

A Christmas goose tastes even better when you were helped out on the hunt.

Teach a girl to

HUNT

YOU MAY HAVE A HUNTING PARTNER FOR LIFE.

KERRY MOTOVILOFF

John Motoviloff

The memories of teaching my daughter to fish and hunt are a stream fed by many sources. It's a special stream flowing from the time when Anne was a toddler and I was working out of the home as an outdoor writer.

One source is a windy November afternoon when Anne parted the curtains to reveal a brace of mallards from the morning's hunt hanging by the back door.

"Ack ack!" she said, imitating a duck.

That night at dinner, my wife Kerry cut her a slice of dark, tender duck.

"Ack ack!" Anne proclaimed, taking a big bite, smiling and coining her own word for meat.

Another source is a December twilight when I found myself walking along a spit of land between two lakes; Anne nestled in a backpack I carried on my shoulders. As I craned my head to get a better look at the ducks coming in to land there, I had the uncanny sense she was a shadow-self, seeing what I saw and feeling what I felt from a separate but connected being.

Another, still, stems from an Indian summer day when Anne and I were sitting on 5-gallon buckets plucking ducks. The fall wind had swept up clusters of down and I was struck, suddenly and powerfully, with the thought that life will always be fleeting while the attachment to those we love will always burn with searing permanence. So stinging was this truth that I had to turn away.

#### Following the stream

Streams flow on with their own ripples, glides and runs. Each one is distinct from the next. Just as we attend to water as anglers, we strive to teach others about the outdoors. Slowly, organically, patiently. And so one spring day found us — father, mother and daughter — on a trout stream near the Mississippi River. Kerry and I had caught fish, but casting beneath a tight tree canopy proved tough work for 6-year-old Anne. I offered to let Anne fight a trout I'd hooked, but she shook her head.

"I want to catch my own," she said, thrusting out her lower lip. I had her cast toward a fallen tree. The line sank into deep green water.

"Daddy, something's happening!" she said.

The water erupted, drag peeled off the reel, and she cranked in determinedly. I dropped my fly rod and rushed over. As I was about to coach her, I saw this

wasn't needed. She was already walking backward, in her tie-dye Wellies, and bringing the fish with her. The hefty brown trout was flopping on the bank and it was hard to say whether student or teacher was more excited. As we celebrated that night over butter burgers and root beer at Culver's, I saw that she knew exactly what she wanted — and was willing to wait for it.

A watershed of evocative names followed. Cold Spring and Plum Lake. Weister and Tainter. Crow Hollow and Star Valley. Kickapoo and Beaver Dam. Lunchbox and Triangles. We fished as the earth greened around us, finding morel mushrooms growing in leafy shade. We fished in July heat and gathered blackcaps in the evening cool. We fished in January, jigging through the ice for bluegill and crappie, and fried firm fillets in hot oil.

I showed her how to gut trout and wash them in cold, flowing water. How to bury fish bones in the garden to make vegetables grow. As she approached her teens, we became fishing partners.

Instruction gave way not so much to talk as to silence. There was an inquisitiveness in her hazel eyes that reminded me of my Ukrainian grandmother. There was, in our companionship, the silent bond my brother and I shared in fishing, which in turn echoed my Russian grandfather's proverbs. "More work, less talk. The quieter you go, the further you go."

#### "The coolest thing ever"

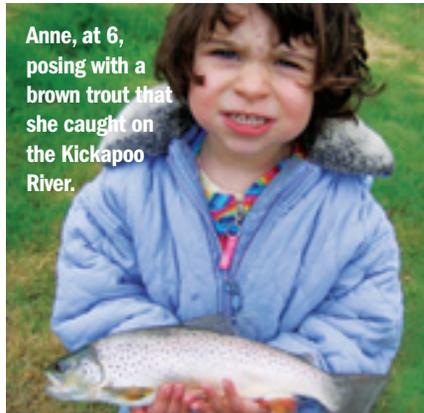
As streams press on, their character changes. As the Kickapoo — whose Algonquian name means, "he goes here and he goes there," and on whose bank we've built a family cabin — arises swift and narrow and then grows to a wide river, so we were ready to move from fishing to hunting. Not to handle guns, at this point, but to see if she liked the business of pursuing game. That our Labrador retriever, Gypsy, was a hunter helped pique Anne's interest.

If I've labored on my daughter's experience, it's not without reason. I've taught outdoor skills to adults and children. If I've learned one thing from this — and from my wife, who's been teaching for almost three decades — it's this: one size does not fit all. Each student — adult or child, male or female — has a particular path. Some may be ready at 10 or younger. Others may not have the opportunity or inclination until they are 20, 30, 40 or older. A good teacher meets



Anne and hunting pal Zane with wood ducks bagged on the 2015 Youth Waterfowl Hunt.

JOHN MOTOVILLOFF



Anne, at 6, posing with a brown trout that she caught on the Kickapoo River.

JOHN MOTOVILLOFF

students where they are.

One hoarfrosted December morning — after a hearty breakfast and with Anne dressed snugly in coveralls — we set out to chase pheasants in the Kickapoo River State Wildlife Area. Gypsy charged from the kennel and I slipped two shells into my side-by-side shotgun. I expected lots of chasing and little flushing, so we ambled along. Gypsy, however, had halted at the end of a weed patch. Her stiff posture told me a bird was near. Sure enough, a rooster flushed and I shot.

“Too loud?” I asked, as we went over to the dead bird.

“No,” she said. “It was the coolest thing ever!”

So began an apprenticeship. Anne endured mosquito bites on hot September dove hunts. She stomped brush piles to flush cottontail rabbits. She hauled decoys. She walked up steep coulee country hills. She carried a Christmas goose back to the car on a snowy evening looking in her wool cap and oversized coat, for the life of me, like a child from a Dickens novel.

Our most memorable hunt was a quiet evening on Pool 9 of the Mississippi River. I never fired a shot at the gadwall and widgeon flocking together in the open water beyond us. Our reward came, instead, in the form of a spectacle. A bald eagle swooped in and scooped

up a squawking duck in each talon, scattering the others in a whistling, quacking cloud. We sat processing what we’d seen and the words of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset came to mind: “Hunting takes place across the entire zoological scale.”

This was a bonding time to be sure, with lots of hot chocolate and granola bars. But it was also a test to see if she really wanted to hunt. And a hedge against the nature deficit that’s all too common today. At worst, my thinking went, I would end up with a child who knew something about the workings of nature and guns. At best, I would have another hunting partner, my own Annie Oakley.

### Timing is everything

I enrolled Anne in a hunter safety course at a local rod and gun club. That the class began the night of a howling blizzard, in which I nearly drove off the road, was perhaps an omen. The students watched a film about a young hunter who, after making a series of other mistakes, accidentally shot his friend. The film ended with the camera panning on the ambulance driving off, lights flashing.

I remembered, in junior high school, watching a prison documentary called “Scared Straight.” As the threat of incarceration, then, helped keep teenagers from jail, so the threat of maiming a friend would, here, discourage poor gun handling. This approach made good sense to me. But there must have been a disconnect for Anne.

I looked over to see that all color had drained from her face. While the message that you can’t take back a bullet is entirely correct, Anne’s take-away wasn’t the intended one. Sensitive and conscientious to a fault, she was, I could tell, sure she would kill someone the next time she picked up a gun. It was clear we needed to start over and find another class.

Shortly after this, I inherited my Uncle Roger’s Winchester Model 12, 16-gauge,

shotgun. He had used it, growing up in Pennsylvania in the 1950s, to hunt pheasants and quail. It had a good history, fit Anne well and, thanks to the polychoke it had been outfitted with, could be used for the full range of shotgunning.

We practiced gun handling and shooting at the cabin and she gained confidence. I enrolled her in an online hunter safety course in September 2015. At the field day, she got a perfect score on her written test and shot a pair of bull’s-eyes. That the youth waterfowl hunt took place a week after she completed the course seemed further proof that we were on the right track.

Taking advantage of this early season hunt, Anne and I crouched among fallen oak trees on a Lower Wisconsin Riverway slough. My hunting partner and his 14-year-old son were also there. The air was thick with anticipation and also with the pungent smell of bottomlands. A dense fog enveloped us and we waited. Soon, a drake wood duck twisted toward us through the timber. We could see his trademark facemasking as he came close.

“Take him,” I whispered.

Anne shouldered the Model 12 and fired. The bird lay twitching on the water and Gypsy brought it back. Anne held it and smoothed the feathers.

“Dinner,” she said.

I was going to remind her about ack ack. But it seemed best, with two teenager peers in the blind, to keep that one quiet.

While this turned out to be Anne’s only game bagged during her first season, she learned a great deal. She shot bull’s-eyes with a 30/30 at the Dane County Law Enforcement Range. On a pheasant hunt, she knew to turn down the shot as a hen flushed over her. During deer season, she sat quietly for hours on end, scanning the snowy woods, and never issued a complaint.

Where this will come to rest — or whether it will go on with its own trajectory, in her life, with her own family — I can’t say. Where this would have led had I pushed, earlier and harder, I’m certain: with a dislike for hunting and firearms. Now, we are making our way down the sporting road. It doesn’t matter whether it takes us to woods or waters, uplands or marsh, after fish or game. We’re here together, and that’s what counts. 

*John Motoviloff edits hunting regulations booklets for the Department of Natural Resources. He is an avid hunter and author of the cookbook, “Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest.”*