

Families Afield

New Hampshire is a national leader in youth hunting



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It's November in central New Hampshire, the morning air icy and invigorating. A dusting of snow from the night before contrasts with the remnant canopy of autumn leaves above your head. Your eyes scan the woods for any signs of movement. Nothing.

You can hear your child's breathing next to you, slow and rhythmic. Shoulder to shoulder, leaning against an ancient oak, you both sit and wait for the sight or sound of a deer's movement through the awakening woodlands.

As the morning sun creeps overhead, the woods come to life. From their hidden roosts, birds announce the break of day with sharp calls; squirrels scamper along fallen logs, moving to feeding trees. The gurgling sound of a nearby stream echoes through the woods. Hours drift by as you and your child take turns scanning for movement with binoculars, and using a field guide to identify and learn about the unmistakable drillings of a pileated woodpecker on a nearby tree. You both navigate to a new hunting spot using a map and compass. Your child practices holding and aiming her gun. You show her how to follow tracks, identify rubs and scrapes — detective work that allows her to read the exciting story of wildlife in these woods. The gun may stay unused today, but it doesn't matter. You have introduced another New Hampshire child to the wonders of hunting and our natural world.

A National Leader

New Hampshire is ranked third in the United States for youth hunting participation and recruitment (only Missouri and Oklahoma ranked higher). Unlike many other states, New Hampshire regulations allow for parental discretion, not public law, to determine when an individual child is ready to hunt. The Granite State's nonrestrictive method has also proven successful for 16 other states with similar regulations, all of which are national leaders in youth hunting.

While the economic benefits from hunting for New Hampshire are evidenced by the thousands of jobs and millions in revenue generated by hunting-related trips, by introducing our children to the hunting tradition, Granite State residents are also safeguarding our wild lands, generating respect for the outdoors and encouraging responsible use of our natural resources for the future. Perhaps most importantly, adults and children are creating strong relationships and memories during the many hours spent preparing for and participating in an activity that they will likely share for a lifetime.

Efforts to usher in a new generation of hunters are critical to the future of the sport. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) *Families Afield* report, there has been a 23% decrease in adult hunting participation throughout the United States over the past 25 years. The national percentage of adults that hunt is 6.15% while the percentage of youth that hunt is only 4.23%. Today, only 25% of youth from hunting households are active in the sport. As the U.S. population ages and hunting participation rates decrease, there is a corresponding loss of mentors to initiate interested youngsters into hunting. Despite the fact that 58% of young people surveyed in a

Responsive Management study approve of legal hunting and 44% express some interest in hunting, a lack of mentors to lead these children and educate them may endanger the future of hunting.

Using the proportion of hunters in child and adult age categories, the NSSF calculated a "hunter replacement ratio" to determine how many new hunters are replacing old ones. The national average is .69, meaning that for every 100 hunters lost, only 69 new ones replace them. However, there does seem to be hope in New Hampshire: according to the NSSF, we have a replacement ratio of 1.09; for every 100 hunters lost, 109 new hunters will replace them. This suggests that in New Hampshire, at least, our hunting heritage will be a lasting one. New Hampshire's youth hunting participation is 6.04%, well above the national average, also contributing to the hope that our hunting tradition will continue into the future.

The New Hampshire Advantage

What are the reasons for New Hampshire's success? An important part of the story is that New Hampshire's youth hunting laws are "family friendly." There is no minimum age for hunting here, although kids age 15 and younger must be accompanied by a licensed adult. Hunting is affordable for families, because kids don't need to buy a hunting license until they turn 16 (though they do need the required permits if hunting pheasant, turkey, bear, moose and archery-deer).

Another factor encouraging youth participation in New Hampshire is that — because they are hunting under the direct supervision of a licensed adult — youngsters are not bound by hunter education requirements. Proof of Hunter Education is required to purchase your first hunting license. Fish and Game recommends that kids complete hunter education sometime between the age of 12 and 16. Kids of any age can take the class, but they have to be at least 12 years old by the end of the course to receive a hunter education certification (for that reason, students who are 12 and older have priority when class size is limited).

Youth can participate in any hunting season in New Hampshire, with a bonus of special statewide youth hunting weekends for deer, turkey and waterfowl species. These weekends are open only to youth hunters under the age of 16, accompanied by a properly licensed adult (who may not carry a firearm), and they allow young hunters to participate without the competition of thousands of other hunters in the field. New Hampshire's special youth hunting weekends began with the first Youth Waterfowl Days in 1996. The popular youth deer hunting weekend was added in 1999, and a youth turkey hunt weekend has been offered since 2004. According to N.H. Fish and Game records, 12% of the state's annual turkey take is credited to youth hunters. There is a similar trend with annual deer harvest, with 3% coming from youngsters.

A Family Affair

The importance of teaching hunting to today's youth is not just about the taking of an animal, but introducing kids to the outdoors. Youths that participated in the Responsive Management survey noted having fun (85%), being close to nature and

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT MARLEY

Payton Hoyt, Samantha Marley, Amanda Mach and Alex Canto are all smiles after their spring turkey hunt. Samantha's dad Scott wrote: "The kids and their parents thank New Hampshire Fish and Game for the opportunity to hunt during the youth seasons... Now if we could get other states to follow your lead, we could get a lot more youth involved in hunting."

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the outdoors (77%), spending time with friends and family (75%) and the challenge (72%) as reasons why they hunted. Only 54% and 44% of youth said that harvest/game meat and trophy animals were motivations for hunting.

With so many distractions pulling kids indoors, such as video games and TV, it is crucial to encourage and protect activities that maintain a child's connection to his or her natural surroundings. Hunting allows children to feel comfortable in nature and learn critical tools for survival. It encourages an appreciation for all of the natural resources New Hampshire has to offer.

Mark Ellingwood, New Hampshire Fish and Game's Wildlife Programs Administrator, uses turkey hunting as a way to get his three children involved in nature. "Hunting is not solely about the legal taking of an animal, rather it is about the skills, ethics, and natural history knowledge required in order to safely and responsibly enjoy and appreciate hunting," he says. "I've never pushed my children to hunt — I've waited for them to express an interest in my hunting endeavors. Hunting for us entails identifying birds, photographing wildflowers, using maps and compasses, tracking, calling, understanding natural history, relaxing, chatting about life and occasionally putting real organic food on our table. In short, we learn life-long skills that reflect our interest in the natural world."

Youth hunting encourages children to be active and responsible in the outdoors as adults.

For adults and children, youth hunting is a great way to create lasting memories.

Chad Stevens, 22, grew up in Candia, New Hampshire, and learned how to hunt from his grandfather and brother. "I was about 12 when I first starting shooting my brother's .22 rifle, and started hunting shortly after, just sitting in the woods and occasionally shooting gray squirrels. My brother and grandfather always made it a point to explain to me the importance of hunting as a serious

activity. It was just not a time to shoot animals, but it was a time to get to know nature," says Stevens. "Hunting influenced me to stay outside more. Living in Candia, I had lots

of open woods to explore and spent a lot of time hiking. The appreciation for the environment that I gained from my hunting experiences also led me to become very involved with fishing."

"I had lots of advice from my grandfather, who was an avid hunter, and my brother, who was an Eagle Scout," said Stevens. "They both taught me how to shoot and the importance of conservation. They also educated me about the environment and were part of some of the most exciting experiences of my life. Because of all this, my brother and grandfather are very close to me and I hold them with a great deal of respect."

For adults and children, youth hunting is a great way to create lasting memories. It generates a common interest that builds a strong relationship between two people. "Taking an animal amounts to only minutes of the time we invest in hunting. We spend days preparing and planning, and hours afield, hiking, exploring, talking and learning," says Ellingwood. "Kids enjoy and ap-

preciate any effort parents make to spend time with them. Through good example, kids come to appreciate the many skills and values associated with hunting. We don't focus on hunting success, but on enjoying the outdoors, adhering to ethical practices, and learning skills that make us self-sufficient. It's a great way to forge lifelong skills and memories."

Hunting with family and friends also promotes the continuation of hunting into adulthood. Studies have shown that the vast majority of today's adult hunters were taught by family members and mentors when they were younger. "By not having age limits, required training or hunter education for youth, kids have an easier time with the transition to adult hunting, and they maintain this connection because they are rooted in the activity," says Ellingwood. "My oldest son is 17. While he retains an interest in hunting, he's understandably preoccupied with being a teenager. I've lost him for the time being, but I know that he has the skills and knowledge to come back to hunting if and when he chooses. I'm hopeful that it's something I'll share with him and his siblings for the rest of our lives."

Continuing the Tradition

Hunting is a vital source of healthy, active entertainment and education for New Hampshire youngsters. It builds personal strength and confidence; introduces children to their wild surroundings; and helps them gain an understanding of our natural resources. New Hampshire's non-restrictive regulations encourage family hunting adventures and help create lasting relationships and memories. Bringing young hunters into the sport ensures the economic benefits that hunting brings to New Hampshire; without hunters, thousands of jobs and millions of tourist dollars would be lost. Because N.H. Fish and Game is self-funded, each new hunter is also an important part of the Department's ability to sustain itself. Revenue from hunters enables Fish and Game to pay biologists, educators, law enforcement officers and others who work to ensure that wildlife will be around for future generations.

A recent Cornell study shows that children who hunt and participate in other "wild nature activities" are far more likely to care about the natural environment as adults. Ellingwood adds that hunting "helps create skills and interests that can last a lifetime — and it encourages an understanding of and appreciation for our invaluable and diverse natural resources. Today's children will be at the forefront of tomorrow's conservation movement. Some of them will be environmentalists, organic chemists, wildlife

Tips on hunting with kids

1. **Instill safety, etiquette and ethics.** Teaching safety standards gives youngsters the responsibility they'll need to enjoy a lifetime of great hunting experiences. By teaching etiquette and ethics, you'll show them what the hunting tradition is all about.
2. **Keep it fun.** Don't get too serious or competitive. There's no need to turn novices into pros their first time out. It's far more important to just have a good time.
3. **Start with the basics.** If you learned to hunt when you were young, today you probably perform the whole process automatically. Make a conscious effort to explain and show step-by-step what newcomers should do, so they will feel comfortable later doing these things on their own.
4. **Create instant success.** Recognize small accomplishments. Shooting game is always a bonus and helps kids appreciate the experience even more. Young people also enjoy the pride of having provided a meal for their family, like Mom and Dad do.
5. **Be positive.** If you build a youngster's self esteem and confidence, they're more likely to enjoy hunting and want to go again. A well-timed compliment can go a long way.
6. **Share your love of the outdoors.** Help your young guests notice things around them. Stop and listen to birdcalls and sounds of a rushing stream. Draw their attention to signs of wildlife. Help them understand the important role that hunters play in conservation of natural resources.
7. **Provide appropriate equipment.** Make sure the equipment you use is the right size and weight for a youngster.
8. **Hands-on instruction helps.** Everyone learns best by doing. Sometimes you may need to lecture, but as much as possible, intersperse the talking with doing. A few trips to practice at a local shooting range are key to becoming comfortable with handling a firearm.
9. **Create a feeling of independence.** Youngsters want to become increasingly independent. Have youths develop new skills and then give them the freedom to practice those skills on their own.
10. **Choose the right location.** Convenience is a consideration. Whether on public or private land, the National Shooting Sports Foundation offers online resources to find great places to hunt through www.huntinfo.org and www.wingshootingusa.org. Also try www.huntnh.com for New Hampshire-specific hunting information.

Adapted from National Shooting Sports Foundation materials.

managers and biologists. The more experience and knowledge they have, the better they'll be prepared to deal with the mounting threats to our natural resources."

When you're planning your next hunting adventure this season, think about taking along your child or grandchild, neighbor or other young friend. Flexible and family-friendly laws make New Hampshire a great place to learn how to hunt while protecting and managing our wildlife, creating lasting memories and helping today's youth to develop an appreciation for the environment that will last a lifetime. 

Kat Bagley, of Manchester, served as a Public Affairs Intern with N.H. Fish and Game. She will graduate in 2007 from St. Lawrence University with degrees in English (Writing) and Biology.

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