



Author and son on recent pheasant hunt. | Photo by Angela Keer

## SETTING THE STAGE: Sharing Hunting Traditions Successfully *With Youth*

By TOM KEER

*W*hen my daughter and son were younger, they both wanted to be firemen. Those convictions came about after our local Fire Chief Joe and his crew visited their school. The demonstration included an inspection of the fire truck, helmets, axes, pike poles and the siren. I thought about the impact the firemen's visit had upon them, and the revelation came to me to break down that visit and incorporate a similar series of demonstrations into my hunting tutorials. Several years later, it's been working like a charm.

### MAKE IT TANGIBLE

What was it that made the firemen's visit to my children's school so motivating and inspirational? What was it that made me remember a visit by my town's fire department to my third grade class so long ago? Many things, but the most noticeable was that the activity was tangible. It was problem and solution oriented. A fireman puts out a fire.

We all know that in addition to bravery and skill, firemen perform a wide variety of tasks. They respond to everything from a smoke alarm that misrepresents a burning pot roast for a house fire, to tackling burning buildings and resuscitating people in need. The variety of their activities was immediately understandable to young minds and the kids could understand and appreciate each facet of the fireman's job. Try and explain that you're a marketing expert, an accountant or a psychiatrist to kids and watch their eyes glaze over. They lose interest because the concepts are irrelevant to them.

As you go through the process of teaching kids to hunt, always make each event tangible in a way your child can understand. Here are some examples that might inspire them to get really excited about bird hunting.

### REINVENT YOURSELF

Step outside of the teacher role, move away from the occasionally authoritarian position of a parent, and become more of a mentor. Teachers and parents ultimately need to add judgment to a child's performance. The lessons of right and wrong apply to gun safety, bag limits and legal hunting times.

Out in the field is where the magic happens. It's where the dog that a child perceived as a pet becomes a mythical hunting creature. It's where a father, uncle or friend makes shots that will be discussed for decades and passed down as a part of a tradition. This is where a mentor can shine, for they are teachers who can break through the

boundaries of learning commonly associated with a disciplinarian.

A child going hunting with you is really a sign that they admire you and want to spend more time with you. You can bust your pals for being late, give them grief when they miss a shot, or chide them about dead batteries in their collars – but say that to a kid and they'll stay at home and play video games.

### REWARD GOOD BEHAVIOR, CORRECT BAD BEHAVIOR

The easiest way to get a child to routinely perform well is to reward their good behavior. Kids like praise and attention, and a simple compliment lets them know they're on the right track. The flip side is a bit more difficult, that is, how to handle something that isn't right.

Many of us hear a comment like, "You missed that bird because you stopped your swing." The operatives in that line are missed the bird and stopped your swing. Children get confused about what to do. They watched you hit the flushing grouse so they know the goal is to hit the bird and they didn't. Odds are they feel bad enough about it on their own. They get confused when you tell them what they already know: that they missed the bird. Handle those situations positively. Say, "Next time, swing through the bird and pull the trigger."

Another common source of tension is lost or broken gear. Take a deep breath and avoid the, "You shouldn't have been goofing around with those shooting glasses, they're not a toy." Replace those sentiments with, "Next time, pack an extra pair of shooting glasses."

Kids know when they louse up, so just point them in the right direction. Tell them what you want them to do and when they do it, praise them.

### PRE-HUNT ACTIVITIES

#### *Dog Training*

Some of the most fun that we have in our family is getting ready for the season. This typically arduous task becomes an exciting kick-off event. We work together on dog and hunter conditioning. We hold serious training exercises in the morning like most trainers do. It's before the summer heat sets in, true, but we also do a training session during the early afternoon, right at the peak of the heat. That session is shorter on the intensity and is a series of intervals which we run near a string of kettle ponds or on the beach not far from our home. When we see one of our dogs start to overheat we get them in the water to cool

down. When we're done we all take a swim, and everyone gets in shape without overheating.

It's a great time to review each dog's individual traits with the kids and to incorporate information about pad care, nutrition, stamina, tick checks and other health issues into the session. Afterwards, the kids look at the dogs and now see them as bird dogs instead of just pets.

### *The Environment*

Each time we're in the woods we study the environment. We'll discuss trees by species,

fun for all, and it ties the kids into the hunting process that occurs later. Finding birds in their coverts brings the process full circle.

### **THE HUNT**

Hunting with kids is very different than hunting with your buddies. Carve out a shorter period of time for the kids, with maybe a half-day or just a few coverts. Also pick coverts that are suitable to their aptitudes. My son doesn't mind busting brush but he hasn't hit his growth spurt, so he has a tough time climbing over deadfall. My daughter is tall and gets over logs, but she

cleaned and stored, and birds are cleaned.

We split activities based on disposition. My daughter picks the birds, and she saves the feathers for winter fly tying or for use in Christmas ornaments. One year she made a Halloween mask out of grouse and pheasant tail feathers that was the hit of her class. My son loves to get dirty, so he handles the bird cleaning. We turn this part into a biology lesson and go through the various organs and their functions. One highlight was retrieving a woodcock with an earthworm still hanging out of its bill.

Then comes the cooking - we'll always



(Photo right) Feather mask made by author's daughter. | Photo by Angela Keer

examine why alder and poplar runs are great for woodcock and how each grouse needs five female poplar trees in its zone. We cover primary and secondary growth and how it relates to food sources and protection. Bird behavior, particularly when one of the dogs points a bird, is one of the kids' favorite topics. Most grouse spook when we talk, but woodcock are ideal for discussing possible flushes and patterns. We'll review positioning, how to walk in on the dog, how to handle the flush, and review where the bird might go. When the kids are right about the bird's path they feel a sense of accomplishment, those experiences add to their memories. As we shift to quail later in the year they carry over their knowledge of grouse and woodcock into the quail fields.

As all hunters know, finding new coverts to replace lost or overgrown haunts is an ongoing exercise. We add mountain biking and orienteering to the mix. Riding down logging roads or on paths through the woods is a favorite family activity. When we find something that looks good we'll name the covert and mark its location on a topo map or store it in a GPS for future reference. The combination of biking and orienteering is

doesn't like briars in her ponytail. So, I'll pick a covert or two that is appropriate to their attention, mood for the day, and aptitude. I make sure that they have clear shooting glasses and clothes that fit properly. A pair of adult-sized boots worn with three pair of socks will chaff a child's feet.

I'll task each of them with certain parts of the hunt: identifying the best parts of the covert, reading the dogs' body language, determining what the dogs did right or could do better, marking the downed birds, sexing the birds (they run for the grouse tails and always carry a dollar bill for woodcock beaks), studying the wear patterns on the woodcock wings. Sometimes it's simply finding a drumming log to sit on. They carry cameras to shoot pictures to commemorate the hunt. And if we find some morels or tart apples we'll throw them in the game bag.

### **POST HUNT ACTIVITIES**

The time after the hunt traditionally teaches responsibility, but I use it to set up the next hunt. Most of the time the kids will want to grab the phone to tell their friends about the day, and they're allowed to do that after dogs are patched up and fed, guns are

prepare a few favorites, but the season is long enough to experiment with a number of new recipes. Lastly we print out photos that they shot and place them in an album of the season.

If you make hunting fun, odds are pretty good that in a few years you'll have built-in hunting buddies who will go from dawn to dusk. And if they're better than you in all aspects, well, then you've done your job right. 🍷



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