An apprentice license was my ticket to a world of hunting adventure

by Reneé Zobel
The blanket of dry leaves crunched under my boots as I walked off the trail and into the inviting reds and golds of the fall morning trees. The day was uncharacteristically warm, and the sky was clear and blue. I kept my eyes fixed on the flashing white of my furry companion, an English setter named Avery, roving the woods with his nose to the ground. Unlike Avery, this would be my first hunt, but I felt the same eager anticipation.
We moved through the shrubby growth of a regenerating forest, with the dog coursing ahead. It seemed only seconds before his wide circles became tight and focused. Then the magic happened. Avery stood perfectly still, tail up, and stared down a seemingly invisible target. Goosebumps hit me as I stood frozen in awe. After what seemed like an eternity, I took a few steps toward what I could not yet see, clutching my gun tightly. Up it flew, right in front of me, a tawny speckled blur of feathers in motion. I admired the thunderous sound the grouse made as it burst into flight. I was so entranced by the beauty of the moment, the thought of shooting didn’t even cross my mind. There was so much more to hunting than the shot! I was hooked.

Why Hunt Now?
You may wonder how I got started on this quest. I grew up in New Hampshire in an outdoorsy family, but we did not hunt or fish. My childhood was spent in the woods, often by myself, exploring and learning. While many kids were playing with toys, I was content to catch snakes, climb trees and fish frog eggs out of the swamps surrounding my childhood home. From a young age, I learned how much was hiding in plain sight if you simply sit, watch and listen. I was not a stranger to guns, growing up in a home with rifles and handguns. How I did not stumble upon hunting, which seems such a natural progression, really just comes down to lack of access to learning. I would venture a guess that most hunters learn from a family member.

As a Fish and Game biologist today, it’s almost embarrassing that I’m only now venturing down this road. Every year, as I watched coworkers and friends head out in their camo and orange, I would think to myself, I really want to do that. Only to be followed by…maybe next year. Truth be told, I’ve been intimidated. Where do I start? What gear do I need? How do I learn? What do I hunt for? Where do I go? Shotguns, rifles, bows, muzzleloaders… the landscape seems overwhelming. Nonetheless, I became determined that this past year, at age 35, was going to be the year I pulled the trigger – pun completely intended.

Fast forward to a Fish and Game social media team meeting, where the discussion circled around to the apprentice hunting license. This is a relatively new license that allows people to try hunting, under the guidance of an experienced hunter, without having to take a Hunter Education course. I explained my plan to purchase an apprentice license that year, and wondered if there was anything from my experience that might help inspire others. Little did I know that my plan would quickly take shape into an outreach project to help pull back the curtain on hunting for people just like me. I would share my adventure on video and via the Department’s Facebook page in an attempt to encourage others to take the leap. My colleague Mark Beauchesne, Fish and Game’s advertising and promotions coordinator, graciously accepted the challenge of accompanying me.

Boots and Vests and Gear, Oh My!
And so it began. The apprentice hunting license is only available at Fish and Game headquarters or through the mail, so step one was a visit to the licensing office in Concord. The license was explained to me while I asked a million questions. What permits did I need to hunt for certain species? What on earth is a HIP number? (I learned the HIP is needed to hunt migratory game birds like woodcock, which we might encounter on our grouse hunt.) With license in hand, I realized there was no turning back.

Next, I needed gear. Have you ever been in a 10,000-square-foot candy store and tried to limit yourself to just one bag of treats? I haven’t either, but that is the best way I can think of to describe my feelings upon entering a major sporting goods retail store. I’m not much of a browser, and usually shop with a specific mission in mind. Today, my mission was not so clear. Without Mark’s help, I would have frozen in a wide-eyed, catatonic state. One could easily spend a year’s salary without batting an eye, so having someone help me focus on selecting basic necessities for hunting in New Hampshire was key. I walked out with a great pair of rubber boots and later purchased a small game vest to set myself up for hunting upland birds.

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APPRENTICE LICENSES:
- Are available only at N.H. Fish and Game in Concord, or through the mail.
- Cost the same as a regular hunting license.
- Can be purchased only once in your lifetime.

Learn more at huntnh.com/hunting/apprentice.html.
Shooting Practice

Despite growing up in a gun-savvy household, I had never fired a shotgun, so next we headed out to the range. I think Mark’s plan went a little like this: let’s throw Renee into the deep end, head first, and see what happens. Not only was I going to be shooting a firearm I hadn’t shot before, but I was supposed to hit moving targets! Mark showed me how to work the action and safety on three types of shotguns before setting me loose on the clays.

After some begging, he agreed to demonstrate one, yes just one, sample shot. I settled on what I considered a lofty but reasonable goal of hitting a single clay pigeon that day. Much to my surprise, and likely everyone else’s, I managed to hit quite a few – and didn’t want to stop! I did well enough to be deemed ready for the woods. As we headed for home, a grouse flushed on the side of the road, a fitting omen of things to come.

Into the Field

Which brings me back to that magical red and gold morning afield. Striding with firearm firmly in hand, I savored the crisp fall air, my senses attuned to the sights and sounds of the woodland around me. With admiration, I watched the experienced dog methodically work the thickets ahead, as heritage and training have taught him to do. I cannot begin to describe the feeling I got the first time I saw Avery point. If you’ve never seen a bird dog work, I highly encourage you to go out with an upland bird hunter. You could say I was not only hooked, but also spoiled, as that first grouse was one of a dozen birds Avery located on my first hunt.

As happens sometimes, the birds were in the tight trees that day, and the woodcock felt like walking. My shots were rare and missed their mark. I could feel Avery’s eyes on me at times, as if to say, “Really? You missed that? I gave you a layup.”

Despite my lack of success on that and our subsequent trip last fall, I had found my calling. I love hunting, and I cannot wait to harvest and cook my first bird when upland season comes again.

If you are toying with the idea of dipping your toes in the hunting waters like I did, don’t hesitate to reach out to any hunters you know. I’ve found the hunting community to be extremely generous and have had no shortage of support, advice and offers. And take advantage of other resources. I attended Fish and Game’s outdoor adventure talk on turkey hunting last spring; I hope to give that a try as I continue what will certainly be a lifelong pursuit of learning how to hunt and harvest many of the incredible animals in New Hampshire. Stay tuned as I continue to share my journey.

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