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Women of the hunt: more females answer the call of the wild

By MIKE JOHNSTON
senior writer



Deborah Essman does some target shooting. She, along with many other women in Kittitas County, enjoy hunting.

Contributed KITTITAS COUNTY —

When Kathy Delvo was engaged to her future husband, Joe Delvo, she made it clear she really didn't understand Joe's keen interest in hunting.

"Her big thing was that it, fiscally, didn't make sense to her," Joe said late last week. "She questioned why I spent all that time and money hunting when you can easily buy your meat for a whole lot less at the store."

Joe tried to explain the enjoyment of the outdoors, the challenge of the hunt, the camaraderie with hunting companions and the bonus on top of all that if you actually get an animal, which wasn't a given.

11/3/2010

Kathy, who likes hiking, listened, but was skeptical.

In early fall 1996, after Kathy and Joe Delvo were married in April that year, Joe was geared up to go hunting with a friend on the first day of deer season in Kittitas County.

The night before, the friend called and said he couldn't go. Joe said he would go alone.

Kathy had another plan.

"I told him 'you are not going to go out there alone,'" Kathy said last week. "I said I would go with him just for the exercise. We didn't have kids then, and my reasoning was to just be with him and be in the outdoors."

Kathy, who teaches PE at Morgan Middle School, had no hunting traditions in her family while growing up and, as it turned out, Joe got a deer in the area of Durr and Umptanum roads.

"When we saw the deer he told me to crouch down, be quiet and don't move," Kathy said with a laugh.

Getting into it

Kathy acknowledged that immediately after Joe took the shot and downed the deer, she was startled and a bit shaken for a while, but then the hard work of field dressing the deer and hauling it out took over her focus.

"I thought to myself, 'I could really get into this,'" Kathy said. "I was getting interested in hunting."

Later that fall, during a hunting trip in Montana that was a wedding gift from Joe's brother, Kathy asked Joe to help her with some target shooting with his hunting rifle.

Then there was an opportunity for Kathy to get an out-of-state hunter tag while in Montana to help reduce an oversized local deer herd that was damaging farm land.

She took the opportunity.

"Well, I got my deer," Kathy said proudly. "I guess I got into the excitement and the challenge. And it was also something I can do with my husband and enjoy the outdoors at the same time and get great exercise.

"I was hooked."

Joe said since Kathy's first deer that was taken "with a heck of a shot" it's been "a foot race to see who can get to the door first" in planning and going on hunting trips for mostly deer and elk.

11/3/2010

National statistics indicate a growing number of women are becoming involved in hunting, and there are indications more are taking part in Kittitas County.

For every hunter there are different motivations for hunting. Here are other local women who have answered the call of the wild.

All in the family

Deanna Jo Panattoni grew up with a dad and family members who took her hunting in the Lower Yakima Valley.

Although she enjoyed being with her dad, mom and brothers stalking game, Panattoni just hiked, watched and was told to be silent.

She didn't take up hunting at that time, but said she became "very familiar" with it.

"It was in the time between 9 to 12 years old, I suppose, when being quiet for me at that age was a challenge, along with staying warm out in the wilds," Panattoni said. "When the whole family was out with Dad we made lots of noise; it was a miracle he got anything.

"But it was a great family time."

Much later, as an adult, her fiancé, Steve Panattoni, took her hunting with him. She hiked along and he hunted.

After they married, and Deanna learned how to handle weapons as a reserve deputy sheriff, she became interested in hunting with Steve.

"For me, being with him is the number one reason for hunting," Deanna said. "I don't like different hobbies or recreation that separate us."

The second main reason for hunting is going camping and enjoying the quiet and solitude, said Deanna, who is the Kittitas County treasurer.

And now with married children and grandchildren, some hunting/camping trips have become extended family gatherings for Steve and Deanna.

"It's OK if I don't get an animal," Deanna said. "We get a peaceful, relaxing time and great memories around the campfire with our kids and grandkids."

A bonus is actually getting an animal and stocking your freezer or giving away meat to family members, she said.

More females

11/3/2010

Deborah Essman, an avid outdoor enthusiast and amateur naturalist with a passion for the study of birds, is also a certified state hunter education instructor.

She and her husband, retired wildlife enforcement officer Bill Essman, have been hunting together for 20 years and annually teach three sessions of hunter ed classes in Kittitas for those seeking their hunting licenses. Each class is a total of 25 hours with about 30 students in each class.

Bill, especially, has noticed a steady increase in the number of females taking the course during his 30-plus years teaching.

Now half the classes are females: pre-teens, teenagers, single moms, women with their husbands or boyfriends and older women.

“It’s hard to pin down just one reason why, but having great access to a lot of quality public lands all around us could be one,” Deborah said.

Other reasons could be women wanting to share the experience with their husbands, girls wanting to be with their dads or other family members or women just wanting a challenging, outdoor, recreational experience that also involves wildlife.

“For Bill and I, when we’re not hunting we’re planning our next hunting trip,” said Deborah, the branch manager at Sterling Savings Bank. “Hunting is many experiences: watching wildlife all around you, being extremely physical, and being in competition with yourself to stalk your animal well and take it with one, accurate, humane kill shot. Out of respect for the animal we don’t want it to have prolonged suffering.”

Pass it on

Joe and Kathy Delvo’s son, 6 1/2-year-old Kyler, has begun to accompany the couple on some hunting trips. Kathy said they can tell he already loves the outings.

“We hope to pass it on to him,” Kathy said about the tradition of hunting with family. “There’s a real value with being together as a family and being outdoors.

“There are shared memories that can last a lifetime.”

Women and hunting highlights

Web sites to visit:

- www.womenhunters.com
- www.the.womanhunter.com
- www.womenwhohunt.com

11/3/2010

- www.womenhunters.org
- www.kittitasfieldandstream.org
- www.cookecanyon.com (women's hunting day)

What does it take to start hunting?

- License and tags — To hunt deer, elk, bear, cougar, and small game in Washington adds up to about \$90.00 for residents
- Rifle — To hunt big game in Washington state during the modern firearm season a rifle must be .240 caliber (6 mm) center-fire or larger. An adequate quality rifle and scope will cost at least \$450. As this is the most important piece of equipment you're purchasing, buy the best you can afford. Don't forget to have the rifle sized to fit you — the length of the stock and subsequently how you see through the scope or sites is critical.
- Binoculars and spotting scopes — Hunters spend a lot of time "glassing" for game. Never use your rifle scope as a replacement for binoculars and/or a spotting scope. They're another very valuable tool — so again buy the best you can afford. A good pair of binoculars (I like my 10x42s) cost from \$70 up to \$2,000 or more. A light-weight spotting scope starts at about \$150.
- Boots — Be sure to purchase and break in your boots long before the season. A good pair (waterproof and insulated to whatever your comfort zone is) will run from \$50 on up. We have boots for every season, as the fall deer hunt may be dry and warm but the elk season may be cold and snowy requiring a higher level of insulation and different tread.
- Clothes — Layering is the secret to being comfortable during any hunting season. Not only can the weather change quickly from warm to very cold, but your activity level may change drastically during the day too. We may get up very early and hike, then sit for long periods of time when we get to the spot we want to watch. There are lots of great hunting clothes available that are warm, yet breathable. Again, cost varies and a good all-around set of clothes will run at least couple hundred dollars by the time you get pants, long underwear, shirt, jacket and the required hunter-orange vest. Of course, you'll want every camo pattern available too!
- Knife — Make sure you have a good, easily sharpened knife for field dressing your harvested animal. It's a tool you might also have to use for building a fire. Make sure it fits your hand comfortably and is not too big. A pretty good knife can cost as little as \$20, or as much as you want! Also have a sharpener (cheap) in your pack.
- Misc: First aid and survival kit, compass, GPS, flashlight/headlight, pack (to carry all this stuff, and to transport meat if you're successful), and hearing protection and shooting glasses for practicing will set you back another couple hundred dollars. Of course you could add in

11/3/2010

tents, stoves, etc.

This might sound like a lot of money, but once you have these tools most will last a lifetime. Obviously, the boots and clothes will get worn out, but what memories you'll have along the way. — Deborah Essman

Be fully aware of all state and local unit hunting regulations

- Get hunting regulation booklets at all local stores that sell sporting goods, or go online to: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/index.html>

Mandatory hunters' education class

- Washington State law requires all people born after January 1, 1972, to show proof of successfully passing basic hunter education training before purchasing a hunting license. There are no exceptions to the law. There is currently no minimum age to purchase a hunting license in Washington State.
- For information on classes, and home-study and online testing options, go online to: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/huntered/>
- According to Deborah Essman, a certified state hunter education instructor, the classes amount to about a total of 25 hours, which includes class time and a field day and testing.
- Topics, techniques and practices taught include: firearm safety including rifles, shotguns, bows, muzzleloaders and pistols; wildlife conservation and identification, survival and first aid, hunter ethics, pertinent laws, sportsmanship, learning the ten commandments of hunter safety and others.
- On range or field day, students must show instructors they can safely use a rifle and shotgun and prove they know how to safely hold their rifle or shotgun while walking over all types of terrain.

Hunting observations

For Deborah Essman, a board member of the Cascade Land Conservancy, the Kittitas Environmental Education Network and the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, hunting is many things.

"A lot of hunting is hiking and then sitting and waiting for a long time," Essman said. "Yet, when you get to be very quiet in the solitude out there things start happening.

"You start to notice birds and watch small animals moving about. It's a lot of magical things you wouldn't notice just driving by. You become an observer of nature."

Those deciding to hunt need to be in fairly good health, able to exert themselves in the

11/3/2010

wild without problems, she said.

"Youngsters coming out to hunt get away from their indoor videogames and witness and experience the outdoors. They can see the cycle of life."

Essman said fees and taxes paid by hunters across the nation, coupled with private money from many nonprofit sporting groups, have been used to fund "some of the greatest conservation projects" in the United States to protect, preserve and expand wildlife habitat.

When she hunts she also takes down names of birds she spots and takes digital photos of memorable places and wildlife.

"When you really work hard at hunting well, the right way, you're competing with yourself to do the best you can to be silent, control your shot and harvest that animal humanely," Essman said. "There's lots of internal excitement. After you take that shot and harvest an animal, there is, for me, a rush of feelings of respect for the animal."

11/3/2010