



For the Dogs, For the Family: Women New to Hunting Tell How and Why

When German Shorthair Quill locks up rock-solid on point then zooms out to retrieve the downed bird, it's hard to say who's more excited – he or Heather, his owner.

"I've always had a love for dogs. It's cool to have a relationship with your dog and then bond doing something you both love to do," Heather explains. "What I like most about hunting is the dog work. Watching them work, looking for the birds, hopefully listening to my commands. Finding out that I can train a dog to work for me has been an important part of the experience."

Not all women come to hunting early in life. Balancing work and family, finding time for other hobbies and sports, women often push hunting to the back burner as a choice for recreation or adventure. As a result, some, like Heather Place, Isabelle Edling and Debbie Brey, discovered their passion for upland hunting later, when their love of the outdoors and their love of dogs turned up the heat.

Heather Place

Heather is a behavior interventionist working with high school aged kids who have emotional and behavioral challenges. She has

been around hunting her whole life, as both her husband and her father are avid hunters. Heather just started hunting two years ago; she is 34.

"As I get older, I look for hobbies Jon and I and our 7-year-old son, Noah, can do as a family for the long term. We want to teach him to be a conservationist and a responsible hunter," says Heather.

When asked to describe her first bird hunt, Heather talks about going grouse hunting with her father in a thick reclaimed farmland cover on one of those warm early season days when a hunter quickly gets overheated wearing too much gear and fighting through "picker" bushes. She admits that "schlepping through thick Vermont woods" is her least favorite part of hunting, along with missing birds. Nonetheless, she enjoyed it.

"I expected to be able to shoot a bird, but instead, I learned about how quickly grouse come up. I didn't even have time to shoulder my gun! But the possibility of shooting was there. The dog, my father's German wirehair, Tank, was just as I expected. He was steady and all about pleasing my dad and working with him."

The first bird Heather ever shot was a planted preserve pheasant. "I felt a little sad for the bird – I'd never killed anything before

except fish," Heather reflects. "I guess there is a hierarchy of animals because I felt better knowing this bird was raised for the preserve, to improve our shooting and train our dogs." She goes on to say that she believes women are reluctant to get into hunting because they don't want to kill things.

"Society teaches women it's more in our genetic make-up to be gatherers, not hunters; society pushes us that way. I don't feel that way. There isn't a huge group of women that hunt, although now it is more accepted. But the images you see of women hunters are either wicked rednecks or pretty models, not regular women out with their families," Heather says.

Heather's next successful hunting venture was on a Georgia quail plantation where not only did she hone her shooting skills, but she ended up



Heather Place.



Isabelle Edling.

getting her very own bird dog. Her timing was perfect – from one of the guides’ recent litter of shorthairs, one puppy was left without a home. And back in Vermont, Jon’s Lab, Luna, needed a buddy.

So far, Heather hasn’t carried a gun in the grouse woods often, nor has she killed a wild bird. She’s still training Quill and asks someone else to do the gunning for her so she can focus on handling. Not to worry, though. Heather sees herself hunting with Jon and Noah well into the future. Spending time as a family outdoors with Noah learning to hunt and shoot beside them is a priority. Summing up, Heather says, “More women should try hunting. They’ll find out it’s something they can do. It will sustain them their whole lives.”

Isabelle Edling

Isabelle also sees hunting as a pursuit she will enjoy for a long time. “Being outdoors, making new friends, respecting nature and having that relationship with dogs” are on her list of the things hunting has enhanced in her life. Isabelle was born and brought up in Sweden in a hunting family. Her father always kept two GSPs as well as a beagle and a dachshund for hunting. But when she was younger, Isabelle, now 60, wasn’t allowed to carry a gun. Hunting was exclusively for men.

Isabelle feels that because it has been considered a male activity, some women won’t try hunting or shooting. She explains, “It is not much different from women who play football, for instance,

another mostly male sport. Girls can do it, but they know that most guys don’t really want them there.”

“There were three girls in my family. The boys could shoot, but we weren’t allowed. If everyone went to the range, the boys shot and the girls loaded the skeet traps. If they held a driven shoot, the boys hunted and the girls were the ‘drivers,’” she explains. “I always wanted to hunt, but it took getting Cooper, one of our German shorthairs, for me to try it.”

Isabelle and her husband, Thomas, bought Cooper from a breeder in Utah who also worked as a guide at a pheasant preserve. He encouraged them to try a hunt. For Isabelle, it was noteworthy just to be carrying a gun on a hunt. “I raised the gun several times, but never got a shot. That didn’t matter. It was a pleasure to see the dogs and be part of it.”

Several years later, the Edlings moved to Maine and met Patti and Blaine Carter, who took the them out for grouse and woodcock. Again, Isabelle didn’t shoot anything but thoroughly enjoyed the hunt. She and Cooper started attending NAVHDA clinics; they got Cardi (another GSP) and Isabelle’s motivation grew. Her first wild bird was a woodcock shot in Vermont, an accomplishment that still amazes her.

“I was so surprised,” she recalls. “Two birds went up, and with my friend shooting, too, I didn’t know I’d hit the bird. I was stunned. It was one of those big things that are outside your imagination, that you can’t quite believe you can do.”

Isabelle has always been athletic, and dogs have always been a part of her life. She spent several years training and working with therapy dogs, and with Whiskey, her golden retriever, she



Debbie Brey.

pioneered a Special Ed program using therapy dogs to improve reading and comprehension.

Isabelle says that from the beginning, for her, hunting has always been about the dogs. “We are so proud of our dogs – watching them is the best thing about hunting.” She also points out that hunting and NAVHDA have brought her new friends in a way that reaches over the borders of occupation, schooling and backgrounds. “Our dogs bring us together because of the common interests. It is very important for life that we aren’t locked into a group of people that are just like us. We can learn so much more out of our comfortable group.”

Asked what she likes least about hunting, Isabelle replies, “Wet boots, bears and porcupines.”

Looking ahead, Isabelle sees herself improving her hunting and shooting skills. “Developing any skill is always an improvement of yourself. It’s a win-win situation,” she adds.

Debbie Brey

Debbie has been at Bath Iron Works for 24 years, working as an administrative technician in the Receiving, then Finance, then Traffic departments. She loves fly fishing and started hunting seriously a year ago. Her mom called her recently and asked, “What happened to the little girl who used to wear dresses and do girl things?”

“I still like to cook and cross-stitch. I like to fly fish. I like to try new things and now I like to hunt. I’m kind of like the dog – I’m versatile,” Debbie replied.

Debbie’s decision to get into bird hunting at age 45 was motivated by her husband, Bob. She’d been going along with him deer hunting but hadn’t shot at a deer herself. Then Bob went grouse hunting with friends and reported back how exciting it was to watch the pointing dogs work. Two more decisions convinced her to give it a try: They got Emma, their German Shorthair, and Bob offered to take the Maine hunter safety class with Debbie so she wouldn’t have to go by herself.

“I also realized that if I could shoot over Emma, it would give her a better chance of getting birds down than when we’d go out with just Bob was shooting,” Debbie says. “I took lessons and got my own gun. Finally, in the fall of 2009, I was ready to go after grouse and woodcock myself. On my second real day of bird hunting, Bob had his limit early. I knew when Emma next went on point it would be my turn.”

“In a flash, everything happened. Her collar sounded the point beep, and with one shell loaded, I mounted my gun. The bird went up, I kept my eye on it, my gun followed, I covered the bird, pulled the trigger, and bang – the bird went down!”

Debbie says she expected it to be harder than it was, but she realizes that woodcock do usually hold, unlike grouse. “I was so ex-

cited that I actually did it. I was disappointed that my dad wasn't with me. The week before we had gone out together but hadn't found any birds. I've fished with my dad for years, but never hunted with him."

Being unfamiliar with firearms is what Debbie thinks keeps most women from getting into hunting. She says she pays "110 percent" attention when she's carrying a gun and checks the safety constantly.

Nevertheless, Debbie recommends women who are even slightly interested in hunting should get involved with a group like NAVHDA – see the dogs work, follow along and get an understanding of the process.

"I'm more confident in myself now," Debbie says. She then adds that it's not just knowing she can shoot a bird. "It's also about exploring more on my own, going out on the trails by myself with Emma as my companion." What does she like most about hunting? Doing it in a partnership with her husband. What does she like least? "The hat. I hate wearing hats," she replies.

As with Heather and Isabelle, Debbie sees a lot more hunting in her future. She wants to learn how to use her GPS, and she'd like to bag a nice big grouse or cock pheasant to mount and display in their game room. "Then I could show it to people and say, 'That one's mine....I did it!'"