

Is
There

ROOM

For
Women In The

OUTDOORS?

By Jim Heffelfinger

Times change, too quickly along some fronts, too slowly along others. In an age where women have successfully occupied niches in almost every occupation and sport, we still see a curious lack of participation in hunting.

In today's world, a woman calling herself a homemaker just might wear a tool-belt to work and handle 2x4s all day.

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Horace Gore photo

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Females do the hunting in the world of the African lion, yet in our own highly advanced social system that seems almost taboo. Perhaps this division of labor arose out of necessity millions of years ago when early Hominids maximized their survival by allocating responsibilities. The men hunted and the women gathered. Under this system all nutritional needs of the clan were met in an efficient manner.

I'm confident, however, that somewhere

along the evolutionary trek a "gatherer" picked up a bow or spear and longed to chase fleet-footed quarry rather than dealing with the relatively mundane task of grubbing for roots and picking berries. The consequences would be grave, however, if this "gatherer" were caught handling a "hunter's" weapon, for this was not allowed under the clan rules. We see similar confrontations today when a wife empties a gun cabinet to dust.

The consequences of these early clan rules are seen today as research tells us that nationwide as less than 2 percent of women in the United

States hunt. The last National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-associated Recreation in 1996 did not report the percent of Texas women that hunt because the "sample size was too low to be reported accurately." This evolutionary predisposition has been reinforced since birth: boys are given Red Ryder BB guns and girls are given a Barbie doll, complete with pink convertible and surfboard. Other barriers arise as the young girls grow older, which makes it difficult for them to participate in outdoor activities. There are several barriers which must be broken down before we will see widespread female participation.

In an effort to break down these barriers to outdoor recreation for women, Dr. Christine Thomas of University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point developed a workshop in 1991 entitled "Becoming an Outdoors Woman."

Social pressure from peers, family members and male hunters who view hunting as "a man's sport" all combine to keep women out of the field. Hunting is by no means the exclusive domain of men. Interviews of over 800 female hunters in three states by Dr. Robert Jackson at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse showed that women were as prepared, effective and involved as their male counterparts in the pursuit of game.

Females reported seeing an average of 7.28 deer per day of their hunt, versus 9.23 as reported by males. Forty-six percent of both sexes reported

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Is There Room for Women in the Outdoors?

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getting a shot while women deer hunters were more successful in connecting on their shots (94.5 percent for females and 76.5 percent for males). This should not be surprising. Good shooting is a combination of steadiness, concentration, hand/eye coordination and patience for the right shot in the field. None of these qualities are acquired as a result of a subscription to Soldier of Fortune Magazine.

Lack of female role models hurts women in hunting. Flip through a magazine or watch any hunting show on Saturday or Sunday and this is painfully obvious. There are many good female hunters that could probably host a show better than most I see on my TV. If young girls looked up from their Barbies to see a woman in camouflage on TV explaining how to place dove decoys around a stock pond, they would realize that hunting isn't just a boy thing.


Expense or availability of suitable equipment is a problem for women and children. Shotgun and rifle stocks are often too long for safe and accurate shooting by smaller-framed women. Some women are introduced to the sport of hunting with a rifle too powerful to shoot comfortably. Bows with shorter draw lengths are not available in great selection at many sporting goods stores. Outdoor clothing lines have always been designed with the male physique in mind (36-46-36). Women in the outdoors are not concerned with fashion while hunting but it is important that clothing fit properly if you plan to stalk and glass all day or climb into your tree stand. In the last few years some sporting goods outlets such as Cabela's, Gander Mountain, and Bass Pro Shops, have begun marketing outdoor clothing specifically made for women.

Being raised in a non-hunting family hurts most. This is a problem for young men and women with interests in hunting but no mentor. Surveys show a majority of hunters were introduced to hunting by age 15. If a person is not introduced to hunting and the outdoors at an early age, they probably will not hunt consistently throughout their life. Even in hunting families this introduction has traditionally been father to son with the daughters and wives rarely considered. In Dr. Jackson's survey, over 50 percent of the respondents stated that their husbands introduced them to hunting. In Wisconsin, one


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and when accompanied by others who are at the same place on the learning curve.

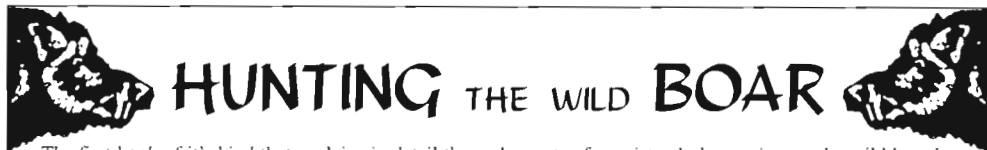
In an effort to break down these barriers to outdoor recreation for women, Dr. Christine Thomas of University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point developed a workshop in 1991 entitled "Becoming an Outdoors Woman." This weekend workshop included seminars on everything from hunting/shooting sports, flyfishing and photography to orienteering, canoeing and dutch-

oven cooking. This workshop was an overwhelming success and it evolved into a nationwide program which would be expanded to 18 workshops in 14 states and one Canadian Province in 1994. Workshops like this provide a forum for women to come together and learn about the opportunities available to them and speak to others with the same interests.

Husband and wife hunting side by side is a great way to spend quality time together. One Midwestern bowhunting club reported that they did not allow women to join. When interviewed, they

counted 27 divorces among 35 members. They failed to realize that the future of hunting (and, apparently their marriages) depends on extending a welcome to all who are interested in becoming more involved in outdoor activities.

A recent Arizona survey revealed that 85 percent of current participants in hunting were involved by age 18. Demographic research tells us that 50 percent of all children will live with one parent by age 18 and 90 percent of all single-parent families are headed by a woman (less than 2 percent of whom are hunters). It doesn't take a degree in Sociology to figure out where the future of hunting lies. The hand that rocks the cradle... ♀



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