



## Hunting on the Farm

**Hunters and hobby farmers can work together toward wildlife management, hunting access and help ensure the health of the farm and environment.**

By John Morgan

Hunting is a constant in nature. Survival of living things often depends upon the consumption of other living things.

The basic food web taught in elementary science provides a clear picture of this simple truth.

Man, the earth's top predator, uses superior intellect and creativity to maintain his role in the environment.

However, intelligence and a complex social structure have also created a separation between man and the land.

Today, many people do not connect basic necessities to the environment—they believe that food comes from the grocery store and lumber comes from the hardware store.

As society becomes more urbanized, those who work the land to support the masses become fewer, as do those who are willing to fill the role of top predator. This article offers information about wildlife management, hunting access and hunting on small farms.

### Hunting's Role Has Changed Over Time

Like society, hunting has changed significantly in the last 150 years. Before modern agriculture, the harvest of game was a critical component of survival. The Industrial Revolution began to change the place of hunting in America.

Game became exploited and viewed as a commodity; market hunting led to the slaughter of wildlife for profit. Many species were driven to the brink of extinction; some extinct, like the passenger pigeon.

Fortunately, early conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and Teddy Roosevelt, understood the error of man's ways. By 1900, the Lacey Act was passed, which banned market hunting and started America's wildlife management legacy.

As modern agriculture blossomed in the 20th century, hunting became referenced as a "sport" because the need for food from the wild was replaced by man's taming of the earth.

Today, American wildlife are held in public trust, meaning they are the property of the people. Wildlife management is performed by government.

This basic concept is at the heart of the North American Model of Wildlife Management--no more can wildlife be exploited for personal gain and all law-abiding citizens have the opportunity to utilize the renewable wildlife resource.

Sportsmen and women have been leaders in the conservation of wildlife through habitat management and protection, funding and control of populations.

As man tamed the earth, many large predators were lost in their wake. Mountain lions, wolves, eagles, bears and others were eradicated from large parts of their historic ranges. The absence of these large predators left many prey species unchecked.

Because of this, man must replace the predator's role in an effort to maintain the delicate balance of nature.

The white-tailed deer is a prominent benefactor of the lack of large carnivores. Never before have white-tailed deer numbered so many, and never before have we seen the destruction a large herbivore can wreak on the environment.

Deer have decimated forest understories, leaving them devoid of wildflowers and young trees. Overpopulated deer have been blamed for the decline in songbird populations and deer have caused extensive damage to crops, landscaping and vehicles.

The land can only support a finite number of deer. Left unmanaged, deer will decimate plant communities, crippling the



land's ability to support the herd and other wildlife. The end result can be widespread starvation of animals and/or disease.

#### Modern Conservation, Wildlife Management

The profession of wildlife management was born in the 1930s. Aldo Leopold's Game Management was the first professional text dedicated to the conservation of wildlife.

Nature has a way of bringing things back in balance, and the goal of today's wildlife manager is to minimize catastrophic natural events like disease, environmental degradation and widespread starvation. Hunting remains one of the most important wildlife management tools to avoid these events. In many respects, hunters provide a benefit to society, particularly when their quarry are large herbivores like deer and elk.

Hobby farmers are often among America's best land stewards. They are generally interested in the outdoors and working the land, but they are not reliant on the land for income. Therefore, hobby farmers are more likely to make concessions for conservation like wildlife habitat management or maximizing water quality.

Small-farm owners purchase land for a multitude of reasons: to grow crops, to raise livestock or to have a place for recreation. Some purchase land specifically for hunting, whereas others do not support hunting on their land. Regardless of the landowner's motives, every farm should be managing wildlife for the good of the environment and their farm; hunters can provide many other services besides control of wildlife populations.

#### Utilizing Hunters on the Farm

Historically, landowners readily allowed neighbors and the general public hunting access. Thirty years ago, a father and son or daughter could knock on a farmer's door and gain permission to hunt. This tactic used today yields so many "no's" that many have abandoned trying. Human population growth and America's shift from a rural to an urban society has changed access to private property.

Also, hunters are leasing hunting rights, tempting landowners to generate income instead of allowing friends and neighbors free access to the property. Leasing can be a viable option for the hobby farmer, especially if additional dollars are needed to offset the cost of the land. However, landowners lose a little control over their property because paying hunters will generally require unlimited access.

A better solution can be bartering hunting access for other skills of hunters. This strategy gives the landowner complete control over their property and builds a sense of community. Hunters come from all walks of life and from various professions. Accountants, lawyers, carpenters, bulldozer operators, biologists, foresters and countless others can offer unique talents that could benefit the hobby farmer. Just think--a dozer operator could dig a pond and an accountant could do your taxes. Trading hunting access for people's skills and abilities just makes good sense.

Another great way to reap rewards from hunters is to schedule workdays. Sportsmen and women have a sincere interest in the land they hunt. How the land is managed has a direct impact on hunting success and strategy. So, managing and improving habitat are tasks hunters may even ask to do. A smart hobby farmer will identify tasks that meet the goals of both the farm and the hunter.

Fortunately, many management practices can benefit both parties. Maintaining or erecting fence can keep livestock out of the woods, resulting in a healthy forest for wildlife, improved timber potential and better livestock control.

Another example is timber stand improvement (TSI). Oaks and other fruit-producing trees are valuable timber trees, so wildlife and forestry practices can work together. TSI involves a forester marking unwanted trees and a landowner removing them. Tree removal can be accomplished through herbicide application, girdling or felling. The common theme among all these removal methods: They're all labor intensive! So you will need all the help you can get. TSI can be a great project for a group of hunters.

Finally, hunters love to plant food plots to attract wildlife. If a hobby farmer doesn't have an interest in hunting, then he or she may have an interest in wildlife viewing. Many different species of wildlife will use food plots and hunting will not eliminate wildlife use.

Be sure to make workdays a fun, family affair. Have everyone bring a dish to pass for a potluck lunch or dinner. Also, schedule them on weekends to accommodate work schedules. A workday should ideally be four to eight hours in length, and three to four days per year is a feasible target.



Most hunting seasons take place in the fall, so the best time to plan workdays is late winter and summer. Spring can work too, but many hunters like to spring turkey hunt. For labor-intensive outdoor work, the late winter makes for comfortable work conditions. Remember, it's your property, so if work must be done in the fall, schedule it accordingly.

#### Finding Hunters to Visit Your Farm

Many hunters don't knock on doors anymore, so how do you find them? Hunters are everywhere, but they aren't wearing signs! Coworkers are a great place to start. Other options may be your church or youth groups like 4-H or Boy Scouts. Targeting local banquets of hunting organizations such as Quail Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation or Ducks Unlimited can generate potential hunters as well.

If all else fails, your local Fish and Wildlife Conservation Officer can quickly identify potential candidates. You will need to find only a hunter or two because they will likely want to include their family or friends. Actually, this makes for a better arrangement since the group should get along well. Finally, make sure you "interview" the hunters to make sure his or her values match yours.

Once you've identified hunters, set ground rules. Rules will minimize misunderstandings and make the experience better for everyone. Be sure to personally meet every hunter that will be on your farm. Explain what you expect of them, including workday requirements. Workdays may scare off some hunters, but no matter, you want dedicated and respectful hunters on your property anyway. Make it clear that you own the land, and that you control access and activities. If you prefer to not have hunters out on a given day, be sure they understand that.

#### Liability Concerns

According to the National Safety Council, hunting is a safe activity. In fact, hunting results in fewer injuries per 100,000 participants than do many other sports, including cycling, bowling, golf and tennis, yet liability is a common concern for landowners. The idea of using firearms generates concern for landowners and for the general public alike.

Many states have laws that protect landowners from liability for those hunting on their property. Check with your state fish and wildlife agency to be sure you're protected. If no law exists, you may consider a waiver for the hunters to sign. Either way, hunters are many times more likely to be hurt driving to the farm than to be hurt in a hunting-related accident.

Hunting and hobby farms should exist in perfect harmony. Controlling wild populations of deer is a necessity for agricultural production, forest health and the deer themselves. Hunters can provide professional services to farmers, complete farm or habitat projects, and help minimize trespass from unwanted people and ATVs.

It's also common courtesy for hunters to share the harvest with the property owner. There are few foods as healthy as venison or other wild game. Game is lean, with no preservatives, antibiotics or growth stimulating compounds. Not to mention that it's delicious!

Leasing hunting rights is also a potential option, but fostering friendships on the farm will be more rewarding than simply taking a check every year. The good ole' days of rural America were based on strong ties to neighbors and to the community. Hunters and hobby farmers working together can bring back that feeling once again.

About the Author: John Morgan is a Certified Wildlife Biologist that earned a B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Science from Penn State University and a M.S. in Wildlife Management and Ecology from the University of Georgia. He owns a small farm in Kentucky that he manages for wildlife.

This article first appeared in the November/December 2006 issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local newsstand or tack and feed store.