

WOMEN CHANGE THE FACE OF HUNTING: FEMALES BREAK STEREOTYPES WHILE BOLSTERING RANKS OF HUNTING COMMUNITY

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It's been a bad year for hunters in the Letters pages of the Calgary Herald.

They've been excoriated as "egomaniacal thrill-seekers," "wanton killers" and "eco-sadists." One woman referred to hunting as "plain old Neanderthal knuckle-dragging male thrill-seeking."

Infiltrating their ranks reveals a different story. Contrary to the stereotype of hunters as toothless backwoodsmen, my first year of hunting has put me alongside lawyers, wildlife research biologists, Crown prosecutors, judges, computer experts, denturists, police officers and health-care workers.

Instead of male thrill-seekers, I've also met a surprising number of young women, all with a full set of teeth and several of whom are considerably more attractive than a certain Alaska governor.

According to Kelly Semple of the Hunting for Tomorrow Foundation, and herself a hunter for 25 years, women are the fastest growing sector of the hunting community. Female participation in hunting, growing in Alberta at a rate of three per cent per year, signals a trend in a sport that has seen decreasing or stagnating numbers for two decades.

Registered hunters in Alberta reached 109,813 in 2007, up from 96,772 in 1996. While that's not on pace with the province's population growth, hunting organizations are encouraged by a new demographic they see attending hunter training courses and enrolling in outdoor education programs.

The trend, they say, is clear. After years of being written off as an endangered species, hunting appears to be going through a resurgence, led by a new generation of women who are reviving interest in the sport.

Among them is Melanie Buteau, a 27-year-old former Calgarian who took up hunting six years ago. Now living in Newell County near Brooks, her participation in a blood sport has shocked some of her urban friends.

"They think that I've turned into a hillbilly who goes out and kills stuff," says Buteau, who likes to bird hunt with her black lab Jinx and red retriever Cooper.

"That's the reaction from some people who don't hunt or don't understand it," Buteau says. "That's the way I used to think, before I got into it."

According to Semple, women hunt for the same reasons as men -- the enjoyment of being outdoors, camaraderie, the possibility of obtaining food from a natural source and the ethical commitment of being personally responsible for the death of an animal one chooses to consume.

Melanie Vieira, 35, a Calgary paramedic, took up hunting three years ago in a quest for lean, organic game meat.

"I knew that if I wanted it on my table, I was going to have to put it there myself," says Vieira. "I love the taste of it."

Today, on Alberta's second-annual Hunting Day, Vieira hopes to take down a moose or elk using a bow and arrow, the traditional method preferred by hunting purists.

Bob Gruszecki, president of the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association, which teaches firearms safety and humane hunting, says women are participating in increasing numbers.

Of the 55,000 students who will go through its programs this year, about 15 per cent are women, up from five to six per cent a few years ago. An outdoor education program for 200 women held by the organization each August sells out.

"We can't keep up with the demand," says Gruszecki.

He says the women's outdoor program -- teaching everything from hunting and fishing to how to back up a trailer -- is the largest training program of its kind in North America.

Ed Houck of the Canadian Pheasant Company, a hatchery at Brooks, says an introductory women's program at its shooting range was flooded with participants over two nights this summer.

"We were hoping to have a few ladies come out. The first night, we had 72 show up. On the second night, we had 54."

His hatchery also co-sponsors the Ringneck Classic, a team pheasant hunt staged every February by the Brooks Clay and Feathers Club.

It has attracted several women's teams, including the Deadly Dames, six women from the Calgary and Patricia area.

"We've never beaten the guys in six years, but we've never been the worst, either," says team member Dulcie Beasley.

"We just have a lot of fun. We're not great shots, but we have wonderful dogs."

Working with dogs, which are used to point, flush and retrieve birds, is "the ultimate thing," says Beasley, who is reputed to make what Houck insists is the best pheasant pot pie he's ever tasted.

The Hunting for Tomorrow Foundation, which promotes responsible and safe hunting practices, sponsors an annual women's waterfowl program that is also a sellout.

"We won't be able to meet this year's demand," says Semple.

The organization puts out a fact sheet for female hunters that notes equipment and technology has equalized the field for men and women hunters.

Hunting can also be a source of accomplishment and empowerment for women, the brochure says. Hunting "creates a sense of independence and is an act of conviction, courage and self-respect.

"There is a profound, deep sense of self-satisfaction, similar to a woman who runs her first marathon or wins the longest drive competition on the golf course."

There is also "pride in eating and sharing a meal that you have taken from the field to the table. This seems to bring out the best in people in terms of sharing."

Semple says courses teach all hunters to respect the choice of others not to hunt, even if the debate is not always a two-way street.

"Unfortunately, there is a stereotypical perception of the average hunter that is not always complimentary," says Semple.

"It is important for the hunting community to educate people about that and have faces that break down that image."

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