

***Strong supporters of land & wildlife conservation, hunters in the US are in decline.  
Will a new generation take the field?***

By Robert M. Poole Photographs by William Albert Allard National Geographic Magazine, Nov 07



The ducks came up from the basement: An opening wave of mallards, numbering 4,744, followed by battalions of black ducks, mergansers, pintails, shovelers, ringnecks, and canvasbacks, with a rear guard of more than 6,000 Canada geese completing the flight. It would take most of a week for the mixed flock of 22,963 birds to conclude the last leg of a long migration, which had begun with autumn, stretched into winter, and ended here on a damp January morning at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife research center in Laurel, Maryland.

It might be more accurate to say that these were metaphorical ducks and geese, with one part standing for the whole creature, because by the time they appeared at the Maryland research station, all that remained of each teal or scaup was one frozen wing, segregated by species and stored in a basement freezer to await the 2006-07 Atlantic Flyway Wing Bee.

Norman Saake pulled a mallard wing out of a cardboard box, fanned it so that the bird's steely blue speculum feathers flashed in the light, and broke into a smile. "You wonder how, after 30 years of doing this, a guy can get so excited about a pretty wing," Saake said, holding it up for the admiration of three or four others scrutinizing wings at his table. They cooed like grandparents looking at baby pictures. Saake, a biologist retired from the Nevada Department of Wildlife, had crossed the continent for yet another wing bee, one of several such events crucial to the health of the nation's waterfowl population.

Each wing told a story. By reading the feathers for a few seconds, a veteran like Saake could distinguish a mallard drake from a hen, a juvenile from an adult, a purebred mallard from a hybrid. After a week of sorting wings in Laurel, scientists could gauge if there were enough juveniles surviving in each species to replace adults in the population. Such surveys, combined with wing bee data and research from other regions, help resource managers determine how much hunting pressure each species can sustain from year to year. This is a prime consideration when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sets its bag limits for the next hunting season—not only for waterfowl but also for woodcock, snipe, doves, and other federally protected migratory bird species.

"The age ratios really help show how a species is holding up," said Paul Padding, the Atlantic flyway

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representative of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The great irony is that many species might not survive at all were it not for hunters trying to kill them. All the wings provided to Norman Saake and his colleagues throughout the country come from hunters, who fold them into prepaid envelopes, record the date and place of harvest, and mail them in. It is but one example of how the nation's 12.5 million hunters have become essential partners in wildlife management. They have paid more than 700 million dollars for duck stamps, which have added 5.2 million acres to the National Wildlife Refuge System since 1934, when the first stamps were issued. They pay millions of dollars for licenses, tags, and permits each year, which helps finance state game agencies. They contribute more than 250 million dollars annually in excise taxes on guns, ammunition, and other equipment, which largely pays for new public game lands. Hunters in the private sector also play a growing role in conserving wildlife.

Ted Turner, who is a hunter as well as a media pioneer, is also the country's largest private landowner. He has worked tirelessly to restore the American bison through much of its range. Now he manages some two million acres (800,000 hectares) in the U.S. for biodiversity and for sustainable ranching, timbering, fishing—and hunting.

“It starts with managing the land properly,” said Turner, who allows paying visitors to hunt for quail, bison, elk, antelope, wild turkey, and other species on his properties. “You need good healthy land for good healthy animals. They need good water, good cover, and good food. If you're missing any one of those three things, you won't have animals. I maintain my ranches with wildlife being the top priority. I am trying to do the smart thing for the environment instead of the dumb thing. I want others to see what can be done with the land—even if they're not billionaires.”

Turner has found a way to make hunting pay for conservation. At his Vermejo Park Ranch in New Mexico and Colorado, he allows a few hunters to kill about 200 trophy elk each year—some 2 percent of his 10,000-elk herd. Each hunter pays \$10,000, which brings two million dollars in revenues annually. “Now, that's a pretty acceptable figure,” said Turner, who uses the income to keep his 600,000-acre (240,000 hectares) property in a relatively wild state, with few fences and with preference given to indigenous plants and wildlife.

Hunters of more modest means contribute to conservation in other ways, giving 280 million dollars annually to organizations such as Pheasants Forever, the Ruffed Grouse Society, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, and other nonprofit groups, which sponsor scientific research for particular species and maintain important habitat. Since its formation in 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 11 million acres (4.5 million hectares) of wetlands and associated uplands. Hunters also focus public attention on conservation issues in state legislatures, in Congress, and in the marketplace. When you buy a camouflage camisole (\$24.99) from the Ducks Unlimited catalog, a portion of the proceeds goes to conservation projects. If you visit Bozeman, Montana, and buy a pair of Schnee's Pac boots, you will find a tag dangling from the laces, along with a promise that the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation will receive some of your money for elk conservation projects.

“It's the hunters who keep most of these species going,” said Jim Clay, a middle school English teacher, hunter, and maker of turkey calls in Winchester, Virginia. “They put in the money, and they put in the hours. Hunters really care about what happens.”

As a bird hunter who occasionally shoots a deer for the freezer, I have never shared the big-game hunter's appreciation for horns, antlers, and trophies, which convey an elevated status upon those who keep track of such things. They carry pictures of trophy elk and whitetails in their wallets and speak knowingly about Boone and Crockett Club scores for antler points, rack spreads, and other measurements. It may be that trophy fever is rooted in the aesthetic that prompts me to save a few grouse or woodcock feathers each year—which are beautiful on their own merits and evoke a particular day in the field, when a bird twittered up through the alders, folded in mid-flight, and was brought to hand by Bart, an old Brittany spaniel who still knows his job and does it with style.

Bart and I pile into the car with the first cool days of autumn, heading north, as we've been doing for more than a decade. Even at age 13, he still quivers like a puppy; he knows what's in store, the very thing for which he was

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bred as a pointing dog. Year after year, we tromp the same moldering orchards, endure the same slashing hawthorn thickets, hear the same old stories from friends in New Brunswick and Maine, and flop in the same seedy hotels along the way. We mourn the dogs that have died since last year and meet the puppies that will replace them. This routine is a reminder that the seasons dance to a cadence as old and reassuring as Ecclesiastes—even older.

Each bird I take from Bart is accepted with a mingling of thanks, a twinge of regret, and a smoothing of earth-colored feathers. When we have enough for a meal, it is cause for ceremony, accompanied by good wine and extravagant praise for Bart, who can no longer hear a word I say but pretends to, knowing this will earn him a nice piece of woodcock or grouse at the end of the show. Such gestures are important in a world where hunting seems increasingly irrelevant and misunderstood.

Well, maybe not so misunderstood. In the rural Virginia county where I live, neighbors drive the roads at night, illegally spotlighting and shooting deer, in and out of season. Just last autumn, while walking on my own land, I found a very young doe that had been shot through the spine, which made her back legs useless; otherwise she was alert, eyeing me, kicking her front legs to get away. I put her out of her misery and ate venison the next few weeks, thinking that there was no reason to compound my neighbor's crime by treating the creature as garbage. Up the road in Shenandoah National Park, authorities recently broke up a ring of hunters who were shooting black bears and selling their gallbladders for the Asian medicine market.

Elsewhere, hunters illegally bait for ducks, kill over their limits, ignore the season, spray houses with bird shot, and argue with landowners who catch them trespassing. Even some people who hunt legally do not hunt ethically, leaving mortally wounded prey to flop around while they pose for photographs, piling up kills they have no intention of eating, treating their quarry as just another commodity.

“When you're hunting,” said Grayson Chesser, a Virginia waterfowl guide and decoy carver, “you have to be ethical. You have to come to terms with the impact you have on other creatures. But I'm afraid we're seeing a new generation of hunters who are disconnected from tradition. Half the time, they don't even know what they're shooting—they're so obsessed with the latest gun, the latest camo pattern. And they think you're some kind of sissy if you don't get your limit.”

More typical, perhaps, are the hunters you meet on the wind-whipped grasslands of central Montana, where a local chapter of Pheasants Forever has converted an 800-acre (325 hectares) parcel into a haven for pheasants and other wildlife.

“Pheasants need grain and cover,” said Tom Stivers, a biologist with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks who showed me around the Coffee Creek project. The rolling, treeless plains looked well-groomed. Rows of alfalfa, sweet clover, and silver sage hugged the sinuous contours of Coffee Creek, while the surrounding hills bristled with juniper, buffalo berry, chokecherry, and golden currant. In the distance, snow clouds swirled around Square Butte, a landmark anchoring the scene, just as it did in paintings by cowboy artist Charles M. Russell.

“Plenty of food, plenty of cover,” Stivers said. “As long as they have those things, they will stick around—even if you're hunting them hard. If you've got the habitat, hunting isn't really a limiting factor if it is properly managed.”

During an hour or so of combing the hills, we neither saw nor heard another human, not even the rumble of a distant pickup truck. On one hill, we kicked up a flock of 20 sharp-tailed grouse, saw bald eagles wheeling overhead, and sighted perhaps 50 mule deer bounding toward the horizon. But not a single pheasant.

“So, where are all the pheasants?” I asked.

“Oh, there are plenty around,” Stivers said, discreetly toeing the ground with a scuffed boot, calling attention to the hundreds of bird tracks in the snow. After the long hunting season, the birds grow wary of anything on two legs. The brushy, low-lying shelter belts were doing their job, concealing pheasants while providing sanctuary

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from the harsh Montana winters.

The place also offered a refuge of sorts for people like Craig Roberts, founder of the Pheasants Forever chapter in Lewistown, Montana. In the old days, hunters could grab a shotgun and take to the hills after work with little concern about bumping into other people. But land ownership patterns have changed in recent years, with old ranches carved up into smaller ones, and new owners saving the hunting rights for themselves or banning the sport altogether.

“Access has become a bigger problem than habitat,” Roberts said by phone from his wintering grounds in New Mexico. “The demand for land simply outstrips supply, so that more and more hunters have to pay for access to private lands.”

By contrast, the Coffee Creek property is open, free of charge, to anyone who wishes to hunt there, which means that it gets plenty of action—virtually every day of Montana’s three-month pheasant season. “We get people from 41 states and one Canadian province,” Roberts said. “But that land can stand it. We already had good cover. We just keep adding new shelter belts and grain every year. That brings in the birds. It shows what one little local group can put together.”

Meanwhile, back on Coffee Creek, Stivers and I finally jumped one indignant-looking pheasant, loitering near a tractor shed at the center of the property. Neither of us was armed, but the gaudy rooster sprinted off nonetheless, making tracks in the snow and disappearing into heavy brush—there for a second, gone the next, just like Square Butte floating in and out of view on the horizon. Wind rustled the junipers, Square Butte glowed in the soft light, and Stivers offered a sort of benediction: “You come out here for a few hours with your dog. You do some hard walking. It’s quiet. You see old Square Butte coming out of the clouds up there, and you get a couple of birds—good food, good exercise, and a good way to reconnect with those people who were here before. They were looking across the hills for wildlife, just like we’re doing. We find their arrowheads all the time. They were hunters too.”

Some scientists speculate that humans are still programmed for the chase, since our species has been doing that far longer than we have been farming, writing poetry, or marketing stuff by telephone at dinnertime. After emerging on the plains of Africa, our hominin ancestors began hunting more than a million years ago, killing other creatures in order to live.

“We were all hunting until the Neolithic about 10,000 years ago,” said Wade Davis, an anthropologist and explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society who has studied traditional hunting cultures from Arctic regions to the Amazon Basin and Oceania. “Every day, you had to kill the thing you loved most, the animals upon which your life was dependent. It was the first mystery—and I would argue the basis of religion, which was an attempt to explain what happens after you die.”

In the traditional cultures Davis has studied, the skillful hunter is a respected figure, with a relationship to prey transcending the material world. “There is a strong sense of connection between the people and the prey,” he said. “It penetrates every level of the hunt. If you don’t respect the prey, if you violate the taboos, then you won’t be able to hunt. And if you cannot hunt, you cannot eat. In our own culture, as we’ve become more urbanized, we’ve lost this connection with the natural world. The further away we get from the wild, the less we understand it.”

They still understand the value of hunting in tiny Gardiner, Montana (population 851), where visitors are welcomed by a sign carved with elk antlers, the Antler Pub and Grill advertises weeknight poker, and a sign at the Yellowstone Village Inn promises: “Hunters Welcome—Elk Stay Free.” Thousands of elk graze the hills around town, essential winter range for many in the Yellowstone herd.

This isolated community has been dependent on outdoor enthusiasts since President Theodore Roosevelt, a keen hunter and a founding father of America’s conservation movement, helped put Gardiner on the map in 1903. He came to enjoy a few weeks of solitude in Yellowstone National Park in April of that year—and to argue the case for conserving forests and bison, elk, and other game species then in decline.

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“Every man who appreciates the majesty and beauty of the wilderness and of wild life . . . should strike hands with the far-sighted men who wish to preserve our material resources, in the effort to keep our forests and our game-beasts, game-birds, and game-fish . . . from wanton destruction,” he wrote of his Yellowstone trip. Like other sportsmen of his day, Roosevelt was alarmed at the loss of fish and game, and set out as President to do something about it. By the time he was through, he had helped conserve more than 200 million acres (80 million hectares) in new national parks, bird reservations, national forests, federal game preserves, and other lands.

Barely a century later, Roosevelt would no doubt be pleased to see the herds of elk still lumbering out of the park in January, across the ice-fringed Yellowstone River, and up into their snow-covered winter range around Gardiner.

The temperature was stuck at one degree Fahrenheit (-17°C), and the stars shone hard and bright at four on the morning of January 7, when Warren Johnson cranked up his Dodge pickup and we went sliding down the Jardine Road toward Gardiner, stopping every few miles to check for elk tracks in the snow. Johnson, a well-regarded outfitter in this part of Montana, is one of those big, self-contained westerners who may speak 500 words in a particularly voluble week. After a few stops, I could stand the silence no longer.

“Any bulls?” I asked.

“Yep,” said Johnson.

“Well, how many?”

“Looks like a hundred elk crossed here last night—maybe three or four good bulls among them,” Johnson said, studying the tracks with his long-handled flashlight. “They will be going behind that ridge,” Johnson said, slowly turning to indicate a shadowy hump against the night sky. “That’s where we start today.”

Back at Johnson’s Hells-A-Roarin’ Ranch, we traded the pickup for horses and, as new snow clouds wisped around the moon, we made a slow climb up through the Gallatin National Forest. Johnson led the way, followed by Ron Harris, a pipe fitter from Cashmere, Washington; his hunting buddy, Mike Strutzel, also from Washington; two other Montana guides; and a straggling figure bundled in so many layers that he looked like a horseback version of the Michelin Man. One of the guides was assigned to watch over the Michelin Man, who had to be plucked out of snowdrifts and hoisted into the saddle throughout the morning, for which I was grateful. Strutzel came to root for Ron Harris, the only person in this party of six who was actually hunting.

Harris had drawn one of Montana’s rare late-season elk permits in August, borrowed money for the \$3,000 trip, and was finally pushing his horse up through the pines in chest-deep powder this morning. At a signal from Johnson, Harris dismounted, kneeled in the snow, and took aim on a bull elk, which we had spotted and outflanked by riding around a ridge. Anticipating the crack of Harris’s rifle, I tightened my horse’s reins just in time to see Warren Johnson wave off the shot. “He was a nice bull,” Johnson explained later, “but we’ll see a better one.”

The next morning, up in the dark and back in the saddle, we took to the mountains again, where a magnificent five-by-six-point elk presented himself to Harris. But just as he squeezed off the shot, the bull stepped out of the way—prompting a clean miss. The elk vanished at a trot, and we rode in uncomfortable silence through the rest of the morning.

On his third day out, after I’d left, Ron Harris got his bull, a 750-pound (340 kilograms) male in prime condition, with a heavy six-by-six-point rack. “If you’ve ever seen a grown man cry, you almost would now,” Harris told me by phone that day. “I am one happy guy.” The big elk rode back to Washington with Harris and Strutzel, who converted it into steaks, chops, and sausage. The bull’s head would take a place of honor in Harris’s game room.

He has something in common with his European ancestors, who decorated the walls of their Chauvet Cave with

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exquisite paintings of reindeer, bison, bears, and other revered animals, celebrating their magical power. That was more than 30,000 years ago, yet anthropologist Wade Davis discerns a connection between the paintings and today's hunting trophies: "It's totally connected."

Whatever the spiritual bond between hunter and prey, there was no mystery about the link between hunting and prosperity in a town like Gardiner, which relies upon Yellowstone elk and the hunters who follow them to carry the community through winter. When the elk were thriving, so was Don Maroney, the bearded, peppery man who presides at the Two Bit Saloon on Highway 89, where the dim light would make a Chauvet cave painter feel at home.

"It's sad," Maroney said, looking around the empty bar on a winter afternoon. "When the herd numbers were up, we'd have 3,000 hunters in town in one season. They'd come in for a beer, stay in a motel, get gasoline, and spend money. Those days are gone." It seemed to be true. Out on the highway, red "Vacancy" signs flickered at every motel in town, the parking lots were empty, and one of Gardiner's three gas stations was up for sale. Restaurants were deserted. A few bleary-eyed hunters could be seen rattling through town, but their numbers had fallen, mirroring a drop in the size of the Yellowstone elk herd. Since its recent peak of 19,045 animals in 1994, the number of elk had dropped to just 9,215 in 2006.

At Gardiner's gathering places, the decline was blamed on hunters—not those bipeds in orange vests but the four-legged ones in fur coats, namely gray wolves. These superbly effective predators, reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park between 1995 and 1997, were flourishing. Fueled by an abundance of elk protein, their population had skyrocketed from a founding colony of 41 wolves to some 380 today.

"Those wolves are hunting all the time—24/7—with no checks on them," said Don Laubach, who sells elk calls and hunting equipment around the corner from the Two Bit Saloon. "No wonder the elk are down."

What to do?

"Nobody wants the wolves to be eliminated," Laubach said. "Just control them—they need predators too."

They might have them before long. Federal officials recently proposed that the wolves be removed from the endangered species list in Montana and Idaho, which could eventually allow for wolf hunting outside Yellowstone National Park. Fewer wolves could mean more elk and a comeback for hunting around Gardiner.

Until then, said Tom Lemke, the state biologist who watches over the north Yellowstone region, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks will recommend only a handful of late-season tags, perhaps 160 for the Gardiner region.

"If the elk numbers go up and we can keep things in balance," Lemke said, "we'll issue more permits. We understand why hunters want more tags—but the elk herd is about where it ought to be, according to our management plan."

How many wolves could the Yellowstone system support? In the heated debate surrounding that question, it was easy to forget the time, back in the 1990s, when the state had recruited hunters to reduce the elk herd, which was thought to be too large. The big ungulates were starving, and biologists worried that they were overgrazing the resource. Now the wolves were ascendant, the elk down, and the local populace restive. For wildlife managers like Lemke, keeping predator and prey in balance is increasingly tricky.

Human population grows. Habitat shrinks. The long, slow march from rural to urban living began when the Civil War ended in 1865. Two gentlemen of my acquaintance were on the front end of this transition from farm to town: They were Talmadge Spurgeon Teague and James Augustus Poole, who laid aside their plows and headed for North Carolina villages as the 20th century began. They took their shotguns to town and made regular forays back into the country for hunting. Both were respected for their gunning abilities—especially T. S. Teague, who would invite the preacher on Friday for a quail dinner on Sunday, confident that he could find the birds Saturday

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afternoon. He always delivered—at least that is how my mother remembers my grandfather. From him, I inherited a love for the life afield; from my other grandfather, it was a love for dogs—and his battered 12-gauge Ithaca shotgun.

That old double-barrel is something of a relic, like the declining numbers of Americans who go out to hunt each year. “We’re the endangered species,” said Steve Del Rossi, a New Jersey dog breeder and hunting companion, with whom I often share a duck blind. On a recent December morning, we found ourselves shivering by Maryland’s Chester River as the sun strained behind sooty clouds and thousands of Canada geese honked overhead in long, noisy formations. Looking down the bench in our blind, it occurred to me that Del Rossi was right: I counted four other white guys with red noses poking from their head-to-toe camouflage, all overfed and over 50, all from hunting families with no understudies to follow them.

In recent decades, the number of hunters has been dropping. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, there were 14.1 million hunters in 1991, 13 million in 2001, and 12.5 million in 2006, which means that they now make up a mere 5 percent of the adult population. Younger hunters are entering the field but not in sufficient number to replace the old ones, who die off or retire their guns for other pursuits. In recent national surveys, the niche formerly occupied by hunters and anglers is being filled by a new species of outdoor enthusiast called “wildlife watching participants” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This new group—including nature photographers, traveling birders, and stay-at-homes with bird feeders—accounts for 71 million people, more than 30 percent of the adult population.

It is too soon to know whether the wildlife-watchers will bring enough money and enthusiasm to the outdoors to keep game species flourishing, much less to bankroll the nation’s state fish and wildlife agencies, which depend on hunting and fishing revenues for most of their funds. “It’s something we’re very concerned about,” said Ed Parker, President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. “We think about it all the time.”

So does Ted Turner. “The quality hunting has already moved to private land,” he said, predicting that this trend will continue as population grows. “The United States is expected to have a population of over 400 million by 2050. That doesn’t leave much room for the animals. It will get more expensive for hunters.”

Old hunters mellow, their bloodlust fading with the years. They still hunt, but not as hard, maybe because they simply have less energy or because they have a growing sympathy for their prey.

“I killed too many ducks when I was young,” admitted Thomas J. O’Connor III, a Suffolk, Virginia, peanut broker who is engaged in a sort of penance now. In recent years, O’Connor has been painstakingly restoring critical waterfowl habitat on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, where wintering masses of ducks and geese find food and shelter on his 750 acres (300 hectares). Much of that land will be preserved in scenic easements, so that it will be shielded from the development rapidly colonizing the fields and woods around Cape Charles.

O’Connor showed me around a seaside farm wreathed by salt marsh and fragrant with pine woods. We sent hundreds of ducks flying at our approach, mostly wood ducks and teal, whistling up from the shallow ponds O’Connor has carved for them out of the black, sandy soil. “I’m proud to say that I never took a dime from Ducks Unlimited—although I took plenty of advice from them,” O’Connor said.

Watching clouds of ducks circling overhead, he suddenly cracked a smile. The birds had banked sharply, changed direction, and come our way again, splashing down practically at our feet. “They can’t stay away,” he said. “They know they’re safe here, just like those teal you see over there.” He pointed to a knot of the fast-flying, chunky little birds. “Look. See them?”

O’Connor stood on his tiptoes and watched the teal disappear over the trees and off toward the north, where they would be breeding soon.

He doesn’t hunt many teal these days. Why not? “I got so I like having them around too much.”