

Passing

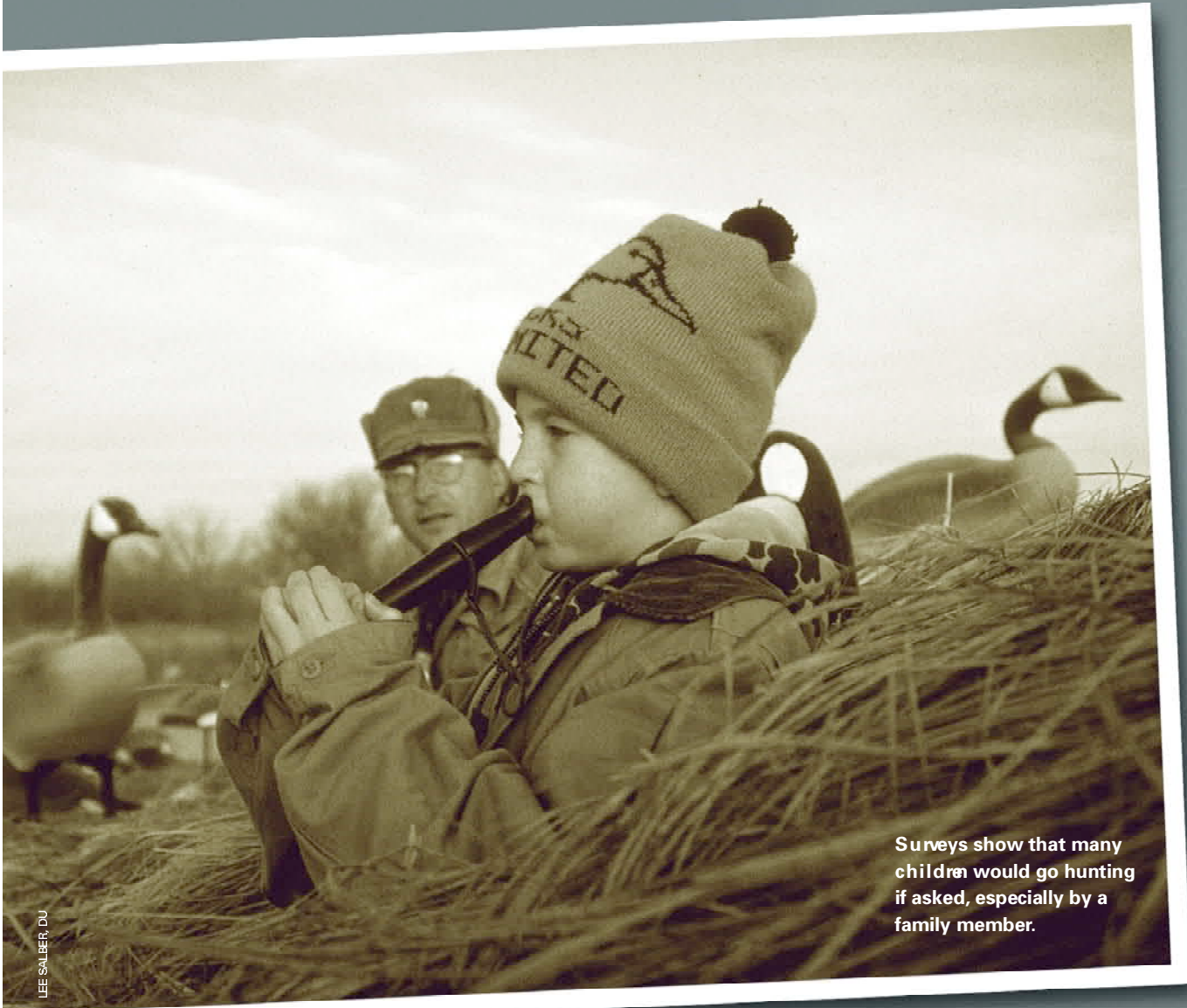
BY SCOTT YAICH, PH.D.

on the Tradition

Today's waterfowlers have a responsibility to recruit new hunters, especially youth, for the sake of our heritage and the resource



TRAVIS MUELLER/EVERETT PHOTOS



LEE SALBER, DU

Surveys show that many children would go hunting if asked, especially by a family member.

I wonder how many of us remember overhearing our dads making plans to go hunting only to have our hopes dashed when we were told that just the grownups were going on the hunt. My dad often attempted to placate me by promising to take me “soon” or “next time.” And while I was greatly disappointed to be left behind in those early instances, he eventually took me hunting, and I’ve been an avid hunter ever since. Many Americans, for many reasons, have a far different experience than I did growing up, and as a result do not hunt.

We currently have about 18 to 20 million hunters age 16 or older in the United States, or roughly 7 percent of the total population. But surveys indicate that the number of Americans who hunt is declining nationwide, most rapidly on the coasts and least of all in the north-central states. According to the most recent *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, which is conducted every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in cooperation with other state and federal agencies and

nongovernmental organizations, 12.5 million people age 16 and older hunted in 2006. This represented a 13 percent decline in hunter numbers compared to the previous survey in 2001. The drop in migratory bird hunters was especially steep, declining 22 percent from almost 3 million in 2001 to 2.3 million in 2006. In addition, duck stamp sales, which serve as an index for waterfowl hunter numbers, have also been declining in recent years. Over the long term, duck stamp sales have decreased more than 40

percent from a peak of 2.4 million during the 1970-1971 waterfowl season to an average of 1.4 million in recent years. So even as the U.S. population steadily increases, hunters are being lost faster than new ones are being recruited, a pattern even more pronounced among waterfowlers.

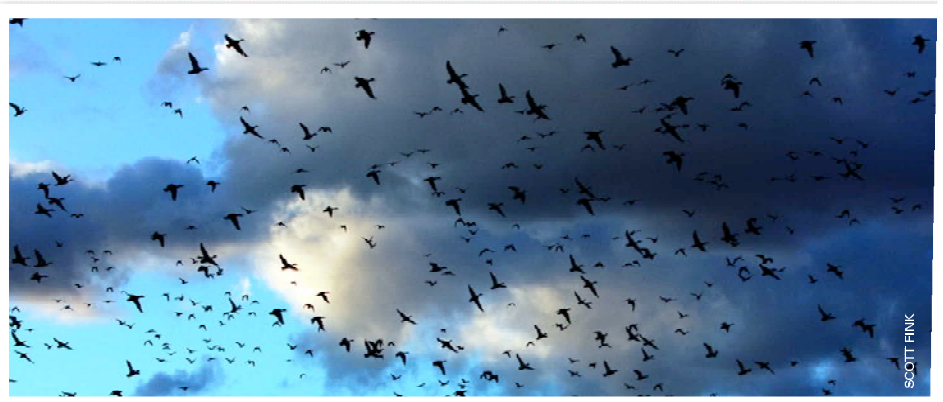
Why should this concern us? After all, fewer duck hunters means less competition for hunting spots and more ducks for each hunter, right? Clearly, this is a short-sighted view at best. Fewer hunters also means

decreased license revenue that conservation agencies depend on to manage waterfowl populations, habitat, and hunting areas. Moreover, as hunter numbers decline so does the number of people who care enough to influence public policies important to waterfowl and hunters. Unlike the banks and multinational corporations that have become “too big to fail” in the eyes of some policymakers, duck hunters could become “too few to matter.”

Why is this happening? There have long been many theories about why hunter numbers are declining when many populations of game, including ducks, are abundant compared to times in the past. Fortunately, human dimensions, the science of investigating what people think and do, is beginning to shed light on these questions. This research is providing valuable information that will help us better understand what we can do to recruit more waterfowlers and other hunters now and in the future.

Losing Touch with Nature

In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv drew attention to the growing disconnect that is occurring between children and nature. Louv even coined the phrase “nature deficit disorder” to describe this troubling social trend. Hunters intuitively understand the psychological impact that losing our connection to nature can have on both children and adults. While many of us grew up with the freedom to roam the fields, woods, and vacant lots near our homes (often with the strong encouragement of our mothers), the open territory that today’s children have to roam is only a fraction of what it was 25 years ago. Those of us who grew up with that freedom know how important it was in shaping our interest in nature, replacing fear with fascination, providing experiences



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that strongly influenced who we are, and contributing to our interest in hunting.

Research shows that the more interest children have in nature and the more time they spend outdoors at an early age, the more likely they are to become hunters later in life. In addition, unstructured play, including simple activities like turning over rocks just to see what’s there and building tiny dams on trickles of moving water, is strongly correlated with a person’s future commitment to nature and conservation. Unfortunately, today’s kids may know more about the Amazon rainforest than the nearby creek. And structured activities like school field trips or participation in clubs do not have the same impact on a child’s connection to nature.

Some of the reasons for this societal shift are based on misconceptions about the safety of our backyards and neighborhoods. A 2005 Duke University study showed that American children are now safer than at any time since 1975, but intense media coverage has fostered a sense that children

are at ever-present risk outside the home. Understandably, many parents have restricted their children’s outdoor activities because of safety concerns. Sadly, fear has indirectly affected the experiences that we allow our kids to have.

Research has also found that a lack of outdoor experience leads to other misconceptions about nature. For example, 30 percent of kids surveyed believed that “most wild animals are dangerous to people.” The

RECRUITING ADULT HUNTERS Kids may be the largest pool of potential new waterfowling recruits, but approximately one-third of first-time hunters are over 20 years old. Like our children, they depend on other hunters to introduce them to the sport. The most likely adult recruits are relatively young (18 to 34 years old); from small city, town, or rural backgrounds; and are already involved in other outdoor activities. Their interest in hunting is sparked by conversations with hunters, and more than 90 percent begin hunting only after being invited by a friend. While their motivations include being interested in getting outdoors and seeing wildlife, social reasons like being with family and friends are increasingly important to them. Between 1980 and 2006, the percentage of adults who started hunting “to be with family and friends” increased from 9 percent to 20 percent.

Encouragingly, a high percentage (42 percent) of hunters said they introduced newcomers to hunting because “they showed an interest.” So merely talking with your friends about your hunting experiences may be the best way to foster relationships that ultimately lead to sharing those experiences with others.

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fear of the unfamiliar that exists among many parents and teachers is being transferred to our youth.

Introducing Children to the Outdoors

Nevertheless, children still have a strong, too often unfulfilled interest in nature, wildlife, and hunting. One survey documented that the overwhelming majority of youth have a high (41 percent) or medium (50 percent) interest in wildlife, and boys who enjoyed watching wildlife were three times more likely to hunt than those who didn't. Reassuringly for the continued future acceptance of hunting, a solid majority of today's youth—58 percent—approve of hunting while only 33 percent disapprove.

Perhaps the single greatest challenge we face is that fewer young people are being

initiated into the hunting culture than in the past. One survey found that in 2005 only about 8 percent of children of any age were initiated into hunting, down from 12 percent in 1990. This doesn't necessarily reflect a lack of interest in hunting or a preference for playing video games or spending time online. Nineteen percent of youth surveyed said they were "very interested in going hunting" and another 25 percent said they were "at least a little interested" in the sport. And therein lies the promise for the future. Once kids had the opportunity to hunt, 56 percent said they "liked hunting a lot" and over two-thirds said they would like to hunt more often.

How do we explain the difference between hunting interest and participation among our youth? We can find the answer not through sophisticated scientific surveys or statistical analyses but simply by looking

reaching 40 percent by age 13 and over two-thirds by age 19. Adults continue to join the sport at a slow but steady rate through their 40s, after which few people start hunting.

Parents, relatives, and mentors who take young kids hunting are crucial to the recruitment of young hunters. Having a family member who hunts is a better predictor of whether a kid will hunt than other factors like growing up on a farm or in a rural area. Almost 60 percent of hunters had a mentor who influenced their interest in hunting, and nearly three-quarters were taught to hunt by their father. In fact, kids interested in hunting said they would much rather go hunting with their father than with friends. And only 2.9 percent of boys hunted if their fathers did not. Clearly there is wisdom in the saying attributed to the legendary sportsman Herb Parsons, "Hunt with your son today, and you won't have to hunt for him tomorrow."

Recruiting the Next Generation of Waterfowlers

How do we get more young people into waterfowl hunting? Just ask. Surveyed youth said they would be most inclined to go hunting, or hunt more often, if their father, another family member, or a friend asked them to go along. Why don't more kids get asked to go hunting more often? The reasons vary but are all too familiar to too many of us. "Not enough time" was cited most often (44 percent). Many people are working more hours per week and sometimes making less money. Economics can have a significant impact on hunting participation because initiation rates of children in hunting families drop off dramatically when household income falls

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in the mirror. We are the problem. The good news is that we are also the solution.

First, it's important to understand the pattern of recruitment among young hunters. Those who begin hunting at a younger age tend to be more dedicated and active hunters later in life. Less than 20 percent of hunters have their first hunting experience before age 10, but initiation ramps up quickly as children grow older,

below \$40,000 a year. Perhaps most unfortunately, many adult hunters expressed the feeling that the inconvenience and effort necessary to introduce youths and novices to hunting takes away from their own enjoyment of the sport. Why are we facing the challenge of declining numbers of waterfowlers? Get out the mirror again.

If you do ask young people to go hunting and they say yes (which will be most of



Mentors play a crucial role in recruiting young waterfowlers.

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the time), keep their interests in mind when you take them afield, especially for the first time. Having fun is at the top of the list (85 percent) according to a recent youth survey. Other reasons include "being in the outdoors" (77 percent), "being with family and friends" (75 percent), and "for the challenge" (72 percent). So it's important to help young, beginning hunters have fun and be successful. (See Wade Bourne's column on page 42 of this issue for some practical tips.)

Finally, once children have been introduced to hunting, adults should take them often. In families where the father hunted

one to three days a year, 27 percent of boys and 9 percent of girls became hunters. Hunting recruitment jumped to 46 percent in boys and 13 percent in girls in families where the father hunted 10 to 19 days a year. And in families where Dad hunted 30 or more days a year, 61 percent of boys and 26 percent of daughters joined the sport. Like so many things, repetition breeds success.

Ultimately, maintaining participation in waterfowl hunting comes down to ensuring that future generations have the same opportunities we had to enjoy the rich, diverse traditions of the sport. Through a

commitment to conservation, we must first conserve sufficient wetland habitat to maintain abundant waterfowl populations and provide places for people to see and hunt the birds. Through a commitment to our waterfowling traditions, we must also make the effort to recruit the next generation of waterfowlers. Our generation is the link between the waterfowlers of the past and those of the future. We must do whatever is necessary to make sure that our children and grandchildren remember us for our commitment to them as waterfowl hunters and conservationists and not for our selfishness and indifference. ↻

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DU AND BOY SCOUTS PARTNER TO SERVE YOUTH

Ducks Unlimited's Greenwing youth membership program has received a powerful endorsement from Boy Scouts of America (BSA). DU and BSA recently signed a memorandum of understanding in which the two organizations formally agreed to work together through special youth activities and events. Scouts will be provided with rank advancement and merit badge opportunities at these events while also learning about wetlands and waterfowl conservation. This concept was pioneered by DU volunteers in Virginia's District 1 (led by the Northern Virginia Chapter), who have worked closely with BSA in their area to hold similar events in the past.

"The Boy Scouts of America looks forward to working with Ducks Unlimited to offer unique programs that focus on education, conservation, and stewardship," said Frank C. Reigelman, outdoor programs team leader for BSA. "For over 100 years the BSA has recognized the importance of conservation, and in our next century we are looking for partners to expand this important message for our members."

"This is a great example of two fine organizations with shared values and goals coming together to help develop tomorrow's conservation leaders today," said DU Senior Vice President Bruce Deadman, who chairs DU's Youth and Education Committee. "Our goal is to assist the scouts with their rank advancement and introduce them to DU and our mission in hopes that they will make a lifetime commitment to conservation."

Dr. Scott Yaich is director of conservation operations at DU national headquarters in Memphis.