

HELPING NEW HUNTERS

Most hunters start out with a lucky break: They are born into a family of hunters where friends and relatives form an automatic inner circle of instructors, advisors, mentors, and guides to help a young hunter get off to a safe and proper start in the field.

This past year we have seen a notable upswing in hunting (and fishing) participation in America. State wildlife agencies note that a significant portion of these license buyers are non-traditional hunters, young adults coming into the sport for the first time. Nevada last year saw a 30 % jump in hunting license sales and put 50 % more people through its hunter safety classes. Washington graduated more than twice as many residents from its hunter safety program than the year before and Maine sold a record number of deer permits with young adults making up the fastest-growing customer segment.

Sure, there was an understandable urge to get outdoors this past year, but it appears that what really sparked this surge in hunting was a sight that many Americans had never seen before: slim pickings in the meat and poultry section of their favorite supermarket. Concerns about potential breakdowns in the nation's food supply

chain and broader worries about social unrest prompted many Americans, it could be argued, to take a step or two toward becoming a bit more self-reliant.

In 2020, for example, books about canning and preserving foods shot up 137 % over 2019. In a TV news report on the deer season in Georgia last fall, one hunter summed up this new attitude when he commented, "I had a great time in the woods. More than that, my family and I feel a whole lot better these days with a freezer full of venison back home."

In a time when Uber picks up and Grubhub delivers, younger adults in our country may now see certain life skills, such as hunting, in a new light: If not a necessity at least an ability that could prove mighty handy down an increasingly uncertain road. A key question is, how do we help these new hunters successfully navigate that road?

The good news is that state wildlife agencies around the country have developed their own mentor hunting initiatives. Some states have partnered with non-governmental organizations to provide programs that include both classroom and in-the-field experiences. Many sportsmen-supported wildlife groups are now also active with new efforts to help

newcomers get started. A handy reference is the excellent website compiled by the NRA's American Hunter that is an exhaustive list of programs nationwide to help prospective hunters find mentors. Visit americanhunter.org/guidetomentorprograms.

The readers of *Fair Chase* are an exceptionally knowledgeable and dedicated group of hunters. If you are looking to get involved, here is an off-the-cuff suggestion: Get a few of your hunting buddies together and look to set up a "help desk" at your local shooting range on the weekends later this summer. It is an informal, but effective, way to interact with newcomers on a one-to-one basis, whether helping them to sight-in a rifle, answer questions about



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hunting skills and techniques or touch on the many topics associated with responsible and ethical hunting.

The National Shooting Sports Foundation Hunting License Sales Index points to an increase of more than one million hunters nationwide in 2020 over 2019.

That's a number we sure want to retain and then build on.

Hope to see you down the trail. ■

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Archery and shooting range day during the Outdoor Adventure Camps offered at the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch.