



DOUGLAS F. GEORGE



Kent Island



Patricia (above) and friends have made their hunting trip an annual event.



Beyond BOW deer clinic

BREAKING TRADITION

The tale of a huntress

By Patricia Allen

If someone asks you to describe what a typical hunter looks like, the first image that comes to most peoples' mind is that of a man in the woods, decked out in camouflage with a shotgun poised for the hunt. Why not a woman?

I'm a woman and I still picture a man with a gun in the woods. This image has been embedded into my brain since childhood—it's what we have been told and taught. It's time now to break that tradition.

To steal a line from sharpshooter Annie Oakley in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, "I can do anything you can do better!" Maybe I can't do *everything* better, but I *can* hunt just as well. Other women appear to agree.

According to a national five-year census conducted by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, women are gaining ground in this pursuit, recreationally and economically.

Deer tale

Hunting has become a passion of mine and many of my peers. It's an opportunity to experience nature in a wild and totally natural setting that is also part of our history and heritage.

I remember growing up where the boys told stories of their hunting trips and the girls just sat there listening. But me? I envied their tales. In my hometown, Richfield Springs, NY (dairy farm country), it was unusual for a girl to go and I'm from a non-hunting family. So, the possibility of hunting was slim to none.

It wasn't until adulthood that a friend and mentor took me and three other women deer hunting. I was ecstatic, nervous and scared. I didn't own any of my own equipment, so I had to borrow what I needed. After all, I didn't know if I'd actually like it.

We headed to Snow Hill on the Eastern Shore. Once there, I sat in a blind with my gun at the ready. I sat for what felt like hours, waiting for a deer to come out of the loblolly pine forest and into my shooting lane.

I finally started to relax and just enjoy the surroundings, watching the birds, the squirrels and the falling snow. Then, a doe appeared out of nowhere at the end of the lane, about 175 yards away. I slowly aimed the rifle and looked through the scope. I was shaking so badly with excitement that I wasn't sure I could make the shot. I slowed my breathing and thought, "You can do this!"

The shaking ceased and the doe was still in sight. I released the safety, took aim, slowly let out a breath and squeezed the trigger. BANG! After putting the safety back on the gun and setting it down carefully, I grabbed my binoculars (the one piece of equipment that was actually mine) to see if I had gotten my first deer.

I did!

Shaking again, this time from the adrenaline, I grinned from ear to ear. Everyone on our trip shared in my elation. The women greeted me with high fives and bear-sized hugs. I had harvested my first deer, and I was hooked.



DNR PHOTOS



At BOW and Beyond BOW workshops, women learn how to build shelter, use tree stand, and take target practice.

BOW-ing to women

What does the state do to encourage women to hunt? DNR coordinates a program specifically to those who are open-air enthusiasts. Maryland's *Becoming an Outdoors-Woman* (BOW) offers outdoor skills workshops specifically for women 18 years of age and older. (Men also are welcomed.)

The workshops enable women to learn about a wide variety of outdoor recreational opportunities in a casual environment. Designed to be as hands-on as possible, the classes give participants enough knowledge to pursue their interests. Additional *Beyond BOW* programs focus on specific activities, including two hunting clinics: goose and deer.

DNR has hosted quality outdoors experiences for more than 4,000 women since the program began in Maryland in 1995.

Conserving wildlife

New hunters and shooters—whether male or female—not only increase participation

in the sport but also help with conservation. Many people don't realize that it's the hunters and shooters who support most of the wildlife conservation programs in our state.

The majority of financial support for the programs comes from licenses and fees, and federal funds such as Wildlife Restoration, which are derived from an excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. These also serve as the main funding source for protecting endangered, rare and threatened species.

So when you see a North American porcupine waddling through the forest or a bald eagle soaring through the sky, thank a hunter.

And the next time you are in the woods and you spy a person clad in camo, look closely; it may be a member of the fairer sex taking aim at new opportunities! ■

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