



A Personal Journey

THE VALUE OF HUNTING AS A LIFE EXPERIENCE

By James E. Miller



Credit: V. Daniel Stiles

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Most of us in the wildlife profession who were born before the 1960s are well aware of the demographic and philosophical changes that have occurred within our ranks. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the urban backgrounds from which most recent wildlife students have emerged and, as a result, in their attitudes about hunting and its place in conservation.

Perceptions about hunting have changed dramatically. In the days when most people had rural backgrounds and direct ties to the land, hunting was seen as a natural part of life for many people. Today, our predominantly urban populace has few or no ties to the land and therefore virtually no understanding of where food comes from or of why wildlife management—including hunting, angling, and trapping—remains essential to the future of diverse and abundant fish and wildlife populations.

Due to this lack of understanding and to widespread misperceptions, hunting and trapping are increasingly under attack by individuals and organizations. It is disheartening to hear or read

public comments that hunting should be curtailed or stopped because animals should not be killed for recreational use and food. Incredibly, some opponents say that hunting no longer has a legitimate place in American life since you can go to the grocery store and buy meat on a styrofoam tray or at a fast-food drive-through. Do these folks believe that no animal had to die to provide those burgers or shrink-wrapped pork chops?

Just as such misinformed attacks appear to be on the rise, the percentage of the American population that hunts has declined. In 2006, roughly 12.5 million people hunted, or 5.5 percent of the population, down from 6.1 percent in 2001

([U.S. Census Bureau](#)). The decline is due not just to public misperceptions and urbanization, but also because hunters, trappers, resource managers, and educators have failed to effectively communicate to our youth and the non-hunting public the cultural, biological, economic, ethical, and personal values of hunting. Nor have we effectively explained how hunting contributes to the stewardship of wild things and wild places, and to the ultimate sustainability of all wildlife resources.

True Conservationists

The non-hunting public must come to understand that hunters, trappers, and anglers must purchase licenses, permits, and stamps as well as pay excise taxes on their firearms, tackle, archery equipment, and ammunition. These are the major sources of funding for state wildlife and fisheries management and the conservation programs that promote sustainability. This is true today and very likely will be in the future unless significant alternative funding sources are obtained. Hunting therefore benefits all species of wildlife, their habitats, and the non-hunting public who enjoy wild things and wild places.

Admittedly, hunters are merely one cross-section of the American populace, and some of them act in irresponsible and unethical ways—as do some politicians, golfers, doctors, lawyers, or members of any other profession. I am confident that unethical hunters are exceptions, not the majority, and most Americans seem to agree: According to [Responsive Management](#) research, 81 percent of the public supports hunting if it's employed as a means to manage wildlife populations and if it's fair-chase hunting that results in appropriate utilization of harvested animals.

Such attitudes are a sign of hope, and perhaps of hunting's deep roots in human history. I have long been convinced that the thrill of the chase and responsible stewardship of wildlife resources are two of the fundamental passions of mankind. I contend that hunting blood courses in all our veins, and that those of us who do not suppress our inborn instinct for the chase and the desire to be responsible stew-



Credit: Mary L. Miller

A young hunter-to-be (circa 1944), Jim Miller stands with "O' Rip," the family bird dog, eager to shed his Sunday best and grab overalls for a day outdoors.



ards derive great pleasure and satisfaction from the pursuit of these efforts, which are basic instincts.

For those who argue that they haven't a drop of hunting blood in their veins, I contend that even if they never hunt game animals, they still thrill to the chase—whether it's for a bargain at the shoe store, the winning bid at an auction, the newest electronic gadget, or adding a new species to their bird-watching list. Like these and other passionate pursuits, hunting is about an enriching experience, not just the occasional harvest of a game animal.

A Source of Solace

Aside from feeling genetically and instinctively predisposed to hunt, I treasure and enjoy everything about it: the planning and preparation, the sights and smells, the privilege of observing animal behavior, the scouting, the challenges and thrills of the chase, the skillful cleaning of harvested game, the final organic feast. Hunting enables me to use and improve skills learned over a lifetime. It demands physical fitness, personal discipline, and a code of ethics. It recharges my personal batteries, improves my perspective about life, and results not only in rich experience but in priceless memories of great times afield with family, friends, and colleagues.

Reared on a farm in north Alabama in the 1940s, my earliest memories of hunting begin at about four years old. Armed with a homemade slingshot and road gravel, I hunted barn rats, common birds, bullfrogs, and small game like squirrels and rabbits. Always hunting with enthusiasm, I became more efficient as I moved to a Red Ryder BB gun and then to a single-shot .22 caliber rim fire rifle, which I purchased with money earned from trapping. With help from our beagle hounds, the loan of my uncle's squirrel dog, and my angling efforts, I kept our family supplied with small game and fish to supplement the chicken, pork, and beef produced on the farm. By the time I was 12, it was clear to me that wildlife should only be killed for food, fur, property protection, and self-defense (rabies was fairly common). By high school my experiences of ethical hunting, learned afield with mentors and friends, helped me appreciate the reasons for laws defining legitimate uses of wildlife.

Now, after 65 years as an avid hunter and 45 years as a professional wildlife biologist, I believe that wildlife management continues to rely on the vision of people whose lives have been positively inspired and transformed by hunting. Fair-chase hunting teaches vital

life lessons including the connectivity and interdependence of life; dependence on the biological integrity, viability, and extent of natural systems; awareness of our environment; the importance of stewardship; skills of observation, patience, and responsibility to ourselves and to the animals we seek; self-sufficiency and self-confidence; natural history; responsibility for the safe use of lethal harvest equipment; humility and gratitude; social cooperation with colleagues, landowners, managers, and local communities; survival skills; and reverence for life itself.



Credit: Doris Miller

At a friend's farm in Virginia in 2005, Jim Miller helps his grandson Brooks position and aim his new rifle, a Christmas present. Since then, Brooks has become "safe and proficient" with the rifle, says Miller, who enjoys turkey hunting with Brooks in the spring.

To my mind, hunters are heroes. They were the first to initiate efforts to stop the destruction of habitats from development and the sale of wildlife and the first to call for legislation to restore wildlife habitat and populations. They continue to support and defend scientific wildlife management. Fair-chase hunters are passionate about wild things and wild places, recognizing that wild creatures are worthy of our respect and admiration. Such hunters understand the need for enabling and supporting scientific wildlife management and sustainability.

Those of us who are fair-chase hunters have a major responsibility to serve as mentors to those who follow us and who indicate an interest in hunting, fishing, trapping, and in becoming wildlife stewards. In my many years of teaching young people about hunting, I've tried to help them understand that



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ethical hunting is not about the amount of game you bring home, but the amount of investment you make in obtaining it, and how you take care of it. As I once wrote in a Christmas letter to my then nine-year-old grandson Brooks: "I wish you an abundance and diversity of wildlife and fish species to enjoy observing and harvesting if you desire to do so...[and] that you will become an astute and experienced observer and naturalist [and] an exemplary steward of wild places and wild things as you grow older."

We have the privilege of being wildlife stewards only for a short time. What we leave behind as evidence of that stewardship—good or bad—will be our legacy to future generations. So we face the question: Will we retain our privileges as fair-chase hunters and stewards, or will negative behaviors and misperceptions degrade the future of hunting and wildlife sustainability for present and future generations? The answer lies with us and those we influence. All hunters have a responsibility to discourage unethical practices, to participate fully in the promotion of policies that will support the role of hunting in wildlife conservation, and to serve as mentors for those who follow us. Let's rise to the challenge! ■

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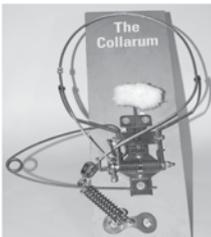


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