

WHY WE HUNT

THE REASONS ARE MANY —
AND HARD TO EXPLAIN —
BUT THE HUNT FILLS
OUR SOULS

BY ERIC **ALDRICH**

Ask twelve people, “Why do you hunt?” and you’re likely to get twelve different answers. We hunt for reasons that are simple and complex, private and public, instinctive and trained. We know that we – as hunters – are often misunderstood by those who don’t hunt or are opposed to it. We try to explain, and sometimes words fail us.

We might cite the benefits of hunting. It keeps deer numbers in check. It contributes to the economy. It connects us with nature and family and keeps us healthy. It provides revenue to manage wildlife.

But there’s a more personal side to hunting – and that’s where it gets hard to explain why we hunt. It’s like trying to explain why we walk. We’ve been hunting since our long, slow evolutionary ride as humans began, maybe some two million years ago. Even here in what’s now New Hampshire, paleo-Indians were hunting caribou, otter and other animals more than 12,000 years ago.

Millions of years of hunting for survival – along with gathering and scavenging – are deeply ingrained in our



psyche, even if we don't know it's there. The urge to hunt is an ember that burns within our souls. It's our urge for nourishment, survival and sustaining ourselves and our people. It's more than a tradition. It's an instinct.

Our version of modern hunting – with seasons, limits and safety regulations – started coming about as the 20th century dawned. That's when instinct meets tradition. We see old photos of our grandparents at camp, deer hanging on a tree. Boys and men stand in the foreground with their rifles. They're smiling, grubby, exhausted, proud and exhilarated.

This is why we hunt.

"I don't know what happens to me come fall," says New Hampshire hunter William Arbaugh. "I start getting restless – the chill in the air, the smell of the fall leaves. I've just got to get into the woods. It doesn't matter if I get something. It's just being out there. Now I go with my 15-year-old son. I just love being in a tree stand with him, watching the way he sees and hears things. I just hope when he gets older he gets that same feeling and has just got to get out into the woods."

The hunt is about connecting with the world and our friends. It's where stories are made and legends created.



THE RIGHT THING

Dan Bergeron has known the thrill of hunting since he was a young teen growing up in southern New Hampshire. “A friend and I took a hunter education class and we were hooked.” Now Bergeron is N.H. Fish and Game’s deer project leader and knows that hunting isn’t just another great reason to be outside. It’s also “the most effective tool we have for managing deer populations.”

With the proliferation of deer throughout much of North America over the past few decades, only hunting can make a significant impact on achieving a state’s desired population goals. In some states, even hunting is not enough.

In their most over-prolific places, browsing white-tailed deer are taking a toll on forests and the diverse mosaic of fauna that would otherwise be present, from common wildflowers to endangered plants and would-be timber stands. The impact spreads to farms, gardens, neighborhoods and more. Hunting helps to keep deer populations in balance with habitat carrying capacity to prevent such problems from occurring.

Hunters generally understand this, and for some, that’s one reason among many for why they hunt. They’re doing their part. Based on the latest N.H. survey data, an overwhelming majority of New Hampshire residents approve of regulated hunting, in part because they know they’re helping to keep deer numbers in check.

THE CHALLENGE

Hunters don’t go afield with a guaranteed chance of filling their tag. Department data shows that success rates for New Hampshire hunters vary from 13 percent for deer to 20 percent for wild turkey (spring) to 69 percent for moose. That means, for every 100 New Hampshire deer hunters, an average of 13 will take a deer.

For any hunter, the hunt is all about the challenge, the lure of success. And success hinges on the scouting, the knowledge of game and

habitat, reading the sign and being in the right place at the right time. It takes skill, perseverance and luck to succeed.

Young hunters often cite the challenge. They want to prove to themselves and to others that they can do it. They want to know they can learn the subtle ways of game, pull the trigger and bring the game home.

Women – the fastest-growing group of new hunters – want to show that they can master the skills as good as any man. They’re up for the challenge, but are also in the hunt for all the other good reasons.

One New Hampshire hunter, Angela Franklin, says she started hunting to spend time with her significant other. “This was the only way to see him during hunting season,” she says. “I never really thought I would come to enjoy it, but I do! There is just something about being in nature waiting under a tree for a deer, maybe taking a little nap, just listening to the sounds of the woods. It’s peaceful and a good way to fill the freezer.”

WHY I HUNT

Tina Lougee – Why do I hunt? Being outside breathing fresh air, listening to a whole new language called nature. The challenge of the hunt, the thrill of it, the rush in your stomach when you see that rack. The food for the family for the winter. I wouldn’t have it any other way...God, family, hunting. 🍷

Jonathan Partridge – I hunt to keep the tradition going. I do it for the time to reflect, for the challenge and the scenery. Hopefully, I will be able to hand down the traditions and knowledge you can only learn in the woods. 🍷

THE CAMARADERIE

Whether young or old, many hunters have nothing to prove. They've tagged deer. They know the hunt. They know the terrain. Here they are – on a brisk November day in New Hampshire with a son and a friend. All is good. Get on a stand, face in the wind and watch the woods come to life.

It's about making arrangements. Coffee in a Thermos at 5 a.m. Meeting someone at an ungodly hour and getting in the truck and going to the hot spot. It's about the ribbing for one screw-up or another. Forgetting the ammo. Missing the 20-yard buck. Falling asleep on stand. The list goes on. It's about the stories and the myths that get better over time. These are stories that pull families close, stories re-told at weddings, funerals and Thanksgiving. They make us humble. They make us human.

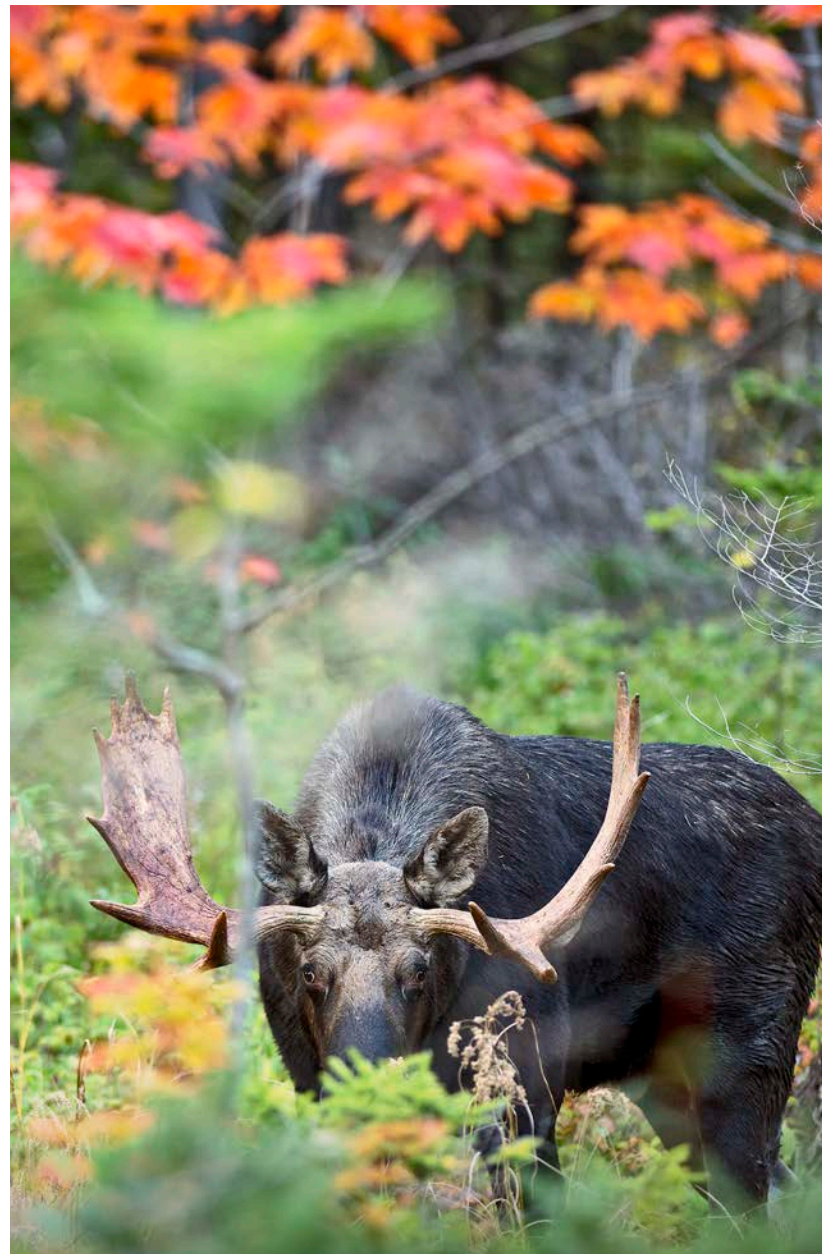
Women – the fastest-growing group of new hunters – want to show that they can master the skills as good as any man.



WHY I HUNT



Wayne Claflin – I hunt because of the camaraderie of other hunters, the experience of being in the woods and looking at other wildlife. I also hunt for the meat – it is healthier than meat purchased in the store. I do not hunt for the trophy. 👍



Even when we're hunting alone, we're never solo. We have the terrain, the sky, the woods and the game to keep us company.



THE SOLACE

By habit or circumstance, many of us hunt alone. We've watched incredible sunrises and seen amazing skies. We've watched coyotes and bobcats that didn't have a clue we were there. I once watched a group of does so close, I could've poked them with my muzzleloader. We've endured cold rain and snow and endless, tedious days of seeing nothing. We carry on.

"We hunt because it is a fundamental aspect of our natural humanity, because the fields and forests call to us with a primal song that links us to where we are from, to where we belong," says New Hampshire hunter Michael Covey. "It is a union with our world that speaks to the soul of any who listen for it... Our eyes sharpen, our ears become more sensitive, even our skin and nose send us cues that are lost in the shuffle of civilization, but immediately translated in the wilds of our true home. In the real world, outside the constructs of man, we become whole again, feral, and as the mantle of civilization sheds itself, so do the troubles that come along with it. We hunt because we are born to, and because it is right, and we feel sympathy for those who have become so lost that they cannot find their way to the woods."

Even when we're hunting alone, we're never solo. We have the terrain, the sky, the woods and the game to keep us company. And at the end of a long, cold day with no tag filled, we hope delicious things await us at home: sausage, apple pie and a warm smile or two. This is why we hunt.

f WHY I HUNT

Cori Ryan – I hunt so everyone will leave me alone for a few hours.

Antonio Arruda - I hunt for therapy.

THE FOOD

For the same reasons that our paleo-ancestors hunted caribou, we hunt for the food. All-natural, organic, free-range, New Hampshire-grown, local and totally sustainable white-tailed deer. You can't get this at Whole Foods, Trader Joe's or even your local butcher. And for good reason. Game isn't a commodity to be bought and sold; it's a public resource, managed by the best available science with help from you and me.

The local food movement in New Hampshire manifests itself not just in the farmers markets and community-supported agriculture farms, but also in the woods. People like Tovar Cerulli, author of *The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian's Hunt for Sustenance*, know

that healthy, sustainable food is totally compatible with deer-hunting.

"Like most hunters I know, I hunt for a complex web of reasons," Cerulli says. "I hunt to bring home healthy, humane, free-range meat, and to confront the death of the animals that feed me. And I hunt to be nourished in other ways: to learn about myself and the place I inhabit, to participate in the rhythms of the land."

The game is delicious. Whether cooked as a complex meal or simply fried up in a skillet with olive oil, you know you've got a lean, protein-rich source of nourishment. It may last a winter; it may last longer. But while it lasts, you know you'll enjoy every bite of it.

f WHY I HUNT

Pam Maurier – I hunt because of my passion for the outdoors and the respect I have when I take an animal out of the woods and bless my family with the meat. My love who passed this passion on to me is my husband Ray, and we continue to pass it on to our kids and grandkids. We love hunting and fishing.

THE FUN

Ask some longtime hunters why they hunt and they may struggle for an answer. And that's okay. They do it for the fun.

It's about getting up early. Pulling gear together. Going to camp and hanging out with friends. Gathering intelligence on deer and finding the right stand. It's not just a challenge, it's a blast – and a labor of love. It's where stories are made and legends created. Whether the freezer is filled or not, the hunt is about connecting with the world and our friends. It's connecting in a way that no other activity can fulfill, not movies, camping or anything else. We're on a mission. We may not succeed. We may fail heroically. But we're on a mission and that's how stories begin.

This is why we hunt.



f WHY I HUNT

Randy Drago – I hunt for some of the best memories that I'll never FORGET!


Eric Aldrich is a former editor of New Hampshire Wildlife Journal. He hunts near his home in Hancock.

Special thanks to the Fish and Game Facebook friends who shared their perspectives on hunting for this article. Why do YOU hunt? Let us know at facebook.com/nhfishandgame.

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