

Mentoring – Waterfowling Heritage
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They are the future of waterfowling – and the future of conservation. And, happily, the future is looking bright.

An increasing number of young Canadian girls and boys are discovering the joy and satisfaction of being part of the tradition of waterfowling, a time-honoured tradition that has helped shape the success of Ducks Unlimited Canada over the past 69 years. But these youngsters aren't doing it without help.

They're being mentored by fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, family friends and other experienced hunters who have been long drawn by magical dawns at the marsh, the sound of frogs and birds awakening to the day and the warm relationships of hunting partners, all underscored by the pulse-quickenning anticipation of ducks and geese approaching a well-laid decoy spread.

Winnipeg teenager Eric Cameron, 13, knows that feeling well. One cold, rainy morning last September, he and several other teens lay in coffin blinds in a muddy field not far from DU's headquarters at Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre north of Winnipeg. Scattered before them were about 40 Canada goose decoys. Two adult volunteer guides played sweet music on their goose calls, trying to entice a small flock of incoming birds.

Eric's fellow hunters had agreed in advance to give him first shot. But when the first goose came within range, Eric couldn't fire because he forgot to click off the safety on his 12-gauge autoloader. A few minutes later, however, Eric got another chance and managed to down his first goose ever. He was elated.

"I was really happy with myself," he recounted excitedly in an interview nine months later. "It's a great feeling, getting your first goose."

Several of the other youths in Eric's party also shot a goose that morning. All the young hunters and guides involved with the mentor hunt gathered that afternoon for a barbecue featuring – what else? – fresh grilled goose. It was a fitting end to a great day.

Eric previously had successfully hunted grouse with his father, Bruce Cameron, his mom, Nadia Zenchyshyn and his older brother, Dane. His parents, both long-time ardent hunters, had mentored Eric and Dane by taking them on family hunts since they were young. Eric started carrying a toy gun on those hunts when he was eight.

"It's Canadiana," says Zenchyshyn. "It's just another thing you can share with your boys."

In Eric's case, his parents initiated his hunting education. But his first goose hunt came about through a unique mentoring program offered by DU. A spin-off from the highly successful Greenwing program for ages seven to 21, the mentoring program is part of DU's Waterfowling Heritage program. It includes instruction on safe gun handling, waterfowl identification, dog handling, calling, ethics and hunting strategies.

"It's all about volunteers helping young people get experience in the field," says Rick Wishart, DU's education director.

“It’s also based on having fun and getting enjoyment in nature.”

According to Wishart, the program “really resonates” with young people and their mentors. Experienced waterfowlers get a great deal of satisfaction from sharing their valuable knowledge and skills with their students, who benefit from receiving that know-how in a memorable, well-organized event. Although the emphasis is on the overall waterfowling experience, Wishart notes the overall goal is “to have as many of these kids enjoy the experience so much that one day they would take up waterfowl hunting.”

He added that DU’s Greenwing program, established in 1980, often includes elements of hunting, including safe gun handling, field ethics, waterfowl calling and dog training. Local Greenwing leaders have the option to include these elements in their programs depending on their interests and those of the students.

“The kids are the future of DU, but they’re also going to be our future politicians, educators and conservationists,” said Wishart, adding that the organization has hired a coordinator to focus specifically on helping local organizers set up Greenwing and waterfowl heritage programs for young people.

In 2000, Environment Canada allowed special Waterfowling Heritage Days when youths who have passed the required firearms training and safety course can hunt waterfowl with an experienced adult mentor. The program is offered in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia. A program is being offered this year in Alberta. Lead organizations have included the Manitoba Waterfowler Heritage Committee and Alberta’s Hunting for Tomorrow Foundation.

DU supports mentor events with free educational resources, including a CD about waterfowl biology, a waterfowl identification booklet, posters, free one-year Greenwing membership and a copy of an extensive, easy-to-read manual entitled *A Young Hunter’s Guide to Waterfowling and Conservation*. The information is designed to inform young hunters about ethical hunting and the importance of conservation.

Randall Eaton, an Oregon-based author and expert on hunting ethics, has written thousands of words in books and articles about the importance of introducing young people to hunting, including waterfowling. He quotes Don Jacobs, a leader in education reform, as calling hunting “the ideal way to teach young people universal virtues including patience, generosity, courage, fortitude and humility.”

Eaton notes that hunting teaches that people are dependent on the “integrity and viability of nature.”

“Put a 12-year-old boy in a duck blind with a shotgun in his hands and there is a fair possibility that he will grow up to join Ducks Unlimited and fiercely protect wetlands,” Eaton writes.

Although that comment focuses on boys, there’s little question girls who learn to hunt from their elders share the same passion for waterfowling and a desire to see healthy bird populations. Just ask 23-year-old Becky Henderson, who loves to hunt when she’s not working as a credit counselor and dance school owner in New Brunswick. Hunting, she noted, has instilled in her a deep conservation ethic.

Henderson learned to hunt from her dad, Mark, who has been a DU volunteer since 1989, when he helped establish the local committee in Hampton, a little town on the Kennebecasis River northeast of Saint John. Now 50, Mark was mentored by his father, Lowell, and grandfathers Clarence Henderson and Herbert Hoyt. Since 2000, Mark

Henderson has passed the torch by mentoring his son Joey and daughter Becky, plus two young family friends. He's poised to mentor a nephew this fall.

"Mentoring is critical for the future of waterfowling," Henderson said in an e-mail interview. "It is a sport that is difficult to break into without the help of an experienced hunter to show the youngster the ropes."

Becky Henderson started accompanying her dad on hunts when she was about 10. She found herself being enthralled by the stories Mark and his partners told, and eagerly absorbed lessons on gun safety. She also enjoyed cleaning the marsh, banding ducks, riding in the boat and hearing Mark describe how to identify different duck species. What Becky calls her "first real hunt" happened when she was 17. She shot a whole box of shells and didn't get one duck. Becky didn't care.

"It was really cool to be out there and experience the thrill of seeing the duck and setting yourself up for it," she said. "It was something that me and my dad could do together that we both enjoyed."

Some mentors wisely learn early in the game to refine their approaches to planning hunts with young people. For example, Ontario hunter Cam Thomson decided to follow the approach taken by his own father, David. Then a farm boy in the Kawartha Lakes region of central Ontario, Cam Thomson recalls that his dad wisely wouldn't ask him to go, but he almost always took him if Cam expressed an interest to accompany him.

"I have seen several avid waterfowling friends who have turned their son or daughter off by pushing too hard when they were not ready," Cam noted. "Wait for them to ask."

Now 53 and living outside Brantford in southwestern Ontario, Cam Thomson says he decided to take a similar approach with his own sons, Alistair, 21 and Callum, 14. They started going with Cam on hunts when they were aged four or five. Cam said he also learned that boys don't function well in early morning, so he'll often go out solo at dawn and then take the boys for the evening shoot. That way, he can concentrate more on making sure they have fun and avoid that "getting a teenager out of bed at 4 a.m. thing."

Thomson says adults should never take their novices' skills for granted. Sometimes, he noted, experienced waterfowlers seem to forget that ducks are very challenging targets. When Alistair started shooting, Cam recalls, he was sometimes frustrated because he found the birds tough to hit. To better prepare Callum for waterfowl hunting, Cam has helped him hone his shooting skills on sporting clays and skeet.

A DU volunteer for more than 20 years, Cam Thomson is vice-president of the Long Point Waterfowlers' Association, and chairman of its youth committee. The association is planning its first youth hunt this fall to help introduce more young people to waterfowling.

Thomson's decision to mentor his own sons was a no-brainer. He wanted them to have the same opportunity to enjoy wildlife in the same way that has been so important to him. Plus, he enjoys their company and the chance to talk.

"We seem to always have our best conversations (while) hunting, fishing or canoeing," he said. "Alistair and I shoot and Callum disses us mercilessly when we miss."

But when the Thomsons head for the Long Point Waterfowl Unit on Lake Erie this fall, they'll have a chance to get back some of their own. This will be Callum's first

season of actually shooting at ducks instead of being restricted to critiquing the efforts of his dad and brother.

“I’m very excited,” Callum said in a telephone interview a few months before his first season as a hunter. “I’m looking forward to it a lot.”

For him, highlights of past hunts have included deciding which blind to use depending on wind direction and other factors, and watching their yellow Labrador retriever, Dougle, retrieve downed birds. This year, being able to shoot under an apprentice licence promises to make the experience even sweeter.

Although there are many exceptions – Nadia Zenchyshyn and Becky Henderson are but two – the bottom line is more boys than girls are being mentored into hunting. Anjela Buus would like to change that.

She’s planning Manitoba’s first girl-only waterfowling heritage event this fall in Selkirk, on the banks of the Red River north of Winnipeg. “I want to let girls know that it’s okay for them to hunt, too,” says Buus, 41, a volunteer on the Selkirk DU dinner committee.

Buus, who lives with her husband, Ken, and their two young daughters on an 80-acre farm east of Selkirk, was 13 when she started going hunting with her soft-spoken father, Grant Smale. Her passion for it sprouted instantly.

Now she and Ken, who are involved in a family construction company, take Grace, aged seven, and Liberty, two, with them when they hunt.

Grace started out carrying a DU air rifle, and last year graduated to a .410 shotgun given to her by her godfather. Although she’s still too young to hunt game, Grace uses the shotgun for target practice. From the start, Anjela and Ken taught her to respect guns, a lesson they are now teaching Liberty. To them, hunting provides meat for the table and quality time together.

“It’s more of a family time, an intense family time,” Anjela notes.

“Other families go to Disneyland and places like that. We go hunting. We wouldn’t want it any other way.”