

# The Great State of Hunting

By Gordon R. Batcheller



James Clayton

As a professional wildlife biologist at DEC, I help manage New York's wildlife conservation programs. As a lifetime wildlife enthusiast, I am also an avid hunter. For me, hunting is a way of life that encompasses all seasons. Beginning in October, I look for turkey flocks and use my calls and camouflage in an often-feeble attempt to call a bird in close enough for a shot. Last fall I took my 100<sup>th</sup> wild turkey, but this doesn't make me an accomplished hunter. My expertise, if any, comes from the thousands of mistakes I have made where I can only conclude, "Turkey: 1; Gordon: 0."

By mid-November, I turn my attention to deer, which remains my focus until mid-December. The venison and wild turkey in my freezer are the only meat in our household, and I deeply value this modest level of self-sufficiency. My richest memories, however, are the deer or turkeys that proved to be elusive, and left me scratching my head and pondering the wonders of nature.

Lately, I have grown to savor days afield with new hunters, both young and old, all of whom have been eager students. When my son took his first deer on a chilly Thanksgiving morning, and when two friends took their first wild turkeys, I knew that I had given something back and done my part in enriching their lives.

New York offers some of the finest hunting experiences in the country for a variety of game, beginning in September for squirrels; running into late winter for rabbits, hares, and furbearers; and starting anew with our spring turkey hunt. This is why New York is a destination of choice for hunters from every county in the state and several neighboring states.

According to the 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, an estimated 823,000 hunters spent 18.4 million days afield in New York in 2011. This ranks New York 3<sup>rd</sup> in total number of hunters nationwide. The 84,000 non-residents who travel to New York to hunt make the Empire State the 9<sup>th</sup>-most popular hunting destination in the nation.

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And the strong state of hunting is generating economic benefits for small businesses and local communities across New York. Outdoor sportsmen and women spend an estimated \$1.5 billion each year on food, lodging, clothing, equipment and supplies, ranking New York 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation for total expenditures by hunters. Though these numbers are impressive, DEC is stepping up efforts to recruit new hunters. This is one reason why our youth hunting events are so important, and it is also why DEC supports programs like "Becoming an Outdoors-Woman," in which women of all ages can learn basic outdoor skills like beginning shotgun and archery.

An important part of our job at DEC is to listen to hunters and understand what we can do to make a good experience even better. Are our seasons set at the right time? Do we provide enough information to help people find a place to hunt? Just last year, for example, we changed our deer hunting regulations to provide even more opportunity, and bear seasons have also been expanded. Research is underway right now to ensure that our turkey seasons are set correctly.

Every year, new hunters explore this lifestyle with curiosity and excitement. Some seek a challenging new outdoor activity. Others wish to grow closer to the land and harvest game as a sustainable source of food. Many are drawn to carry on family traditions. In my case, a close friend taught me some of the tricks needed to successfully hunt turkeys, and the challenge of doing so remains one of the great rewards of going afield each fall and spring. More than anything, I have learned that successful hunters spend lots of time preparing, and lots of time in the field observing wildlife. For me, the connection with nature defines a true hunter, and that is a lifetime quest.

Our job at DEC is to make the hunting experience positive so that hunters want to come back. A big part of this is to ensure that all hunters understand the rules and responsibilities of hunting, and that they are properly trained and licensed before going afield to ensure a safe and enjoyable hunting experience. Another big part is providing information to help hunters understand the excellent hunting opportunities in New York, including how to access millions of acres of public land.

Every year, new hunters ask how to get started. Experienced hunters want to know how to make the most of what we have to offer. Let's take a look at DEC's programs to promote hunting.

## First Steps

All new hunters must first successfully complete our hunter education course. Usually held over a period of two evenings and one weekend day (though we are offering more and more options for online study as well), these courses cover the basics of firearms safety and hunting ethics. Students are introduced to key laws and regulations. Taught by a skilled group of trained volunteers, our hunter education classes are your portal to a lifetime of enjoyable outdoor activity. To find a course in your area, visit the DEC website at: [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html).



## Find a Mentor

There is no better way to learn about hunting than from a skilled teacher. If you are under 16 years of age, New York laws require that you may only hunt with an experienced hunter-mentor. If you are older, seek out a friend or family member willing to take you on your first hunting trip. Talk to experienced hunters and ask them for suggestions. Your hunter education instructor may be able to suggest a network of potential mentors.

Many hunters are very willing to share their time with a new hunter, and few experiences are more rewarding than passing on the hunting tradition. DEC sponsors special opportunities for youth hunters, holding youth hunts for pheasants, waterfowl, turkey and deer. Last fall, for example, the first-ever youth hunt for deer was held over Columbus Day weekend. An estimated 7,500 young hunters went afield that weekend with an experienced mentor, and took about 760 deer. You can see some of those successful hunters on page 17 of this magazine, and even more at DEC's online photo gallery: [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/85926.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/85926.html).

# Sp@rtsman Education

DEC photo



DEC's Sportsman Education program is your entrée to hunting. The program began in 1949. Each year, a cadre of 2,500 trained volunteer instructors teach more than 30,000 students in four disciplines: firearms safety, bowhunting, trapping, and waterfowl identification. Approximately 1,300 Sportsman Education courses ([www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9191.html)) are offered each year, generally in the evenings and on weekends. There is no charge for any course. Demand is greatest for courses held immediately prior to the hunting season, so consider signing up for an earlier offering.

Online and home-study courses are becoming more prevalent, but must be completed with a hands-on field day. For more information, check out [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9187.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9187.html).

We are always looking for interested individuals to join our instructor team. Applicants must be at least 18 years of age, be of good character and have no serious legal convictions. Applicants must have at least three year's experience in the discipline that they choose to teach and several references are required. To learn more about becoming an instructor, visit [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9189.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9189.html).



Many young hunters hone their skills with small game like squirrels.



By extending seasons, expanding use of deer management permits, and increasing access on public lands, we are working to improve deer hunting in New York.

## Start Small

While many first-time hunters are attracted either to deer or turkey hunting, New York's small game hunting seasons offer excellent opportunities for both beginning and seasoned hunters. For example, the squirrel season begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> in all upstate counties. Squirrels are abundant at that time of year; they are widespread in most of New York, the weather is pleasant, and you'll have the woods largely to yourself. Hunting squirrels is an excellent way to develop your hunting and shooting skills. Squirrels remain one of the most abundant and popular game animals in the United States.

## Places to Hunt

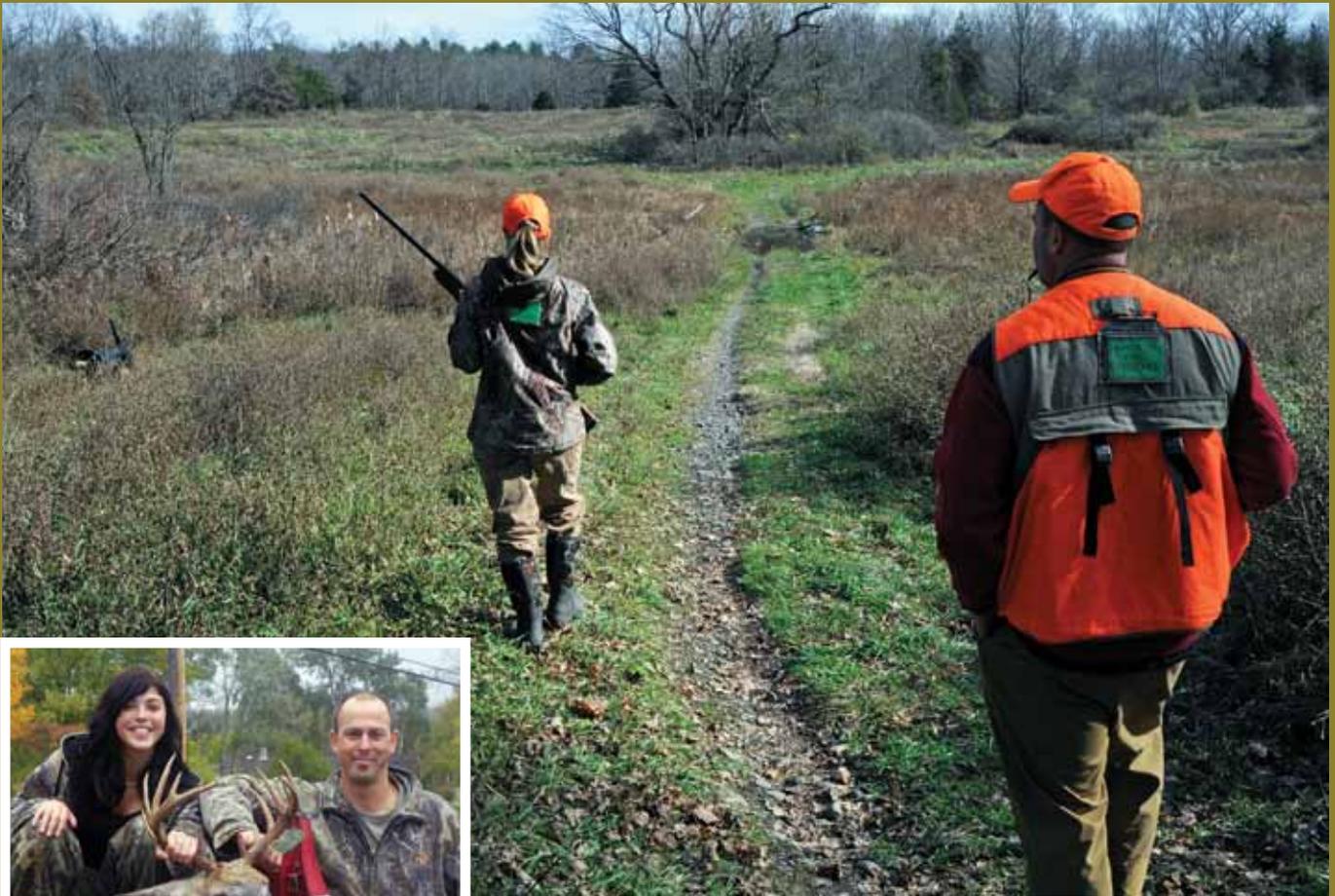
DEC manages hundreds of thousands of acres of public land where you can hunt. The habitat types and hunting opportunities are as diverse as the state itself, and best of all, access to all these lands is free of charge. Recent acquisitions have increased the areas open to

hunting. Since January of 2011, DEC has acquired 44,080 acres in fee and through easement, nearly all of it available for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreational activities. That total includes additions to several Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), including Bashakill, California Hill, Black Creek Marsh, Northern Montezuma, Cranberry Mountain, Rome, Oriskany Flats, Hi Tor and Ausable Marsh.

In addition to WMAs, DEC has also expanded hunting opportunities on a number of other publicly owned lands by: expanding Chenango, Boutwell, Beebe Hill, Eldridge Swamp, Zoar Valley, and Hinckley State Forests; working with the NYC Department of Environmental Protection to open up thousands of acres of New York City-owned lands in the NYC watershed in the Catskills; and adding lands to the Adirondack Forest Preserve. You can find a lot of information about public lands open to hunting by visiting our website at [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/82098.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/82098.html).

Many private landowners also allow hunting on their properties, with permission. Always remember to treat private property as you would want your own land treated: with respect. It is best to approach landowners well before your hunting trip, and be sure you do not interrupt them at an inconvenient time. If you receive permission to hunt on their land, be sure to follow all of their rules. Landowners expect nothing less. After your hunt, let them know how you did and be sure to bring them some fresh game, prepared and ready for the table. Touch base with them every year and keep the relationship positive and open. You will find many landowners are willing to allow you to hunt on their land if you are courteous and considerate.

**Gordon R. Batcheller** is DEC's chief wildlife biologist, and is an avid deer and turkey hunter.



Courtesy the Albright family

# Supporting New York Hunters

by Kathy Moser,  
Asst. Commissioner of Natural Resources

Hunting is one of the most popular forms of outdoor recreation in the Empire State and an important part of our economy. New York hunters can pursue a wide variety of wildlife, including big game, small game, game birds, waterfowl, and furbearers. The Department of Environmental Conservation is committed to providing opportunities for hunters to enjoy their time-honored tradition. Under Governor Cuomo's leadership, the state has taken several steps to better serve the hunting community in 2012:

- Launched a new study to better manage wild turkeys and to maintain outstanding turkey hunting (see "Volunteers Wanted" on page 28). New York routinely ranks as one of the top ten turkey hunting destinations in the United States.
- Extended use of deer management permits during early muzzleloading season and early bowhunting season in the northern zone, thereby providing additional opportunity to take deer.
- Extended the opening of the bowhunting season by 12 days into early October, which bowhunters have been requesting for a number of years.
- Added more than 26,000 acres of new public lands across the state to expand areas open to sportsmen for hunting, fishing, trapping and other outdoor recreation.
- Rebuilt Howland Island Bridge in Northern Montezuma WMA to provide access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation.
- Released 30,000 pheasants for hunting and continued investments to improve the Reynolds Game Farm where pheasants are raised for stocking.