

Hunting ethics

by Kelly Modla

As a Refuge officer, I see quite a variety of hunting ethics in the field. For some, it's doing the right thing when no one is around; packing out trash, picking up litter carelessly left behind, and following the rules and regulations related to the hunt. For a small percentage, however, hunting ethics are not important; it's doing whatever you want, when you think no one is looking.

The 2004 moose hunting season on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was not much different from previous years that I have seen. Several legal bull moose were taken out along the Swanson River and Swan Lake Road areas. Five sub legal bulls were also taken. Three of these were self turn-ins, one a wanton waste, and one an illegal take from the field.

The three hunters who turned-in their moose each thought they had shot a legal bull. This is a mistake typical of the last week of moose hunting season. Ultimately, responsibility falls on the hunter to take the time to determine if the animal is legal. Unfortunately, these three bulls will not be available for future harvest. However, these hunters did the right thing by turning themselves in.

The 'hunter,' who shot and left a bull moose to waste along Swanson River road, robs ethical hunters of game and promotes a distasteful image of hunters to the public. This hunter failed to determine the legal status of the bull, or perhaps was just poaching and left the moose because of fear of unknown consequences such as fines, jail time, or forfeitures.

In the final case, the hunter removed the illegal bull from the field. Observation and concern by an ethical group of hunters regarding the legal status of the bull led to successful apprehension of the violator.

Each of these examples shows different ethical values. In the case of the turn-ins the hunters accepted responsibility for their mistakes and contacted authorities. As a practical matter, penalties for violations that are self-reported are often less than if a person tries to hide the violation and is later discovered by the authorities. The wanton waste case is the epitome of a game thief, whose conduct is perceived by all as unbecoming of a hunter. Still the misdeed did not go unnoticed, due to the action of another hunter who knew that this behavior was illegal, inappropriate and un-

ethical. In the final case, the hunter chose to attempt to keep the sub-legal bull, hide it and elevate the unethical behavior. The hunter did not anticipate someone else was watching, someone who possessed different ethics.

The best way to avoid shooting a sub legal bull is to watch the Alaska Department of Fish and Game video titled, "Is this moose legal?" The video gives the hunter the opportunity to see spectacular footage of legal and sub legal bulls in various field conditions. The rules are a bit complex, and it helps to see some good concrete examples of what is legal and what is not.

A subcategory of hunting ethics is the fair chase ethic. Fair chase as defined by the Boone and Crocket Club is, "the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit, and taking of free-ranging wild animals in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over them."

I was reminded of the fair chase ethic during a recent contact. One hunter had placed a loaded firearm in his pickup truck, muzzle down, alongside the passenger's leg. Firearm safety was not on their minds. Under State law it is legal to have a loaded firearm in an automobile. On the other hand, I have yet to find a hunter education manual condoning the practice of operating an automobile with a loaded firearm lying on the front seat. A loaded weapon takes on a distinct meaning when road hunting and it is far from the notion of fair-chase. The hunter complied with my request to unload the firearm, but stated that doing so would mean he would not get a moose this year because the gun was unloaded. The hunter may not have taken a moose because shooting from, on, or across the roadway is illegal, unethical, and not fair chase.

Driving with a loaded firearm is commonly practiced the on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Out of several dozen vehicle stops of road hunters this season, only two hunters did not have loaded weapons in their vehicles. (By "loaded" I mean having ammunition in the magazine or chamber.) I take my hat off to the hunters who do not drive with loaded weapons in their vehicles.

Unfortunately, there are no laws prohibiting a hunter from taking a poor shot. This is where skill

or voluntary restraint steps in. Wounding an animal is every hunter's disappointment. Well-placed shots decrease an animal's suffering, show respect for the resource, and show care for the meat. Be responsible while in the field and accept the responsibility of your actions. Unlike voting, hunting is a privilege and not a right, so let's not let ballot initiatives nibble away at our hunting privileges. Hunting attracts the attention of many different people. Make the difference.

In a quote from his book *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold sums it up best; "A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact".

Respect for the resource and a desire to protect and conserve it are what motivates people to get

involved in organizations like Ducks Unlimited, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, and the list goes on.

I have had the pleasure of talking with many hunters in the field. These are often men and women who have a passion for the hunt, a feeling that nurtures their souls. On some level, I think we all desire this. Let's treat the resource with respect, promote stewardship and accept nothing less from our fellow hunters.

The staff of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge wishes all our readers and visitors a Merry Christmas!

Kelly Modla has been a Refuge officer for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the past seven years. Kelly and her husband Robert live with their son Jacob, age 18 months, in Sterling. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.