

Not Just a Boy's Club Anymore

Female Hunters on the Rise

By Elizabeth Mack

Walk any given field during the hunting season and that hunter you see in full camo gear and toting a rifle might very well be female. And that shotgun blast you hear? That's the sound of another crumbling stereotype, the one of the delicate woman who would rather do her nails than gut a deer.

While the number of male hunters has declined nationally in recent years, the percentage of female hunters has seen a steady increase.

According to the most recent National Survey of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Associated Recreation published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there was an 11 percent decline in hunters nationwide from 1991 to 2006, but female numbers grew and now make up an estimated 10 percent of the nation's 12.5 million hunters and more than 11 percent of the hunters in Nebraska. One of the largest increases is found in the numbers of female bowhunters, which one National Sporting Goods Association survey indicated had risen 176 percent from

2001 to 2005.

Janice Spicha of Nebraska is one of those bowhunters, and she isn't surprised by the statistics: "I attribute the increases to stereotypes being broken, women being accepted as hunters nowadays."

Spicha, who recently became the first female chairperson in the history of the Nebraska Bowhunters Association, believes mentoring programs such as Becoming an Outdoors Woman, put on by groups such as the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the National Wild Turkey Federation's Women in the Outdoors, have also helped attract female hunters.

"Women come into these camps and they have their makeup cases and all the trappings we women are supposed to have," said Spicha. "When they get there, I tell them this is probably the first time in their lives most of them are going to be allowed to discover themselves and not be a mother, sister, wife, girlfriend. I tell them they can chuck all the trappings

of the world – chuck it all out if they want. By the third day, the trappings are gone and the women discover themselves. It can be life changing."

Jeff Rawlinson, assistant administrator in the Commission's information and education division, says they have seen a steady rise in female participation in NGPC's various outreach programs. Although some states have had to cut funding due to budget constraints, Rawlinson says funding remains in place, at least for now, for the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program: "We have discussed the overall efficacy of the BOW program and will continue to review its impacts each year. The involvement by women in hunting, shooting sports and fishing has increased nationally over the last 10 years and the demand for outreach programs like this one has increased with it."

And it's not just adult women who are coming to hunting in large numbers – from 2001 to 2006, young girls ages 6 to 15 taking to the field increased a whopping 50 percent from just a



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRIUS

Above: Angela McDermott and her husband, Dave, teal hunt at Ducks Unlimited's Verona Complex in Clay County earlier this year. Previous page: Leslie Hershberger with a white-tailed doe she shot in Otoe County.

decade earlier. Many fathers, such as Tom Ronsick of Omaha, are finding out that hunting is a great way to spend quality time with their daughters: "My 11-year-old daughter Elizabeth has been deer hunting with me for two years in a double stand. At first I think she just wanted to spend some quality time with her dad, but eventually she got caught up in the actual hunting."

Spicha, who also hunted with her father, believes that even though men of earlier generations might hold onto old female stereotypes, once men find out that their daughters have an interest in hunting, most jump at the chance to introduce their daughters to the sport.

However, Spicha, who retired last year and has hunted or fished virtually every day since, believes that in order for daughters to have an interest in hunting, it's important to get the moms involved: "There is a saying that if you teach a man to hunt, he goes hunting. But if you teach a woman to hunt, the whole family goes hunting together."

Retailers are finding this out as well –

Cabela's, Bass Pro Shops and others are even targeting women with some lines of hunting clothing.

Females still constitute a relatively small percentage of total hunters nationwide, but Spicha believes the numbers of females going hunting for the first time will continue to grow. "It's a sport women can be good at one-on-one – it doesn't matter if you're fat or skinny, rich or poor," said Spicha. "You can excel at hunting no matter what you are in life. It's for anyone who loves and respects nature and the outdoors. I think we are learning hunting is not a gender-specific sport." ■

Elizabeth Mack is a freelance writer living in Omaha. Her last feature story in NEBRASKALAND Magazine was April 2010: "Sublime Beauty – The American White Pelican."



Becoming an Outdoors-Woman

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) is a program offered by the Outdoor Education Division of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and is designed to encourage women to become active participants in the great outdoors. This includes activities related to hunting, camping, boating, backpacking, hiking and fishing, just to name a few. BOW offers a unique opportunity for women to learn skills associated with a variety of outdoor recreation activities.

The workshops are geared toward adult women, but anyone 18 years of age or older who wants to learn outdoor skills in a non-intimidating and friendly environment is welcome to register.

BOW workshops are offered at Ponca State Park and the State 4-H Camp at Halsey each year, and Advanced BOW programs are often offered throughout the year in various locations across the state. BOW participants gain camaraderie with new friends, discover and enhance diverse strengths and experiences, and develop an appreciation for the wild and what it takes to develop hunting and outdoor skills in a mentored setting.

For more information, call (402) 471-5482 or go to www.NebraskaBOW.com.