


BRENDA WEATHERBY

Photos Courtesy of Steven and Rachel Girt,  
Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt


# Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt



*This unique annual event gathers over 40 women from all over the country to hunt pronghorn over two days in a mentored hunt.*



The ranch at Ucross is the basecamp for all the hunters.



In 2013, the Wyoming Women's Foundation created the Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt, the nation's first women's-only antelope hunt, to promote camaraderie and mentorship through hunting, as well as to raise funds for grants and special projects to help women and girls across the state.

The hunt celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2017, thanks to many generous sponsors including the Boone and Crockett Club, which helped the hunt's inaugural year by establishing an awards structure that promotes fair chase hunting and ethics for the event. Every year since then, B&C has sponsored the Teddy Roosevelt Award, named after the Club's founder and father of American conservation.

The courage and perseverance of 2017 Teddy Roosevelt Award recipient Laurie DeVries, of Atascadero, California, inspired many at last fall's hunt (October 12-15, 2017) at the beautiful Ranch at Ucross in northeastern Wyoming. Here is her story told by her friend, Brenda Weatherby of Paso Robles, California, who encouraged Laurie to pursue her dream to hunt.

#### **THE JOURNEY**

For me, the idea of any hunt suggests certain sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. The image of God's varied landscapes, the fresh scent of good old dirt and the sense of challenge, defeat, and victory make the hunt memorable. But, most of all, being with people who then become friends is what tops it all. On my short tenure as a hunter, I have met so many wonderfully unique and quality individuals. Some have been great mentors to me, others are intensely intimate friends that have shared highs and lows, and then there are the ladies that give me pure inspiration.

Laurie is one that inspires; she just has that outgoing personality coupled with extreme optimism and perspective. She spent many years teaching middle school physical education and volunteering at her church's youth group. Her husband Dirk was an avid hunter and Laurie always went along as camp cook, nurse, and mama to all. She raised two beautiful daughters and now has grandchildren as well. Life for



Laurie has always been full because her joy emanates and her faith always brings her hope and peace.

When in 2015 her husband Dirk was diagnosed with cancer, she battled alongside him with encouragement, hope, and love. It was then that Laurie and I formed a special bond. I usually saw her in the parking lot of our church when she was leaving one service and I was walking into the next service. Somehow, God always had us at least wave, smile, or exchange a few words. When we did, she would always talk about some Instagram post of some recent hunting adventure I had been on. She would tell me that it inspired her, that it was helping her get through this trying time with Dirk. Laurie's husband, earlier that year, had drawn an elk tag in Arizona for a hunt that he had been longing to do most of his life. He already had a custom gun built and bought expensive backcountry gear. But Dirk never made it to that elk hunt; he battled cancer instead, and his wife knew how much he had longed for that opportunity. But God had other plans and eternity beckoned Dirk home. The hunt was donated to a veteran with assistance from Mighty Oaks Warrior Programs, but the experience sparked a flame in Laurie.

Many of our interactions in the parking lot ended in tears as we shared the losses through that year. But, one day, she told me, "Brenda, after this is all over, I'm going to do that, I want to do that." I responded, "Really? Well, I look forward to that day, and when it comes, I'll be here to help." That began a journey for Laurie.

About three months after Dirk's death, I texted Laurie asking her if she had her hunting safety certification yet. A month or so passed and she sent me a picture of the hunter safety card, saying it was a bittersweet moment without Dirk. Of course it was, but she pressed on. We planned some practice sessions anticipating maybe a fall turkey hunt. We sat together in the trees, saw no birds but talked about the start of something new in her and how it just felt right for her life, no matter how many people thought she was crazy.

Over the months, she'd text me about gun cleaning products, and we would laugh together about her experiences at the range with all the guys. She was seriously dedicated, practicing every chance she could get with both rifle and shotgun. Everything I suggested to her, she did. She was a perfect student, taking responsibility for herself and this journey but humble enough to ask questions and apply knowledge that others would offer her. And through it all, the story of Dirk would surface with the people she met. Her new hunting hobby was becoming an inspiration to others without Laurie even knowing it.

In April, she got her first turkey, a beautiful tom. Shortly after, she asked me, "What's next?" I directed her to a ladies hunting camp in Oregon, put on by my dear friends Candy and Randy Yow. She registered, and we spent a weekend together with 50 other ladies sharpening our skills in rifle, shotgun, hunting techniques, orienteering, and



**TOP:** Hunters sight in their rifles the first afternoon under the supervision of women mentors and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. **MIDDLE:** On the first night hunters met their partners and guides. Laurie DeVries is pictured with her mentor Katie McCrary. **BOTTOM:** Brenda Weatherby was the keynote speaker on the first night, talking about her journey of learning to hunt.

even self-defense. Before the time ended, Laurie was inspiring them with her story and ready for the next challenge.

### WYOMING WOMEN'S ANTELOPE HUNT

As was my role, I teed up the next opportunity. This time it was the Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt at Ucross. This unique annual event gathers over 40 women from all over the country to hunt over two days in a mentored hunt. Most of the new hunters had never harvested a big game animal, so the nerves were high and the excitement uncontrollable. The mentor hunters were just thrilled to walk others through their first experience. Laurie was beaming at the thought of where she was and what she was doing. Her dream was coming true, and after so many years of being by Dirk's side doing what he loved, she now was experiencing it for herself. She explained it as truly healing for her and boasted of God's goodness to her.

The hunt proved to be challenging; actually not what I promised her. Every other antelope hunt in Wyoming I had ever done was pretty easy with plentiful numbers to choose from and no worries that I wouldn't tag out. I remember telling her that it would be the perfect learning experience—with little pressure. Boy, was I wrong. After the first day of extreme hiking and belly crawl stalking, we both reconvened at dinner to share our stories. Both of our groups, in different locations, had experienced similar tough hunting conditions. A good learning experience for

sure, but the pressure was mounting with only one day left to hunt.

Laurie was teamed up with mentor hunter Katie McCrary from Mississippi, guide Fred Williams of Meeteetse, Wyoming, and Gloria Esguerra Courser of Jackson, Wyoming, who returned in 2017 as a guide-in-training after attending the first four years. Fred was impressed and motivated by Laurie's enthusiasm, tenacity, energy, and drive to enjoy the entire experience of the hunt. They attempted and experienced several failed stalks on the first day while covering more than seven miles. The area they hunted was non-typical terrain for antelope hunting and looked more like mule deer habitat with steep hills and deep ravines. Laurie's enthusiasm was unwavering despite the day ending without a shot opportunity and knowing that they only had one more day to harvest antelope for both her and Katie, who, having hunted big game before, insisted that Laurie harvest first.

The next day was cold and windy. By mid-morning, Fred had located a group of antelope bedded out of the wind at the head of a ravine. The wind was perfect, and the ravine provided cover enabling Fred and Laurie to stalk to within 80 yards of the antelope. It was at that point Fred said to Laurie "this is going to happen." Laurie realized at that moment she was about ready to live Dirk's legacy. The anticipation of the shot after all of her preparation came in the form of happy tears.

**TOP AND MIDDLE:** Fred was impressed and motivated by Laurie's enthusiasm, tenacity, energy, and drive to enjoy the entire experience of the hunt. **BOTTOM:** (left to right) Gloria Esguerra Courser of Jackson; Fred Williams of Meeteetse, Wyoming; Laurie DeVries of Atascadero, California; and Katie McCrary from Mississippi.





*"I did it. Gosh I actually did it!"*

Fred and Laurie sat in the ravine while the antelope remained bedded for some time talking and preparing for the shot. Laurie's tears eventually faded, and her composure transformed into a hunter focused on the ethical harvest of an animal. They got into position undetected, with Laurie sitting and using a bipod. The buck finally stood after several attempts to get the antelopes' attention. A couple of minutes seemed like an eternity waiting for a clear broadside shot. Finally, Fred was able to say "there's your shot" and all of Laurie's practice paid off with a perfect one-shot kill.

I will never forget the message I received from Laurie that day. Her words were mixed with pure elation and joyful laughter, "Brenda, I did it. Gosh I actually did it."

At that moment, my hunt faded in importance, and her victory overshadowed the 10 miles of hiking and windburn I felt on my face. I have observed a woman, full of recent loss, but ready to live something new with abandon. What had started as me inspiring her had just flipped 180 degrees. She had become the inspiration, not just to pick up the tradition of hunting, but to walk through life with purpose, fully aware that God blesses us far more than we deserve and connects us with people for intimate friendship.

In addition, both Katie and Brenda successfully harvested antelope by the time

the hunt was over. After Katie was willing to risk not having an opportunity to harvest in effort to help Laurie be successful her hunt went down to the wire, harvesting her antelope in the last hour of the last day.

When we returned to the lodge that night, we embraced at the sight of our victory, both antelopes harvested. And later that night, Laurie received the Teddy Roosevelt award. The guides voted on the recipient, and it is given to a lady who had the fortitude to keep trying, was determined and persisted through the two full days of hunting. This award celebrates the type of personal character Roosevelt held in highest regard—an adventurous spirit, determination, self-reliance, and the need to give back more than had taken—all he believed defined what was inside every true sportsman and sportswoman.

Teddy is known to have said,

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."*

**TOP AND MIDDLE:** Hunters who harvest an antelope early in the weekend will have the opportunity to take part in workshops on meat processing, cooking with game meat, fly fishing and trap and skeet. **BOTTOM:** Laurie DeVries with her pronghorn.

Read the story of the first Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt winner online in the Associates community in Summer 2014 issue of *Fair Chase*.



Laurie is certainly a Teddy Roosevelt kind of lady.

And believe it or not, the night wasn't over before Laurie asked, "What's next?" I looked to Fred smiling and knowing that she now had a growing number of mentors in her life. Fred said, "I think mule deer." Laurie nodded and replied, "Mule deer it is." ■

The Boone and Crockett Club has helped create a legacy of encouraging more women to hunt by supporting the Wyoming Women's Antelope Hunt. The event develops new hunters by offering scholarships and hunter education to women who otherwise may not get the opportunity to hunt and pairs them with conservation-minded guides and experienced female hunting partners for maximum learning opportunities.

Next year's event is slated for October 11-14, 2018. Learn more at [wyomingwomensantelopehunt.org](http://wyomingwomensantelopehunt.org).

RIGHT: Fred, Laurie and Gloria with Laurie after winning the award. BELOW: Group shot of all the guides, hunters, volunteers and sponsors in 2017.



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