

A hunter's wish

by Robin West

I grew up as a hunter. Hunting is what I enjoyed doing more than most things—what I dreamed about, what I saved my money for, what I did with my free time. It probably is the reason more than anything else that led me to my profession of fish and wildlife management.

Over the years, the time I spend planning and undertaking hunting trips has diminished greatly, but those few precious days that remain continue to be a cherished portion of my annual calendar. It is not so much the desire to stalk and take an animal that defines why I hunt, but the love of wild places and wild things in God's great creation, the escape from the hectic pace of the everyday world that surrounds us to that of a more simple time and setting, and the never ending sense of wonder of participating in the natural order of things.

Each trip brings life-long memories: the smell of rotting vegetation as you pull a hip-booted foot out of the cold mud of a duck marsh, the sound of migrating sandhill cranes above the clouds, the taste of a ripe blueberry that stains your hand as you put it to your mouth, the feel of the wind and rain on your face as you return across open tundra to the welcome warmth of a tent and sleeping bag at the end of the day, the first sight of your prey, whether it be a trophy moose in a distant alder patch, or a snowshoe hare ready to bound away beneath your feet.

While hunting was commonly practiced by nearly every family in years past, it is no longer so. In the United States it is estimated that less than 10% of the population now hunt. This is true for a variety of reasons but probably most related to the lack of necessity of hunting to put food on the table by most people, and due to diminishing opportunity in time and places to hunt.

Of course there are those who also would like to see all hunting disappear, as they believe it to be archaic, cruel, or unnecessary. I don't argue with these people, for it is a right of democracy to act upon differing personal values and speak freely about them. I suppose I am frustrated along with other hunters, however, when people use such freedoms to try and impose restrictions on the freedoms traditionally en-

joyed by others. And while less than 10% of Americans hunt nowadays, a similar number call themselves anti-hunter and are adamantly opposed to the activity.

The 80% of the populace that remain are simply non-hunters. They don't hunt, but don't feel too strongly one way or another if others hunt. They are the majority. In the long haul it is how they feel about the issue that will determine whether society as a whole will accept hunting in America. Not the hunters; not the anti-hunters; but the non-hunters. Everyone reading this, and everyone who doesn't, falls within one of these categories regarding their attitudes on hunting, and everyone's values and personal convictions count. Those of us who enjoy hunting can never forget that.

We must not label those who disagree with us as people whose views do not count. We must police ourselves and work to educate others. We must go out of our way to follow the regulations, to not leave messy camps, or shoot signs, or leave entrails from harvested game within view of public roadways. We must take care of our harvest so as not to waste any, and to share it with others. With such ethics, hunting will have support of the general public. Without them, I fear we will ultimately lose many, if not all, of the hunting privileges we now enjoy.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is just one of 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System, most of which are open to hunting. All National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska—approximately 80 million acres—are open to hunting. These are public lands that if properly managed will sustain fish and wildlife for many future generations to enjoy. And while some do question the acceptability of hunting within a "refuge," our management premises are simple. Quality habitat and good management yield healthy wildlife populations to be enjoyed by hunters, wildlife viewers, photographers, and researchers—by anyone who appreciates wildlife. Whether you hunt or not, please come out and visit your Refuge, bring friends and family to share some great memories of the great outdoors. And if you do hunt, please remember the impression you leave on others may contribute to the long-term future of your chosen sport.

I wish everyone a safe and enjoyable fall season.

Robin West is a life-long hunter, fisherman, and outdoor enthusiast. He has worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska for 25 years and currently is the manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For

more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.