

PATHWAYS TO BECOMING A HUNTER

Ensuring that hunting continues to be an enjoyable personal experience and meaningful way for individuals to engage with nature is an important part of Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow (CLfT) and its “offspring” programs, Hunting for Conservation (HfC) and Conservation and Hunting in America (CHA). The recruitment or training of individuals into hunting, however, is not a goal of any of these programs. CLfT has been very successful in part, because the program works to empower all participants to confidently evaluate all aspects and values of hunting for themselves both personally and professionally.

Staff and instructors understand that the content and activities of our programs may lead to an individual’s interests to pursue and experience hunting, fishing, and trapping further for themselves. The decision to hunt is a personal choice. If you make that choice, this is a great time in the history of hunting to get started. As you learned in the R3 section in chapter 1, there is a great deal of interest in trying to create and maintain new people into outdoor activities, specifically hunting.

Whether or not you decide to hunt, you may encounter a family member, friend, co-worker, or constituent during your professional career who is interested in getting started as a hunter. Your experience in a CLfT program and the following discussion and resources will allow you to guide anyone through the various pathways to becoming a hunter

It is possible for an individual to simply decide to try hunting and “go it alone”: however, it is not easy and probably ill-advised. Research has shown that a very low percentage of hunters begin hunting on their own. Most hunters get started because an experienced relative, friend, or neighbor takes them “under their wing”. Recall the discussion of hunter initiation in “Motivations and Demographics”. This “mentor” likely has knowledge, experience, equipment, and even a place to hunt. Having a mentor boosts confidence and preparedness in the form of experience, “coach”, and equipment. A hunter may decide later in their hunting career that they actually prefer to hunt solo; many people do for the solitude, chance to be one-on-one with their dog, or for other reasons. That is all well and good but learn from a mentor first if possible and/or be sure to get thoughtful and seasoned advice along the way.

If an individual chooses to become a self-taught hunter, realize that the unmentored hunter needs to do a bit more initial planning and safety training before stepping out in the field. There is a “do it yourself” attitude common to many contemporary hunters these days but they make up for their inexperience, by doing their homework and taking advantage of resources not available just a few decades ago. This is especially true of new adult hunters. In fact, several books written by self-taught hunters include *Call of the Mild* (Lily Raf McCaulou), *The Mindful Carnivore* (Tovar Cerulli), and *Omnivors’ Dilemma* (Michael Polan). They are very informative and inspiring. Furthermore, technology via the internet and social media, including YouTube,

has opened a wealth of information to the novice, with or without a mentor. Please realize there is little quality control on internet resources; be open-minded and cautious. Keep in mind that having a YouTube channel or product endorsement does not make anyone an expert. There is often more than one reliable answers or points-of-view to be explored, and the old adage applies, “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is!”

If a family member or friend who hunts is not available, approaching known hunters in the workplace, campus departments, or social circles is a good place to start. Research has indicated that the number one reason hunters took someone hunting (44%) was because they “showed interest and asked me to take them”. Gaining hunting knowledge and experience is like attempting other avocations in life. The way to get started is seeking additional knowledge and taking the necessary steps to gain experience.

Resources

There are MANY sources of information available to new hunters. We have already mentioned friends, family, co-workers and social media, including YouTube. However, a simple internet search can yield a person all they need to know from state and federal agencies, commercial sporting goods retailers, shooting preserves, non-governmental conservation organizations (NGO’s), and of course, you can always ask “Siri, Google, or Alexa”.

The following resources are listed by groups with comments on the types of information, programs, or materials they can provide.

State Agencies: Search state name and DNR, Fish and Game, conservation department or whatever applies in your state. State agencies are the number one source of hunting and fishing related resources and information. Most have programs and staff dedicated to R3 initiatives.

State agencies can provide:

- Hunter Education: Gateway to safe, responsible and knowledgeable hunting.
- Licenses and Permits: Requirements and exemptions specific to individual participants and species.
- Apprentice Programs: Novice hunter entry via accompanied participation, available in most states.
- Laws and Regulations: State specific extending to localities, access, equipment and methods.
- What to Hunt: Public and private access opportunities and information (state specific).
- How to Hunt: Seminars, workshops and conservation partner facilitated events (GREAT for beginners).
- Shooting Ranges: Some agencies list public and private shooting range facilities.
- Harvest Reporting: Critical to management, hunter ethics and conservation of species and habitats. Reporting is a hunter’s responsibility.

While you explore agency websites for Hunter Safety Education, Learn to Hunt programs, land access, and other offerings, be sure you look for incentive programs for new hunters. States offer a range of special youth hunts, mentored hunts, reduced price licenses and tags, enhanced access to permits, and transfer programs wherein hunters who have drawn special tags may transfer them to an eligible youth or perhaps first-time hunters. These programs are designed to make entry-level hunting attractive!

Federal Agencies – primarily a resource for land access and in the case of USFWS, migratory game species (like waterfowl) information. Search United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and US Forest Service. In some cases, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, The National Park Service or other agencies may be relevant.

On Campus - Many colleges and universities have teamed up with R3 programs to offer some form of learn to Hunt/Learn about Hunting classes on campus. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, for example, there is a CLfT course, a learn to hunt program through a capstone class and the Wisconsin DNR, the Badger Hunt Club (a student organization) and even a Student Chapter of a popular conservation group. Find opportunities like these through campus natural resources departments or agency R3 information.

Sporting Good Retailers – Suppliers of hunting, angling, trapping, and general outdoor equipment and clothing. Choices have become mind boggling. Most larger retailers have knowledgeable and experienced staff including in-store archery/firearm pro shops to assist buyers. Some even offer shooting ranges, training classes, and outdoor adventures. A short list of large national chains includes Bass Pro/Cabelas, Dick's Sporting Goods, LL Bean, Sportsman's Warehouse, Scheels, Field and Stream, Academy Sports and Outdoors, and others. The stores, catalogs, and websites are a wonderland of "stuff". Do not overlook your local hardware or sporting goods store. They will have the basics. Used equipment is often available at lower prices than new.

Shooting/Hunting Preserves – Shooting/hunting preserves are common across the country and offer hunts (typically for game birds) for individuals interested in a controlled (or semi-guided) hunting opportunity. Game is usually "stocked" and a fee (per bird or per hunt) is charged. There may be membership or other limitations. Reasons for choosing to hunt at a shooting preserve include lack of time for a traditional hunt, a chance to experience hunting in a managed setting, a chance to hunt game in artificial abundance, or a desire for other amenities like lodging, dining, and guide service.

Non-Governmental Conservation organizations (NGO's) – There are many conservation groups which play an important role in wildlife management. Groups are often structured around a particular game species or species group, or type of hunting. NGO's often cooperate with public agencies, provide habitat acquisition and management services, and are a source of funding for conservation. Most NGO's publish magazines with helpful information on hunting species you may decide to hunt. Several have youth/beginner hunting programs like Ducks

Unlimited's "Greenwings", and Quality Deer Management's "Rack Pack". Start with a search on the National organization and work down to regional staff and local chapters. Attending a local fund-raising banquet is fun, supports conservation, and a good place to meet experienced hunters. Plus – you might win a firearm, binoculars or other outdoor equipment to support your interest.

A selection of NGO's to consider:

RMEF Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

NWTF National Wild Turkey Federation

WTU Whitetails Unlimited

QDMA Quality Deer Management Association

DU Ducks Unlimited

PF/QF Pheasants Forever / Quail Forever

RGS Ruffed Grouse Society

MDF Mule Deer Foundation

SCI Safari Club International

B&C Boone and Crockett Club

And there are more. There are also many local sportsperson clubs around the country. They often own land and have a shooting range. Clubs offer a range of social and sporting opportunities and are often key players in local conversation programs. Ask around – you never know when a simple question may yield a mentor, a place to practice, some loaner equipment, or a new group of friends.

A Beginner's Check List of things to do

- Locate and complete a Hunter Education course and save that hunter education card! It is good for life and a gateway to being a safe, ethical, and responsible hunter.
- Obtain necessary hunting licenses and permits.
- Review laws and regulations covering the species you will hunt; seasons bag limits, open or closed areas, etc.
- Obtain the gear you need (see resources) including gun/bow, clothing, calls, knife, etc. This is where a mentor (or some homework) will really help.

- Practice: Become familiar with your gun/bow and proficient in its use – before hunting, NOT during!
- Find a place to hunt – could be public land, could be private land. Ask friends, relatives, and do not be afraid to knock on a landowner’s door and ask permission. Know who owns any land you enter!
- Scouting – Preferably before the season, scout an area you plan to hunt. Find suitable places to sit and watch for, or actively pursue, game. Look for signs of game activity; track, trails, dropping, etc.
- Clothing: Basic outdoor / hiking boots, hats, and gloves, will get you started. Camouflage may be necessary for some species (like turkey) and blaze orange may be required for big game hunting. Think back to what you saw and learned during the “hunting types” videos.
- Miscellaneous equipment: A simple internet search of “basic hunter checklist” provides examples or more than you could ever carry. Over time, a hunter determines whether something is “needed” or “nice”. A few items likely to be needed include gun/bow and ammunition, flashlight and batteries, binoculars, map/compass/GPS, knife, tissue, water, snacks, and small first aid/fire kit, and a spare jacket or raingear.
- Hunting Trip Plan: Whether hunting alone, or with others, it is a good idea to leave a hunting trip plan with a family member or friend in case of an emergency. A simple hunting trip plan would include the following:
 - Hunter’s name and name of companions (if any)
 - Date and time of departure
 - Departure and return route
 - Destination (if in remote area, provide a detailed map)
 - Plan B alternative destination
 - Expected date and time of return
 - Vehicle make/model/color/license plate number
 - Mobile phone number

Hunting Lifestyle: Like other activities, hunter participation, passion and avidity fall within a bell curve from casual to dedicated. Although knowledge and equipment acquisition is a typical starting point, dedicated hunters physically and mentally prepare throughout the year to develop skills and stamina necessary for the rigors they may encounter contributing to a safe, enjoyable, and rewarding hunt!

A final bit of advice - start small. Although new hunters often want to pursue deer or other big game animals, there is much experience to be gained by hunting squirrels, rabbits or other small game. They tend to be abundant and their behavior is similar to larger animals, so the same hunting skills come into play. Hunting small game is less complex and there will be more harvest opportunities. It is also easier to secure land access for small game than for deer or elk.

There is a lot to think about, but once you decide to hunt or assist someone else, hunting can lead to a lifetime of enjoyment and some excellent meals. Keep in mind that your instructors always remain a resource for advice on the outdoors, so feel free to contact us.

From all of us at CLfT, HfC, and CHA

GOOD LUCK AND BE SAF