



Why We Hunt

Explaining the deep-seated need for
game meat, outdoors companionship,
and gittin' out amongst 'em. BY JOHN MADSON

Fifteen years ago, when my friend John Mitchell was writing *Bitter Harvest*, he solicited my views on hunting.

We spent most of a day in a johnboat on a Mississippi River backwater while he asked penetrating questions and I provided fuzzy answers. He finally observed that my perceptions of hunting were metaphysical—and he was right, supporting Voltaire's contention that "When the speaker and he to whom he speaks do not understand, that is metaphysics."

I once spoke at a seminar of biologists and offered some general, rather superficial reasons for why men hunt deer.

They do so for many reasons, any one of which may be enough. A common one, of course, is the meat reason. The woods are full of people who claim to be hunting for prime meat, although I've a hunch that this is a standard alibi for busting the first deer that comes along. Yet, there are some real meat hunters—men who are pretty good at judging wild meat on the hoof, and who have the patience and experience to carefully pick and choose, and who take pride in the quality of their venison. There are still a few old hands who will pass up a trophy buck for a plump little fork-horn—although they are often experienced hunters who have already taken their share of trophy bucks.

Then, of course, there's the trophy reason. In its shallowest context, it is simply an exhibitionist effort to display prowess and status. In a deeper context, it goes beyond that.

Aldo Leopold once observed that "Poets sing and hunters scale the mountains primarily for one and the same reason—the thrill to beauty. Critics write and hunters outwit their game for one and the same reason—to reduce that beauty to possession."

Those trophy antlers on the wall may not be only a

hunter's effort to possess beauty, but also to keep something important to him from slipping away and being forgotten. And if the trophy testifies that here is a strong and skillful hunter—well, what's the use of denying it?

And so the great stag has been stalked and taken.

Ten thousand years ago the hunter might have stood by a fire and recounted the great deed to his clan brothers, while the old men nodded their approval and stripling boys back in the shadows listened in wonder. It hasn't changed much. The trophy hunter, the ethical killer of the great stag, or bear, or ram, still commands attention by the fire as he recites his deeds. His peers still salute him, the old men still nod and remember, and boys still dream of tomorrow's hunts.

Most of us will never kill the great stag. Yet we have all taken deer that held special trophy value for us, and such value is not always a measure of tine and beam. It may be just a measure of hard, solid hunting in which both man and deer conducted themselves well, so that neither was shamed.

Trophy hunting has been bitterly condemned for an alleged deterioration of a game stock by killing off the best males. Yet neither the mathematics of genetics nor the observed facts of breeding within wildlife populations add support to that contention. A five-by-five mule deer buck is nearing the end of his days and has already done his share of genetical work. Still, that is empty sophistry if the taking of that trophy is unethical—in which case it is not a trophy at all.

Companionship can be a strong element in hunting. For as long as men have hunted, they have banded into special hunting packs with their own taboos, traditions, and rituals. And sometimes the companionship and the rituals become more important than the hunt itself, and sometimes the greatest pleasure is in anticipation and recollection, with the hunt only serving to bond the two.



A considerable part of modern sport hunting (as with much of our daily living) is the exercise of technology. That is, the employment of gadgetry for its own sake. I plead guilty to that in part, for a fine rifle or shotgun plays a significant part in my enjoyment of hunting. I admire the skill and artistry that go into the making of such guns—but I am uninterested in any gun, however beautifully wrought, if I cannot shoot it well. I count myself as a good shot. When the day comes that my eyes and reflexes impair that ability, I will not hunt again.

Our critics are fond of pointing out that wildlife has scarcely a chance against our highly efficient technology. But the fact is, wildlife has an edge of its own—and it is likely to be enhanced by our increasing dependence on gadgets and less reliance on our legs, eyes, ears, patience, and the savvy that accrues from years of experience. A good working definition of a game species is one that is fitted with survival equipment enabling it to take advantage, while a genuine sport hunter is one constrained by ethics and respect to give advantage.

But as much as anything else, one of the greatest urges impelling such a hunter is his search for freedom,

was visiting an Adirondack deer camp for the first time. He was not a hunter; it was all new to him. As he stood by the cabin door one evening, watching hunters dress deer while their companions offered unsolicited advice, listening to the good laughter and easy talk, the doctor turned to his host with a look of sudden comprehension and said, “Why, these men are free!”

Pascal once observed that the virtue of hunting is not in possessing game, but in the pursuit of it. By being absorbed in looking outward for game, “the hunter is absolved of the really insupportable task of looking inward upon himself.” And so the hunter’s eyes are directed outward instead of inward, and myriad nagging, worrisome concerns are overlain with the illusion of being part of an older, freer world.

I once asked an old river rat of long acquaintance why he was such a deeply committed hunter.

He thought for a moment and replied: “Why—to git away from the house and git out amongst ’em mainly.”

Homer once said much the same thing: *Manet sub love frigido Venator/Tenerae coniugis immemor*. Which renders out as “The hunter goes his way ’neath frigid skies unmindful of his tender spouse.”

...The genuine hunter is probably as free as it’s possible to be in this technocracy of ours. Free not because he sheds civilized codes and restraints when he goes into the woods, but because he can project himself out of and beyond himself, out of and beyond the ordinary, to be wholly absorbed in a quieter, deeper, and older world.

You know how it is. When you go into the woods your presence makes a splash, and the ripples of your arrival spread like circles in water. Long after you have stopped moving, your presence widens in rings through the woods. But after a while this fades, and the pool of silence is tranquil again, and you are either forgotten or accepted—you are never sure which. Your presence has been absorbed into the pattern of things, you have begun to be part of it, and this is when the hunting really begins.

You can always feel it when those circles stop widening; you can feel it on the back of your neck and in your gut, and in the awareness of other presences. This is the

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and for the genuine personal adventure inherent in such freedom. Just as game species may be the truest indicators of quality natural environments, so hunting can be an indicator of quality natural freedom.

Dr. Murdock Head told of a noted physician who

The late author and conservationist John Madson delivered this essay at the groundbreaking first Governor’s Symposium on North America’s Hunting Heritage in 1993 in Bozeman. He was the author of a dozen books, including Where the Sky Began and Up on the River.



JIM HERRLY



CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS

real start of the hunt, and you'll always know when it happens and when you are beginning to hunt well.

There were those times when I was a kid, hunting and trapping and sometimes spending several days and nights alone in the woods, when I'd have a flash of insight that was often gone as swiftly as it came—a vague sense of what aboriginal hunters must feel, and what real hunting, the pure-quill honest-to-God real hunting, is all about. One strong flash of this to a boy—one swift heady taste of an utter wild freedom and perception—is enough to keep him hunting all his days. Not just for meat, or horns, but for that flash of insight again, trying to close the magic circle of man, wildness, and animal.

Is blood lust a prime motivation of hunting, as some of our critics contend?

The late Dr. C. H. D. Clarke pointed out that perverted and inadequate people may indeed hunt, but contended that this is not the story of hunting.

The human investment of hunting with magic, he felt, was a logical development of being able to think about nature, and wonder where the next feast was coming from. When the magic is truly imbedded, it is part of our inheritance. Hunting still has (for some of us) its prehuman excitement and prestige, and its human magic, and when we hunt there is a deep satisfaction that comes from a contact with nature that is healthy and traditional. Blood lust it is not. The deepest fear of the primitive hunter is of offending the spirit of the game. Clarke once saw an old Eskimo who, when young, had been deliberately blinded by his fellow hunters. They were afraid because the man had been disrespectful to a caribou he had killed. For such a sin there had to be a terrible expiation. We do not do that anymore, nor do Eskimos, but the unethical hunter is at least uneasy—and if he is an Eskimo he may be afraid.

Sport hunting, Clarke went on, can surely put us inside the world of nature. The real hunter does not go into that world of nature as a casual onlooker, but as an active participant.

Speaking personally, there are many uses of outdoor October, and I savor them all. I could drink that ale-golden month to its dregs and never touch a gun. But without hunting, some of the savor would be missing.

Lovely and rich as autumn would still be, a certain condiment would be gone, and I think I know what that is. It is seeing grouse and pheasants and quail and mallards at close-hand as any predator might, and seeing how fine-tuned, ingenious, and intricate their responses to predation can be. I might watch game birds and animals at all seasons under a full range of conditions, and yet never know them as I do when I am hunting them well and they are doing their usual fine job of parrying my thrusts.

Hunters may try to reduce their motives to such tangibles as trophies, meat, good dogwork, companionship, exercise, freedom in quality environments, or simply "adventure." Underlying all that, however, are deeply embedded reasons that neither hunter nor psychologist is really equipped to fathom.

Our severest critics are much surer of themselves. The kindest thing they say about us is that we are cruel and dangerous children; at our worst, we are barbarians that revel in the joy of inflicting pain and death. And there is some truth in all of that. We cannot deny that such hunters do exist; to do so is to delude ourselves. On the other hand, the shrill antihunting critics seem unable to understand the motives that impel what I choose to call the "genuine hunter." That is, the person with a deep personal bond to the game he hunts and the habitats in which he hunts it. Such emotion can result only from the respect that grows from experience and reflection.

Our critics deplore hunting on an emotional basis, just as we hunters defend it. Each extreme would do well to share a more objective position. Both hunter and antihunter should be governed by sound biological principle. Hunting cannot be condoned if it is not based on biological management and does not demonstrate respect for game and the habitats in which it is hunted. On the other hand, hunting is best defended by adherence to sound biological principles and demonstration of a genuine respect for nature.

Why do men hunt? It goes far beyond anything I've said here. How can one explain the inexplicable? But after more than fifty years of hunting, I'm pretty sure of two things: that hunting is too deeply rooted in the metaphysical to allow clinical examination—and that it's a happy man who keeps his youthful appetite for that sort of metaphysics. 🐾