Celebrating 70 years of DEC’s Youth Camps
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Special Insert:
Conservationist kids!

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Last October, as I was checking out the foliage at a pond near an Adirondack highway, another guy with a camera approached. With a look of wonder in his eyes, he softly said, “Wow, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.” Fully understanding, I smiled and nodded, though I visit this spot frequently as it is less than an hour from my home.
A year earlier, at another vista about a mile and a half up a mountain trail, I chatted with a photographer named Yoshi as we returned from shooting a lovely sunrise. He told me that he travels from Tokyo every year to revel in the Adirondacks’ autumn splendor. Experiences like these help me appreciate how fortunate I am to live in New York State, where I regularly witness this spectacle of color, almost unimaginable in many parts of the world.
As a nature lover and avid bowhunter, autumn has always been my favorite season, but it is fleeting. Working full-time for 40 years, I managed to make time for bowhunting, but always wanted more days to concentrate on enjoying fall colors with a camera.
My interest in photography began early in life. By the time I got to high school, photography had become an avid hobby, thanks to the 35mm camera and light meter my father gave me when he upgraded his own gear. While I had a keen enthusiasm for science and nature, most of my classmates thought of me as the guy with the camera. During college, my passion for both nature and photography intensified. This served me well in ecological research, followed by a long career at DEC.
When I retired in 2008, I planned epic hikes to capture jaw-dropping scenes of places that few people see. Before my first autumn of retirement, however, blood cancer changed my plans. A rare kind of non-Hodgkin lymphoma nearly killed me. Years of intensive chemotherapy and immunotherapy saved my life, but left me weakened and anemic. So I switched my plans. Today, most of my photography is done less than three miles from a road, or in places I can reach with my lightweight canoe. My primary focus now is my family, and my photographic focus revolves around sharing memories and nature appreciation. Instead of depicting brief trips to remote places, I now focus on capturing intimate scenes of nature in familiar and accessible places. Sometimes my captured memories are expansive landscapes; other times they are nothing more than a single leaf. But all are intensely meaningful to me.
Retired DEC biologist, sportsman education coordinator, and award-winning nature photographer, Wayne Jones frequently contributes photos to the Conservationist. You can see more of his work at www.wwjonesphoto.com.
As both a hunter and raptor enthusiast, I consider myself a hunter-conservationist. My hunting puts food on the table, and by helping limit an excessively large and damaging local deer herd, I feel I am aiding in protecting native plants, local forests and wildlife habitat. I also feel good that my deer hunting does not result in the unintended deaths of non-target wildlife (like raptors)—because I choose to buy lead-free ammunition.

I have spoken to hundreds of deer hunters about ammunition and hunting, and how some hunting choices can affect eagles—and what we can do to better protect them. Many hunters are unaware that the common lead core bullets they use may be ingested by, and thereby poison, eagles and other scavengers. A number of hunters are also unaware of the human health risk from possibly ingesting lead fragments in the wild game they shoot. The risk is highest for children, but lead is bad for everyone. Any hunter who wants to protect his or her family’s health, and also protect raptors like hawks and eagles, can do one simple thing: choose lead-free ammunition.
Better Performance

While conservation and health factors motivated me to change ammunition, other deer hunters have switched to non-lead bullets and slugs to improve performance. Most non-lead bullets are made of solid copper or copper alloys, which are designed to expand while retaining nearly all of their mass. This makes them more effective. In contrast, lead-based bullets tend to fragment within their target. Even the smaller caliber versions of solid copper or copper alloy bullets almost always pass through a deer intact. They are, in effect, a better mousetrap; their non-toxic nature is an unintentional benefit.

On the other hand, lead is soft and fragile; so fragile, in fact, that pure lead bullets can’t be used in modern, high-powered rifles because they break apart on impact. The technology that replaced them—the copper-jacketed lead bullet—holds together well enough to be lethal; however, jacketed bullets still fragment, sometimes into hundreds of pieces. These fragments can then be inadvertently eaten, by both wildlife and people alike.

Lead and Eagles

Approximately 200,000 deer are harvested in New York each year by hunters using firearms. A hunter doing everything right puts a bullet through the deer’s vital organs. These internal organs are removed and left in the field, often providing a feast for scavengers. With a well-placed shot, most of the bullet will pass through the animal, but some bullet fragments will end up in these discarded organs, and a few will also get into the meat; fragments can travel as far as 18 inches from the initial wound channel.

In New York, incidents of eagle mortality from lead exposure are on the rise. DEC’s wildlife pathology staff determined that 29 bald eagles died from lead poisoning from 2008-2015. During the previous 8 years, only 8 were reported. These numbers may seem small, but these only reflect the birds that are found and turned in. Often, sick, dying and deceased eagles are not found. I know of two cases in which biologists, following eagles with GPS tracking devices, found sites where large quantities of lead-contaminated carcasses and butchering scraps were dumped. DEC staff and volunteers found three dead or dying eagles near those sites. Considering how few eagles are carrying tracking devices in New York, researchers were fortunate but alarmed to make this discovery.

A burgeoning bald eagle population means more opportunities for exposure to lead. However, there is another factor: more hunters are using rifles than in the past. Since rifle bullets fragment more than slugs do, there are more opportunities for eagles to be exposed to lead each year.

It doesn’t take a lethal dose of lead to kill an eagle. Raptors rely on their speed, vision, and ability to focus attention to hunt effectively and survive. They need to be sharp. A sick bird may starve to death, or die from hypothermia. New research from Sweden indicates the behavior of free-ranging scavenging golden eagles (trapped and GPS-tracked) was negatively affected by higher blood lead levels. These birds moved considerably less than their peers, both in flight height and movement rate. The authors stated “our study highlights lead exposure as a considerably more serious threat to wildlife conservation than previously realized.”

Data about wild eagles across the U.S. show high levels of lead in their blood. These levels increase during and after big game seasons, and decrease in spring and summer. The Raptor Center in Minnesota has treated thousands of bald eagles for a variety of ailments and accidents. Ninety percent of the birds they receive have measurable blood lead levels, and about one in four eagles they treat has lead toxicity high enough to cause clinical lead poisoning.
Eagles, including this subadult (left) and immature (right), are scavengers as well as hunters, and will take advantage of carrion, which potentially exposes them to lead.

Eagles feed on a deer carcass. Hunters’ use of non-lead ammo can protect these birds—and humans—from ingesting fragments that can cause lead poisoning.
Human Health Risks

Many scientific papers have established a clear connection between lead ammunition and lead exposure in humans and wildlife. In fact, more than 99 percent of the approximately 570 peer-reviewed papers on the subject raised concerns over use of lead-based ammunition.

Few hunters truly depend on wild game for meat. However, many augment their family’s diet with wild game. Even tiny amounts of lead may impact small children and pregnant women; some states warn that these groups should not eat any wild game killed with lead ammunition. New York’s Venison Donation Coalition recently started providing a warning targeted at this demographic.

Cost

If you choose to switch to non-lead ammunition, be prepared to pay more than you do for traditional lead ammunition. Non-lead cartridges have been considered “premium” ammo since they first appeared on the market, but the cost is coming down as these cartridges become more commonplace, driven by increasing demand.

When I bought my first box of non-lead ammo for my .270 almost 20 years ago, it cost me $30. Last fall, I bought a box at a local shop for $28. Considering inflation over that time, that’s quite a drop in price. And while that’s still more expensive than lead ammunition, I feel the benefits are worth the added cost.

Besides, if you consider that a box of 20 rounds—which costs about $10 or $15 more for non-lead ammo—lasts me three or four deer seasons, I’m really only spending an extra $5 a year.

Availability

Non-lead bullets are becoming more common. Every major manufacturer has a line of non-lead center-fire cartridges. However, it can still be challenging for New York hunters to find what they need, and state law prevents ammunition from being shipped to your home from on-line suppliers.

Big-box discount retailers may sell firearms, but they rarely carry premium ammunition. Large sporting goods stores often carry solid copper bullets in the common calibers. Unfortunately, they are frequently mixed in with the lead ammunition on the shelf and may not even be labeled as non-lead. One manufacturer even puts its “boilerplate” lead warning on packages, regardless of bullet type.

It can be almost impossible to distinguish between a copper jacketed and a solid copper bullet by look or feel. Unless you get a really knowledgeable clerk, you may be on your own in large stores. So if you are going to a large sporting goods retailer, do a little homework: arrive knowing the manufacturer and specific brand of ammunition you want to buy. The DEC website (www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/48420.html) has a list of common brand-name non-lead bullets and slugs. Print it out and bring it with you when you restock your ammunition to ensure you purchase the right ammo.

I find the best ammunition sources are well-stocked, privately owned gun shops. The staff is generally very knowledgeable, and if they don’t have what you need, they may be able to order it for you.

Rifles are distinct and different ammunition will perform differently in each firearm. Be sure to practice with your new non-lead ammo at the range before opening day.

Hunting is a longstanding outdoor tradition in New York State. This deer season, do something for your family and wildlife: go Lead-free.

A previous Conservationist contributor, Tom Salo is a hunter, naturalist and Christmas-tree grower in Burlington, NY. He helps organize the fall season Franklin Mountain Hawk Watch near Oneonta.

For more information on non-lead ammunition, see “Alternative Ammo” in the October 2012 Conservationist.
Summer’s end marked the completion of the 70th season of the DEC Summer Camps, and my first year as a member of camp staff. Starting a job with a program that has such a rich history is daunting. There’s so much to learn about how the program runs and my place in it, amidst all the storied history that came before me.

There is a deep-rooted love for DEC’s Education Camps program and the “magic” it creates in former campers and staff that I could only understand by experiencing it firsthand. “The DEC camp system has and continues to affect my life in enormous ways,” said Peter Siciliano, Director of Camp Rushford since 2015. “It has blessed me with some of the most special relationships and friendships I’ve experienced. It will change your life!”

By Christina McLaughlin; DEC photos

Each camper receives a certificate at the end of the week; this one is from 1955.
I wasn’t familiar with the DEC Summer Camp program when I started. I began in the fall after the close of the 69th season, diving right into paperwork despite never having visited the camps. Anyone who has worked behind the scenes of a summer camp knows the bulk of the work is done in the off-season. There are files to update, college fairs to attend, interviews to schedule, applications to collect, websites to update, questions to answer, changes to implement, and sites to inspect long before any campers arrive. Through the fall, winter, and spring, administrative staff works hard to have everything ready for the coming season.

It’s difficult to fully understand the camps program if you haven’t seen it in operation. I heard a lot about camp “magic” when I started, but visiting the camps in the off-season provides only the faintest hint of what the programs are like in action. Each camp is nestled in acres of protected land and surrounded by beautiful views of nature, made even more so by the vibrant fall colors. But in the absence of staff and campers, each camp sits silent, presenting only a pale sketch of the hectic excitement of the summer season.

DEC’s Summer Camp program has come a long way since it began with a single camp in the summer of 1947. Camp Danaca, in Tompkins County, began as a first-of-its-kind sportsmen’s conservation camp for boys. It hosted 75 boys and cost $17.50 for one, 10-day camp session. DEC currently operates four summer camps that provide conservation education programming to more than 1,500 campers a year.

In 1948, Camp DeBruce opened in Livingston Manor in the Catskills following the success of Camp Danaca. The camp, which is down the road from the Catskill Fish Hatchery, hosted 98 boys its first year, growing to 350 campers and volunteers this year. Surrounded by some of the Catskills’ best trout streams, DeBruce has taught fly-fishing to generations of campers since it opened nearly seven decades ago.

Camp Rushford opened in Allegany County’s Hanging Bog Wildlife Management Area in 1952 to serve children from the western half of the state. Its main lodge and dining hall were built with logs salvaged from the 1950 Adirondack blowdown, and it is the only camp built specifically as a conservation camp. As the first campers arrived, staff were still finishing the roofs of the buildings.

Camp Colby in Saranac Lake opened in 1963, replacing a camp in Ray Brook (that is now home to DEC’s Region 5 office). Colby was previously Camp Intermission, the private home of William Morris Sr., a theatre manager and talent agent. The comedy and tragedy masks still found on the gates at the camp entrance are remnants of its history as a summer “home for stars” that Morris managed. Colby was the first of the camps to become coeducational, welcoming girls to the program in 1971; the other camps followed suit in the late 1970s.

In 1997, Camp Pack Forest opened in Warrensburg on property owned by the SUNY College of Environment Science and Forestry (ESF). Previously, older campers had attended the Teenage Ecology Workshop at Rogers Environmental Education Center in Sherburne, Chenango County, but that program had closed. With the growing popularity of the camps program, DEC sought to expand the program to a fourth camp site to provide older campers an opportunity to attend and be part of the program. Through a partnership with ESF, Camp Pack Forest opened as an ecological workshop for ages 15-17, with two weeks slated for first-time campers aged 12-14 at the start of the summer.

The first summer camps focused on fish and wildlife management, and included instruction in firearms, fishing, fly-fishing, and trapping. Today’s camp program still includes a hunter education component, providing campers with an opportunity to complete their hunter safety, bow safety, or trapper safety course. Over time, the programming shifted to feature additional lessons on habitats, forest and stream ecology, adaptations, environmental impacts, energy cycles and more.
A large part of what makes the DEC Camps Program so special is its mentorship of campers. At the end of each week, campers who demonstrate maturity, camp spirit, and enthusiasm are nominated to apply to be volunteers the following year, where they will help with programs, and with a little less glamour, also help in the dining hall—primarily washing dishes. Many volunteers hope to become camp staff someday, and often pursue degrees in the natural sciences or education because of their time spent in the camps program. Several returning staff have been with the program since middle school. And it’s amazing to me how many campers and volunteers are the children—and sometimes grandchildren—of former campers and staff. Love of the DEC Camps is a family affair.

I learned this firsthand early this summer. I visited Camp Rushford towards the end of the first week and met one of the volunteers, James Boglioli. After I introduced myself as the volunteer coordinator, he told me how his parents had met through the Camps program as volunteers competing for a position as kitchen staff, and how excited he was to be a camp volunteer himself.

James’ mother, Melissa, was a camper at Camp Rushford starting at age 12, became a volunteer at 15, and later volunteered twice at Camp Rushford and once at Camp DeBruce. It was at Camp DeBruce that she met fellow volunteer and future husband James Boglioli. Although there are many volunteers at each camp, there is only one entry-level, paid kitchen position. Competition to be the best volunteer in the hopes of getting that position can be fierce. Ultimately, both Melissa and James worked as kitchen staff for a year, later becoming counselors at Rushford and DeBruce, respectively.

“Today it amazes me that camp had such an effect on me in one short week, and that I held on for that long and then took it upon myself to contact Albany to have a volunteer application mailed to me,” Melissa said. After patiently waiting three years to be old enough to request the application materials, she had to visit the library to find the phone number, then make a long-distance phone call to submit her request! “If camp wasn’t magical, I probably would have moved on and forgotten about it. But it is magical, and I didn’t forget. It was certainly worth the effort,” she said.

Her son James volunteered at both Rushford and DeBruce. James is one of many volunteers, I believe, who anxiously wait all year for camp. When a last minute opening at DeBruce popped up this summer, James was asked to fill it. Although the family was away in Philadelphia, they borrowed and bought clothes and dropped young James at DeBruce on their way home to western NY. “The whole way he talked about camp and how he could not wait to get there,” his dad noted.

What makes camp so special that teens return again and again, dropping everything to get there, even with short notice? James Sr. explained that “DeBruce was a magical place for me because it was a place where I could go and truly be myself, outside of all the judgment and pressure of growing up and school.”

His wife echoes those sentiments. “I was really interested in ecology, conservation and the outdoors, and I had never been around people that had so much knowledge and enthusiasm for the topic,” Melissa said. “To have found a place where so many people were interested in and cared about the same kinds of things I did was great. All these memories are in my heart and in my blood, and I wouldn’t be the same person I am today if I hadn’t experienced camps Rushford and DeBruce.”

Camp Colby is the perfect spot to learn first-hand about water resources.
The passion and enthusiasm DEC camp staff have for the natural world and its environment, combined with their compassion, is critical to making “camp magic,” but it’s only part of the experience. One week of camp is often filled with many memorable experiences, and most campers can’t pick just one favorite memory from their stay. Camp recreation games are always popular, along with campfires and swimming. The overnight trips, when campers get a chance to sleep under the stars, are always favorites. In post-camp surveys, though, making new friends is consistently campers’ favorite memory.

All campers have an opportunity to fish, often taught by DEC’s I FISH NY staff.

It’s the “sparking of your ecological consciousness,” according to Adam Stewart, “the passion that drives you to come back as a camper again, volunteer or be a staff member.” Basically, the camps fuel themselves, inspiring each new group of volunteers and staff to live up to those who came before them and continue the tradition of inspiring the next group of campers.

What I learned this past year is that camp magic is what lights up the faces of former campers at the mere mention of camps. It’s the camper who wanted to go home Sunday night after being dropped off earlier that day, but then doesn’t want to leave come Friday. It’s the staff fearlessly sharing their passion for conservation and the outdoors to inspire the same love of nature in the campers they teach. It’s the love of camp that drives a teenager from camper to volunteer to kitchen staff to counselor as they grow with and through the program. It’s former campers, now parents, sending their own kids to camp to continue the tradition.

Christina McLaughlin works in DEC’s camp program in the Albany office.

Adam Stewart first connected with nature as part of the late Brother Yusuf Burgess’ Youth Ed-Venture and Nature Network and now shares his knowledge with urban children from Albany.

Adam Stewart was a camper who worked his way up to camp counselor and later served as DEC’s Capital District Campership Diversity Coordinator. His favorite memory as camper and counselor involved seeing bears on hikes, but in his administrative position, his favorite thing was “Being able to be a part of something bigger than me, and creating opportunities for urban children like me.”

So, what is “camp magic?” It’s a “very personal and sometimes specific experience,” said Peter Siciliano. “When the returning camp spirit is high, nature is in abundance, very unlikely circumstances or relationships come to pass, old staff or camp families stop by to visit, spontaneous chants/skits/songs happen at random... these moments can bring an overwhelmingly special feeling. That to me is camp magic!”

Hunter, bow and trapping courses are taught by DEC instructors and Environmental Conservation Officers.
Academy Graduates

On August 25th, DEC welcomed 31 new Environmental Conservation Officers (ECOs) and nine new Forest Rangers to DEC’s ranks. These 40 officers and rangers completed 28 weeks of training at the 21st Basic School for Uniformed Officers at the Office of Public Protection Training Academy in Pulaski, Oswego County. While there, they learned skills necessary to protect New York’s lands and waters, perform search-and-rescue missions, and enforce environmental conservation laws. DEC Commissioner Seggos presided at the graduation ceremony, noting that these men and women will carry on the proud history of ECOs and Rangers across New York. ECOs (originally called Game Protectors) date back to 1880; Forest Rangers (once known as Fire Wardens) were originally established in 1885. In 2016, ECOs responded to 26,400 calls and issued 22,150 tickets for crimes ranging from deer poaching to toxic dumping, illegal ivory sales, and excessive air emissions from vehicles and facilities; Rangers conducted 356 search-and-rescue missions, extinguished 185 wildfires that burned 4,191 acres, and worked on cases that resulted in nearly 3,000 tickets or arrests. The new class joins the ranks of 275 ECOs and 131 Rangers currently serving.

Caught in the Act—Suffolk County

On August 10th, ECOs Jeremy Eastwood and Brian Farrish were on a boat patrol on Little Peconic Bay in the Town of Southold when, during their first fishing check of the day, they found three subjects whose catch grossly exceeded the marine fishing limits. The subjects had 88 scup over the limit and 24 weakfish over the limit, including 12 undersized weakfish. Each subject was issued tickets for the illegal fish. The fish were donated to CAST (Community Action Southold Town), a non-profit organization created to assist low-income residents.

Search at Sundown—Ulster County

In the evening hours of August 18th, Forest Rangers were contacted by Central Dispatch about a missing 93-year-old man. The subject’s neighbor stopped in to check on him, and contacted Ulster County 911 when she found he was not at home. Prior to the rangers’ arrival, local residents located the subject’s ATV parked on White Birch Lane, near state lands. A search through the night yielded negative results. The next morning, the search effort included 68 searchers from multiple agencies, including four volunteer fire departments, NYS Police, Ulster County Sheriff’s Office, and Eagle Valley search and rescue K9, all working from a command post established in Accord Fire Co. #2. Throughout the cloudy, wet day, rescuers searched the Cherrytown Ridge of Sundown Wild Forest, but did not locate the missing man. As searchers were developing plans for the next operational period, Ranger Kenneth Gierloff was putting up a string bump-line (to designate search blocks) on the far side of the ridge when he spotted the subject walking away. Ranger Gierloff ran up to him, calling his name. The man was in good condition, but dehydrated. After an ambulance ride to Kingston Hospital for evaluation, he returned home—another adventure in a long life.
Clichés are a dime a dozen and frankly, in my opinion, are overused. But in this case, “meant to be” became a lesson in my surroundings and how people interact with nature. It came to me disguised as one of my favorite pastimes, hunting white-tailed deer.

It all happened when I had the good fortune to meet a new friend through a writers’ group summer fishing trip. Between hauling in an occasional porgy, I struck up a conversation with the guy next to me, which eventually turned into an invitation to a shark-fishing trip. Hoping to obtain new fodder for a story or video, I eagerly accepted and soon found myself spending the summer catching sharks for the NOAA Apex Predator Program. That’s when I was introduced to Capt. Greg Metzger of Reel Science Charters, who, at the end of the season, invited me to join him for an autumn of archery hunting for deer on the private lands on which he hunts.

Those who live and hunt in New York can appreciate the magnitude of this opportunity. This is especially true on Long Island, where it is often difficult—if not impossible—to obtain permission to hunt on private property. And if this stroke of luck wasn’t enough, I was blessed with new friends who shared the same respect for outdoor traditions and culture that I had grown up with. I guess you could say, “The stars were aligned.”

Prior to deer hunting season, Greg invited me to come out to get a feel for the lay of the land and to help place new deer stands. While on our way, he explained that the property is the back forty of a farm plot that in its bygone day had been used to grow the famous Long Island potato. I was born and raised on eastern Long Island and actually recall with clarity the vast potato farms and endless sod farms—a time when the Long Island duck was a more popular crop than grapes are now.

To be honest, I had this romantic vision of the “back forty” that I think I got from reading too many outdoor magazines. I thought it would be an unused parcel of
some large farm set aside for a government-endorsed conservation easement, or perhaps a spread not being used because the soil was too poor or too wet and swampy to produce any crops of value. I anticipated a vine-entangled, overgrown piece of white-tailed heaven lost to civilization years ago.

As we neared one of the last bastions of open ground in East Hampton, I started to pay more attention to my surroundings. I wanted to be armed with any knowledge I might need about the adjoining properties—were there features they had that would be more attractive to the deer and lure them away from our lot? I knew I had much to learn in a short period of time, so I looked forward to meeting the landowners to get the lowdown on the day-to-day deer travel routes and patterns.

Passing home after home, however, I became more and more aware of the signs of “progress,” and was a little dismayed by how it was closing in on a place I remembered as rural countryside. I thought of the countless farm fields of vegetables or sod that were now roadways, mega-homes and businesses. What actually shocked me most were the miles of deer fencing that surrounded the beautifully landscaped homes to keep wildlife out. The manicured eight-foot privacy hedge that Long Island’s East-end homes were noted for were now being replaced by cheap, and frankly what I consider unattractive, deer fencing.

Despite these disconcerting changes, I was delighted when we finally pulled into a gravel driveway that opened to a significant portion of land with no fence around it. Greg had filled me in on the history of the property and I was happy to hear the parcel belonged to a deeply rooted and well-respected family in the community that at one time farmed this very site. As the years passed and it became difficult to reap a living from the soil, the family found a more lucrative way to make a living, but never abandoned the land, keeping their family heirloom as natural and open as they could.

Right out of the gate, Greg and I had the same idea, and we went to the main house to introduce ourselves to the family matriarch. We sat at her kitchen table in a home that appeared to be a farmhouse taken from a novel; you could feel it was full of life from the family raised here. Mementos and pictures cluttered every wall and shelf, and with a little prompting, we got a lesson about the family’s life.

She told us of the time when she and her husband worked the fields for potato crops. The rusting vehicle hulks we saw covered in vines out back (see photo at right) were reminders of that life, and of Long Island’s history and culture. I felt nostalgic for what Long Island once was, and how that life is now slowly dwindling away, one plot at a time.

We talked about deer hunting and discussed all the eight-foot-high wildlife fencing we saw on neighboring properties. She said she has managed the escalating deer population the way she believed it was meant to be—the old fashioned way [i.e. letting people hunt her land]. In her words, the deer “are overabundant and are trampling her yard to oblivion.” She pointed out the window, indicating a spot where deer kept crossing her driveway a few feet from her front door and had plowed a path right through her precious hedges. She described how she put white string interlaced like a web through the hole to ward off the deer, but to no avail; they simply moved over a few feet and cut a new path.

When we walked the property, we saw substantial deer damage in the cedar grove that was originally planted as potential nursery stock, but was now devastated by heavy deer browsing. We actually saw at least ten deer lying next to a busy road in the only cover they could find. We then drove around neighboring parcels and saw more deer, lying on lawns as if they were family pets.

Everywhere we looked, the damage to vegetation was significant. The driveways on some properties were lined with nubs where Hosta plants once thrived. There were deeply gouged deer trails in lawns and oddly shaped bushes from overbrowsing. You could understand why property owners built fences, but that didn’t solve the problem. And to add insult to injury, the obscure patterns of high-fenced properties in some areas actually funneled deer into smaller and smaller lots, which only magnified the problem in those places.
Based on our observations, Greg and I guessed there were at least 50 deer in an area no bigger than a square mile. And based on the amount of damage we saw, these numbers were too high for the area to handle. Further complicating matters is that hunting has become very limited here. Where hunters once kept deer populations in check, the herd is now out of balance, and not surprisingly, at nuisance levels. Higher deer numbers have also led to an increase in deer-vehicle collisions and greater occurrences of people being bitten by deer ticks.

Wildlife managers have a tough job here trying to implement effective and safe methods to control the deer population. As DEC’s website states: “Public hunting is a needed management tool…Many acres of public land do exist here, but not all are open to hunters…As Long Island becomes increasingly developed, the resulting loss of habitat will continue to take its toll on wildlife and hunting opportunities. It is critical that each hunter act conscientiously while afield, respecting the rights of landowners and other recreationists.”

In my lifetime, I’ve developed an appreciation for nature and the wildlife living here. I enjoy hunting and its sustainable use, and revel in the idea that when I look into the woods or waters I know that wildlife and people live a balanced and fruitful coexistence. I believe that outdoor enthusiasts, including both hunters and non-hunters alike, are responsible stewards of the land and its wildlife, and I’ve come to respect the job and the various tools and strategies that state land managers and wildlife managers use to maintain a healthy and productive balance.

Greg and I enjoyed a successful deer hunting season that year. We were able to hunt on a wild tract in an increasingly urban area, provide food for our tables, and we felt good that we were helping to keep Long Island’s burgeoning deer population in balance with its environment.

A writer, photographer and filmmaker, Angelo Baio is an avid sportsman. He taught waterfowl hunter safety courses for more than 20 years.

The Challenge of Suburban Deer Management

In suburban and semi-rural areas like eastern Long Island, deer can become too numerous because there is plenty of food for deer and there are few things that kill them. When deer become overabundant, they damage cultivated plants, cause frequent deer-vehicle collisions, and harm forest ecosystems. Over time, heavy deer browsing produces profound and long-lasting ecological damage. For information on evaluating and monitoring deer impacts to forests, visit: aviddeer.com.

Controlling Long Island deer populations is especially difficult because state law and local ordinances restrict the options available to wildlife managers. Additionally, lack of hunting access on many municipal and private lands creates safe havens for deer. Nevertheless, DEC works with communities and landowners to address problems deer cause. The Deer Management Assistance Program provides antlerless deer harvest tags for specific properties that a landowner or municipality can distribute to licensed hunters. Deer Damage Permits allow taking of deer outside of hunting seasons under certain conditions, and may allow the use of specialized techniques to increase success. For more information on deer overabundance and ways to address it, see: www.dec.ny.gov/animals/104911.html.

Even without a special program, landowners and municipalities can help by allowing hunting on their land and encouraging the harvest of female deer to reduce populations. People should also refrain from feeding deer, which is illegal and makes the problems worse.

—Dr. Susan Booth-Binczik, DEC wildlife biologist
Perhaps you remember, from those good ol’ high school biology days, the phrase your teacher urged you to memorize: “Form begats function.” This truism serves as a universal observation of the fact that often there’s a strong correlation between the form of an animal or body part and the function it performs. The long legs of a heron, for example, help it excel at wading in the shallow water of pond edges where it employs its long dagger-like bill to spear fish and frogs. Similarly, the shape of a barnacle, which grows in the intertidal portion of rocks situated in the crashing surf zones of the ocean, is structured to deflect wave energy so the animal cannot be easily dislodged. Want to have some fun? With this truism in mind, spend a few hours on your next hike observing the natural world around you. When done you’ll probably have found dozens of examples of how the form on display successfully performs a specific function.

Nowhere is this “form fits function” rule better exhibited than with our native woodpeckers, birds that typically cling to the vertical surface of bark while hammering away on wood. Indeed, from head to tail, woodpeckers are the epitome of the truism. Almost everything about them makes them adept at pecking and pounding on wood.

Let’s start with the tail, which serves to support the bird. Woodpecker tail feathers, or retrices, are quite stiff (especially the middle two), much stiffer than those of a blue jay or robin. This rigidity is a major benefit as the tail serves as a brace, similar to a telephone lineman’s legs against the pole, helping to anchor the bird against the side of a tree. The other part of the anchor involves very strong feet equipped with sharp and powerful claws enabling the bird to maintain a firm grip on the bark. The grip is enhanced, typically, because a woodpecker...
has two toes in the front and two in the back to better grip bark, compared to a normal songbird foot which has three toes in the front and one in the back.

These anchor points serve a woodpecker well, as the bird actively probes crevices in the bark and hammers away wood in search of grubs lurking beneath. And this is where adaptations in the bird’s skull come into play. According to the definitive text on this bird group, *Woodpeckers of North America* by Frances Backhouse, a pileated woodpecker may strike with its bill, and by extension its skull, 12,000 times a day. Even more remarkably, the deceleration force each time can be as much as 1,200g. This is equivalent to a human hitting his or her head against a solid wall while running at 16 mph—with each and every strike. Anyone up to it?

How does a woodpecker avoid damaging its brain and eyes from the constant hammering? To protect the brain, the skull has developed two thick spongy sections, one in front of the brain and the other behind it, which help absorb the shock. In woodpecker species that spend a great deal of time hammering to feed rather than pecking and flicking, this frontal section is larger. A woodpecker’s behavior can also reduce the impact of the blows by slightly changing the angle of each strike and thereby preventing the same impact to the same part of the brain with each blow.

A woodpecker’s eyes are also vulnerable to damage and, not surprisingly, they too have evolved several adaptations to minimize damage. With the bird’s head moving at such speed and then coming to an immediate stop, their eyes could be damaged and possibly pop out of their sockets. To prevent this, a nictitating membrane, sometimes referred to as a bird’s “third eyelid,” closes an instant before impact, keeping the eyes securely in their sockets and preventing any wood chips from damaging the eyes. Similarly, a tuft of short feathers situated at the base of the upper bill serves to prevent tiny chips from flying into the eyes.

And the adaptations don’t stop here. Woodpeckers’ tongues might be the most fascinating example of “form begatting function” that this group of birds employs. The shape of woodpecker tongues is quite diverse. Sapsuckers, which as their name suggests, lick sap from holes they’ve created in tree bark. Their tongues are brush-like to help lap up the liquid. In contrast, woodpeckers that search for beetle grubs in rotted wood have tongues that are stiff and barbed, with some possessing backward pointing spines to assist in extracting prey. Sticky saliva also helps in capturing prey.
Red-headed woodpecker
In contrast, the downy woodpecker (pictured on page 20) is the smallest of New York’s woodpeckers and is also quite common, with almost every forest and suburban woodlot hosting a pair of downies, where they are given away by their downward slurring “whinny” call. The downy woodpecker’s slightly larger cousin—the hairy woodpecker—is also common and widespread in New York. Hairies prefer deeper, more intact forests than do downies. These two species are easily confused. One clue to distinguish them is found in the white outer tail feathers of the two species. A long time ago I learned this clue—that the downy woodpecker has black spots on its feathers while the hairy lacks them—which I put to memory using a mnemonic device “The downy has dots while the hairy has not.” The hairy’s bill is also proportionally larger, so if the bill seems long, it’s a hairy; if it appears to be short, it’s likely a downy.

The most beautiful woodpecker that calls New York home is undoubtedly the red-headed woodpecker. No other woodpecker, or bird in North America for that matter, has the red-headed’s striking color combination of a brilliant red head and black-and-white wings and body. Unfortunately, breeding bird data indicates this species

If you stick out your tongue, you can feel it is anchored to the bottom of your mouth, toward the back. Not so with woodpeckers. Remarkably, their tongues are not anchored in their mouths at all; instead, they are anchored in their forehead near the base of the upper bill. The musculature for the tongue wraps entirely around their head; this makes the tongue quite extendible. Northern flickers can stick their tongues out a full two inches beyond the tip of the bill, a good skill to have for nabbing ants from a distance.

Virtually all woodpeckers are cavity-nesters; most species excavate the nesting and roosting cavities they use. In this way, woodpeckers play a crucial role in providing nesting opportunities for other cavity-nesting birds such as eastern screech-owls, eastern bluebirds, the stunningly beautiful prothonotary warblers, black-capped chickadees, tufted titmice, white-breasted nuthatches, and great-crested flycatchers. In total, more than 40 North American bird species use woodpecker cavities for nesting and roosting. These cavities also provide shelter to several small mammals, including flying squirrels, and even some snake and lizard species.

Of the 22 species found in North America (23 if you’re optimistic the ivory-billed woodpecker still exists), we have 9 woodpecker species that inhabit the forests of New York. The pileated (pictured on page 21) is the largest, being about the same size as the American crow. They easily give away their presence in the forests throughout the state through their loud drumming and “wek-wek” calls that can carry for several hundred yards through a woodland. If you hear them on a hike, look around on tree trunks for the distinctive, oblong excavation holes they make in search of ants and beetle grubs, their favorite prey. While the pileated woodpecker is widespread in the state, the reason the bird is absent from Long Island, despite the ample presence of large trees and mature forests here, is an ornithological mystery.

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Three-toed woodpecker

Black-backed woodpecker
is in fairly rapid decline in the state, and the cause has not been fully identified. One reported cause is being hit by cars due to its habit of hawking for insects flying over roads.

The red-bellied woodpecker (pictured on page 21) shows the opposite trend than its red-headed cousin. Once of a more southerly distribution, the red-bellied is rapidly increasing in distribution and abundance here. In fact, in Ludlow Griscom’s 1923 Birds of the New York City Region, the red-bellied is reported as being a very rare bird, having been seen merely three times in the area, the last being in 1895. However, by the 1960s, the species was well established and has continued to expand its range northward to this day, being a confirmed breeder in slightly more than one-third of the census blocks in the 2005 NYS Breeding Bird Atlas survey. The bird is now breeding as far north as central New England.

New York’s most widespread woodpecker is the northern flicker (pictured on page 23). Males can be distinguished from females by their black mustache marks. A lover of ants, the flicker spends more time on the ground than any other woodpecker. This predilection for ants, which are unavailable in the winter, is the main reason why flickers are among the most highly migratory of all woodpeckers. I remember hiking several decades ago through an extensive, severely burned area in the Long Island Pine Barrens that, due to the wildfire, had a cleared out forest floor and understory, exposing countless large ant mounds. For the next several weeks I saw flickers commonly here, taking advantage of innumerable ants made available by the fire.

The state’s two rarest woodpeckers—the three-toed woodpecker and the black-backed woodpecker (pictured on page 24)—depend on forest fires to keep their populations healthy. Fires kill trees, which then promotes the growth of wood-boring beetle larvae that these woodpeckers eat. Unlike most woodpeckers which sport varying degrees of black, white, and red, these two species are black, white and yellow in coloration. In New York, both are almost entirely restricted to the Adirondack Mountains.

The last woodpecker species to call New York home is the yellow-bellied sapsucker (pictured on page 23). This bird gets its name from its habit of drilling small holes, typically in parallel rows, in thin-barked trees and lapping up the sap and any small insects that may have been attracted to it.

Whether it be their unique behavior, impressive anatomical adaptations, or ecological importance due to their cavity-making abilities, the native woodpecker species of New York are an interesting and important part of nature’s fabric here. Why not spend some time getting to know the species that inhabit the parks and woodlands in your neighborhood?

Long Island naturalist and bird fancier John Turner is a frequent Conservationist contributor.

Editor’s note: While all woodpecker species can be seen in summer, many of them are more obvious in winter months. Woodpeckers will routinely visit birdfeeders, and especially like suet cakes in winter.
The three young travelers began their journey well before dawn. By 8:00 AM they had reached their destination: a hunter education class in Schenectady County.

It was only after I welcomed these students that I learned they’d come from New York City, three hours by car, to take this course. Politely, I asked them why they didn’t find something closer to home.

Their reply: ours was the nearest available class that hadn’t already filled up.

Every year, just over 40,000 New York residents take a sportsman education course that must be successfully completed in order to receive their hunting or trapping license. There are separate courses for firearms and bowhunting, as well as a trapper education course. A waterfowl hunter identification course is also offered; it is required for anyone wishing to hunt migratory waterfowl in select state parks and national wildlife refuges.

It takes a cadre of experienced volunteers to present the hundreds of hunter education, bowhunter education, trapper education and waterfowl hunter courses offered every year across New York State. According to NYSDEC records, there are more than 2,200 active sportsman education instructors.

I am a recent addition to their ranks. While an avid small game and deer hunter, I never considered myself especially qualified to teach the subject. Some friends who are instructors invited me to sit in on a class; their enthusiasm and passion for the outdoors persuaded me to volunteer right away.

PASSING THE TORCH:
Volunteers Keep Outdoor Traditions Alive

By Patrick J. Chaisson

WHAT MOTIVATES INSTRUCTORS

“I find satisfaction in knowing that in a small way I am helping to keep the woods I love safe for everyone.”

“I like to think I am helping to keep hunting alive for years to come.”

“It’s an awesome feeling when you run into a former student who tells you a great story of their last hunt.”

Once the application is approved, applicants attend an eight-hour new instructor training course taught by DEC sportsman education staff. From that point on, master instructors work with those newly certified in sportsman education and guide them through their apprenticeship, which may last a year or two until they are ready to teach on their own.

It’s easy to join this team of dedicated volunteers. You can start by submitting an application, which can be found on DEC’s website (www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9189.html). You will undergo a background check and be interviewed by an Environmental Conservation Officer, who reviews your qualifications. Prospective instructors must be at least 18 years old and possess good communication skills. Hunting experience is preferred, but not required.
I have been with this program for four years now, and it’s made me a better hunter. Every time I teach, I learn something new from my fellow instructors and students. Since I became involved in sportsman education, I’ve honed my outdoor skills and grown as a safe, responsible outdoorsperson.

For me, the best part of being a sportsman education instructor is meeting and working with other hunters. My fellow volunteers are genuinely wonderful ladies and gentlemen. But we’re getting older: a 2015 NYSDEC report showed a third of instructors surveyed are age 60 or older. At a recent regional conference, we recognized several volunteers who have been teaching for 50 years or more. That’s an amazing record of service.

Unfortunately, sportsman education instructors in some parts of New York State cannot keep up with the demand. We saw evidence of this last year when the three first-time hunters from the Bronx drove 150 miles to take our course in Glenville.

Some hunters I’ve encouraged to become instructors are intimidated by the application process, or their lack of confidence in public speaking. Teaching experience is not required; all that’s needed is a passion for the outdoors and an ability to communicate well.

Sportsman education instructors make a difference. By helping new hunters and trappers get the right start, they maintain an American tradition of safe, ethical outdoor recreation.

For more information on the sportsman education program, call 1-888-HUNT-ED2 or visit the DEC website at www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7860.html.

Scotia resident and Sportsman Education Instructor Patrick J. Chaisson teaches courses in DEC’s Region 4.

Chuck Dente: Lifelong Outdoor Enthusiast Promotes Hunter Education, Safety

Some people seem to be a perfect fit to work for DEC. Chuck Dente, administrator of DEC’s Sportsman Education Program, is one of them.

Chuck grew up in Westchester County, where he spent his free time fishing on county reservoirs. He actively encouraged his friends to do the same, and introduced them to outdoor sports like upland game bird hunting and bowhunting.

Chuck has always enjoyed “bringing the outdoors to people,” and initially worked at a County Parks’ nature center where he set up a one-of-a-kind interpretive center. His first DEC job was in the Bureau of Wildlife, Big Game Section, where he developed an “up-close and personal” relationship with black bears. Chuck live-trapped bears in the Catskills as part of a study to determine when bears entered and emerged from their dens. It was the start of a career in wildlife management: with bear, deer and moose in New York.

Chuck now coordinates more than 2,500 instructors delivering free education courses to prospective hunters, trappers, bowhunters, and waterfowl hunters—about 40,000 students annually. The position also fulfills Chuck’s passion to connect people with nature through “Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Program,” the “National Archery in the Schools Program,” and the “Explore Bowhunting Program.”

Chuck’s DEC career spans more than 38 years, and he’s headed up the Sportsman Education Program since 2012. He credits a dedicated staff as “the driving force” behind New York’s excellent hunter safety record; ensuring that safety, knowledge and responsibility are always foremost in a hunter’s mind.

He still enjoys bowhunting, archery and shooting sports, especially when he “can get others involved in the mix,” like he’s done since his youth. He has also passed his enthusiasm for outdoor sports on to his two sons, who are avid outdoorsmen. He lives on a farm with his wife Lynn, who has a passion for horses. Ironically, a man who “earned a lot of respect and appreciation” for bear, deer, and moose through his early field work, notes that horses “can, at times, be challenging to work around.” No doubt he’s up to that challenge.
New Wild Turkey Display

The NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation recently unveiled a museum display and monument at Allegany State Park honoring wild turkey restoration in New York. A collaborative effort of DEC and the National Wild Turkey Federation, the exhibit and monument celebrate the Park’s role in providing wild turkeys for capture and transfer to other areas of New York and other northeastern states.

Absent from the state since the late 1800s, turkeys expanded north from the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania into the Park in the 1950s. Between 1959 and 1977, DEC staff captured 399 turkeys in the Park and relocated them to other parts of the state; 92 wild turkeys captured between 1972 and 1977 were transferred to other northeastern states. Wild turkeys are now found statewide.

Hunter Mtn. Fire Tower Centennial

New York State recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Hunter Mountain Fire Tower in the Catskills. The project, funded through Governor Cuomo’s Adventure NY program, was a joint initiative of The Catskill Center for Conservation & Development and DEC. More than 100 volunteer “summit stewards” greet visitors on weekends from May through October. A contracted crew painted the structure, replaced the roof and metal grates around the tower’s landings, and made other repairs to the tower and observer’s cabin. Originally built in 1909 and replaced by the current steel structure in 1917, Hunter is the highest elevation fire tower in New York—its base is at 4,040 feet. Visitors can enjoy spectacular views of the Catskills. For more information on this and other fire towers in the Catskills, see http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/76620.html.
2016 Deer Harvest

New York hunters took an estimated 107,000 antlered bucks and 106,000 antlerless deer last year. Nearly 25,000 deer, including 16,000 adult bucks, were harvested in the Northern Zone, and 188,000 deer/91,000 adult bucks were taken in the Southern Zone. DEC estimates that nearly half the adult bucks taken in the 2016-17 seasons were 2.5 years or older. Through our “Let young bucks go and watch them grow” campaign, DEC encourages hunters to pass up shots at young bucks to allow them to mature into larger, heftier bucks. We expect the 2017-18 statewide buck harvest to be similar, with a slight increase in antlerless harvest. More information on deer hunting and this season’s forecast can be found on DEC’s website.

Deer Check Station

Rain or shine, snow or sleet, Western New York hunters are welcome at DEC’s R9 deer check station on the opening weekend of regular deer season. DEC has operated the station at Rte. 16 in Holland for decades, providing a voluntary opportunity for hunters to help DEC gather information on the regional deer population. Successful hunters simply pull into the roadside stop, where DEC biologists and others will examine the deer and collect such data as age, gender, antler diameter, and harvest location. The entire stop takes less than 10 minutes, and many hunters have become regulars over the years. DEC biologists and State Health Department staff may also examine the deer for ticks and test for Lyme disease. In addition, there’s a drop-off where hunters can donate their deer to “ Hunters Helping the Hungry,” which provides venison to local food banks. [Note: Local high school teacher and faithful volunteer Russel Lis has been bringing his students to the check station for years (pictured here) to assist biologists with gathering info and get a hands-on field experience as well.]

Safe Fish Passage

Through a joint effort led by The Nature Conservancy and DEC, a newly constructed coastal waterway at Beaver Lake Dam in Nassau County will allow migratory alewife and blueback herring to spawn upstream. Fish passage was blocked when the dam was built. Since these fish are not jumpers, even a small dam can prevent them from spawning. Restoring the waterway will support a healthy population of river herring, and enhance Mill Neck Creek and the Oyster Bay watershed.

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid in the Adirondacks

In July, observers found a small cluster of hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) (Adelges isugae) on a tree branch in the Adirondacks. Staff from DEC and Cornell’s New York State Hemlock Initiative confirmed the presence of the exotic, invasive pest, the first in the Adirondacks. DEC staff has marked an area where they will treat hemlock trees with pesticides to control HWA.

DEC has been involved in biological control efforts for HWA since the 1990s, and monitors its distribution by conducting annual aerial and ground surveys, as well as receiving reports from partners and the public. To date, DEC has confirmed HWA in 43 New York counties. Additional information on HWA can be found at www.dec.ny.gov/animals/82617.html. Possible infestations should be reported to DEC’s toll-free Forest Pest Information Line at 1-866-640-0652.
A Giant Leap

Like everyone else, I have lots of deer pictures from my trail cameras, however this jumping buck was a surprise and I thought others might enjoy it.

Rob Yates
Avoca

It is amazing what you can capture on a trail camera. Deer can run up to 35-40 miles per hour, and can jump over an 8-foot-high fence.

Quite a CATch!

Fishing in Lake Ontario in Jefferson County and using just a nightcrawler, Eric Scordo of Watertown caught a 35-pound, 3-ounce channel catfish measuring 38¼ inches. The fish broke the previous state record caught from Brant Lake (Warren County) in 2002 by nearly 2½ pounds.

Way to go Eric!

Sweet Chickadee

I took a photo of this chickadee in Mendon Ponds Park, and thought it looked nice against the background of bittersweet.

Claire Talbot
Henrietta

What a great autumn shot! Good job, Claire.

Wily Weasel

Here is a picture I took of this little weasel at Belleayre Mountain.

Dawn Bauer

It takes great timing to capture a picture of one of these guys; congrats! This weasel looks like it is mostly done transitioning from its brown summer coat to a white coat for the winter. Weasels in New York usually start shedding in late October to early November and will change back to their summer coat in late February to early March.

Deanna Kreinheder, DEC Fish & Wildlife Technician
Caught Red-headed

I was very lucky to see this pair of red-headed woodpeckers (juvenile and adult).

Elizabeth Truskowski
DEC Fish & Wildlife Technician
Dexter, NY

As a DEC wildlife technician, Elizabeth knows that red-headed woodpeckers are uncommon in New York State. Read “Wonderful Woodpeckers” in this issue to learn more about red-headed woodpeckers.

Early Tee Time

I came upon these moose tracks one morning on the 2nd hole at Nick Stoner Golf Course in Caroga Lake. These tracks were large—almost as big as my foot. I thought I was the first on the green, but obviously not!

Lilka Lichtneger

The largest member of the deer family, adult male (bull) moose average 6 feet tall at the shoulder and can weigh as much as 1,400 pounds. The tracks are usually about 6 inches long.

Ask the Biologist

Q: I found this skeleton just up from the lake at the bottom of a steep rock outcrop on the east side of Indian Lake, NY. It was lying on its back with long back legs and no apparent front legs. There are tufts of light brown fur on the remains of the pelt. Can you tell me what animal this is?—Jane Conger

A: This is a remarkably intact raccoon skeleton. What a good find. As you have discovered, it can be really tricky to identify an animal using only skeletal features. We look at relative size, skull shape, and tooth type, to name a few characteristics. Raccoons' body length ranges from around 20-40 inches, much of that made of their tail. They have both large canines for tearing and wide molars for chewing, a reflection of the truly omnivorous nature of raccoons.

—Deanna Kreinheder, DEC Fish & Wildlife Technician
Mossberg Memories  by Richard Kellogg

My brother passed away last fall. He was my best friend, and also my hunting companion for more than half a century. After Art’s funeral, his wife, Marilyn, presented me with the only gun he had ever owned: a bolt-action Mossberg shotgun that our parents gave him in the late 1940s on his birthday.

Since Art often stored his gun in the milk house on the farm, it shows signs of wear. There is some rust on the barrel, and numerous scratches on the stock.

Hunting is much more than the stalking and the taking of wild animals.

At first, I thought Art’s gun was a strange item to inherit. Within a few days, however, I began to realize that the shotgun is actually a rare treasure. It brings back memories of the countless days we spent together in the woods hunting for deer and small game.

Art was a true sportsman. He taught me how to handle firearms safely and the importance of following hunting laws and regulations. Those were crucial lessons in my youth, and he taught them well.

Over the decades in which we pursued the elusive whitetail, the season sometimes ended without either of us ever firing a shot. In fact, in all the years we hunted, we never did bag one of those proverbial trophy bucks. Small game was another story, however, and we usually returned home with pheasants, rabbits, and squirrels after a day in the field.

In those days, Allegany County was a sporting paradise for outdoor activities such as hiking, boating, hunting, and fishing. It still is.

A local guns smith recently refurbished Art’s old shotgun for me. He amiably joked that the Mossberg probably cost less than thirty dollars when new. I was spending considerably more than that to make the gun more cosmetically attractive, and he asked me if this was really a wise investment. To me, the answer is a definite “Yes.”

You can’t put a price tag on the value of memories. When handling that gun, I can recall hiking through deep snow with Art on opening day. I visualize Art swinging the gun gracefully to bring down a cock pheasant in our cornfield. I can smell the delicious meals that our mother prepared from the gray squirrels we brought home after a successful hunt. The gun transports me back to earlier years and the pure joy of being in the great outdoors.

Hunting is much more than the stalking and the taking of wild animals. The sport is also about the meaning of family, of relationships, and love. My brother’s Mossberg is a marvelous metaphor for the precious experiences we shared.

That old gun will always be one of my most prized possessions and a tangible symbol of my brother’s legacy.
2016 Big Buck Club Awards

The New York State Big Buck Club, Inc. is a private organization that maintains records of large deer and bear taken in New York. Each year since 1972, the Big Buck Club has recognized the hunters who take the largest trophy bucks in the state. The winner for each category receives original art of his or her deer by artist Michael Barr of Corning.

Largest Bow Deer (Crossbow)
Taken in: Onondaga County
Score: Net 210-0/8
Gross: 229-6/8
Non-Typical
Points: 30
Taken by Robert J. Ortolani

Largest Gun Deer
Taken in: Saragota County
Score: Net 178-5/8
Gross: 186-3/8
Typical
Points: 11
Taken by William Stewart

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
NYS BBC, Records Office, 147 Dog Tail Corners Rd., Wingdale, NY 12594
mosbuck@aol.com | www.nysbigbuckclub.com
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