloins and back straps were cut into filets, simply seasoned and readied for the grill. Ground venison was formed into patties. The heart was trimmed, cleaned, cut into strips, and pan-fried—a first for most of the students and some of the speakers. We enjoyed the meal in the Rasmuson Wildlife Conservation Center (RWCC) with the evening light filtering into the room. The conversation, during the meal as well as after, leaned heavily toward the experiences of processing, butchering, and cooking the deer.

After dinner I was standing with a student at the bank of windows looking west as the sun set over the Front. He was looking through a spotting scope at deer as they browsed the meadows. He paused, and then mentioned

his realization that the deer that we ate was possibly walking the same fields earlier that day. I didn't sense regret in his comment, but rather an acceptance and understanding of the process it took to bring the deer from the field to our plates.

A couple of months after the program I asked Luke why the ranch was the ideal location for the Hunting for Sustainability program. Among his responses were the impressive backdrop of the Rocky Mountain Front, the abundance of wildlife, the community of local volunteers, and the availability of the rifle and shotgun range. He ended his comment by reiterating the importance of relationships, not only in hunting but in all aspects of our lives:

"If following a blood trail leading to a harvested deer wasn't enough, I believe seeing a grizzly in the middle of a hayfield surrounded by black Angus cows certainly showed everyone that wildlife, livestock, and human impacts are in this world to stay, and it is up to all of us to act responsibly while hunting in order to maintain a sustainable future for us all."

The increasing sustainable-food movements and, conceivably, the innovative catch phrases that they have spurred—free-range, grass-fed, natural, and locally grown, to name a few—may be playing a role in a resurging interest in hunting. Regardless of the adjectives one chooses to explain their reason to learn to hunt (or rediscover it), many people are making the decision to kill their own animals for meat—and many are doing so through hunting. Only time will tell if this is a passing fad, or a new lifestyle for ecologically and environmentally concerned adults. ■