

The author's son Nathaniel "Potroast" Pendley poses with a nice buck taken during the Kentucky early youth season. C. Pendley photo



HUNTER NUMBERS INCREASE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Positive news builds on R3 work of state agencies

■ by Michael Pendley

CCOVID-19 has thrown health and government officials across the nation nasty curveballs for the past year as they battle this horrible pandemic. In a turn of events nobody could have predicted, it appears COVID-19 lockdown measures have helped increase hunter numbers across the United States.

For example, *The Washington Post* reported on Jan. 10, "Michigan saw a 67 percent hike in new hunting license buyers last year compared with 2019, a 15 percent increase in female hunters and moderate growth in many younger age brackets. The state also sold 46 percent more apprentice licenses, a discounted option that allows new hunters to give

the sport a try under the supervision of a mentor." License sales also increased dramatically in Maine, Wisconsin, Montana, Pennsylvania and other parts of the country in 2020.

This positive news for hunter numbers helps build upon new ideas state agencies have been using to expose non-hunters to our sport. Emily Lehl, R3 (recruit, retain and reactivate) coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, heads a program followed by many state agencies.

"When we started trying to recruit new hunters back in the mid-'90s, the department concentrated mostly on youth hunters," she said. "After several years, we discovered a couple of things. One, most

of the kids involved in the program were from hunting families; not really the target audience needed to attract new hunters. And two, the participating kids from non-hunting families had no support network to continue hunting once they had passed through the program."

Although youth programs remain an important part of the department's R3 efforts, most of today's focus centers on young adults. "We noticed an increase in interest from young adults who were looking at hunting as a means to procure organic protein for themselves and their families," Lehl said. Many of those young adults were from urban backgrounds. They didn't come from hunting families and were often several generations re-

FRONTLINE *healthcare workers fighting COVID-19 deserve accolades and appreciation*

■ **Bart Landsverk** ~ *Whitetail News Senior Editor*

My wife, Kay, gets up every morning at 5:30 a.m. and quietly prepares for her day at an area hospital near our home in Wisconsin. She never complains about being a physical therapist and treating patients who have contracted COVID-19. That's her job — a job she has dedicated the past 32 years to performing. Kay also never brags about providing the gift of healing to unfortunate patients who have contracted this once-in-a-lifetime virus. I salute her and her colleagues for answering the call when their country needed them most.

She isn't alone, obviously. Take another example: the kind nurses and staff working at elder-care facilities or nursing homes across the country. We know the elderly have been among the hardest hit by COVID -19. The wonderful workers at these facilities not only treat the virus symptoms of seniors but also spend time talking to people who otherwise have been in lockdown and away from family and loved ones. Those seniors are lonely, and the workers give them much-needed social interaction. That level of caring is essential to the lives of those residents, and the people providing that care cannot be thanked enough.

Thousands of frontline workers head to work every day knowing what lies ahead as they selflessly help the nation battle this deadly pandemic. Webster's defines hero as: "A person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements or noble qualities." Webster's could easily have inserted the words nurses, emergency room staff, doctors, nursing home employees and the many other frontline workers as the definition of hero. Tragic events display the character of a person. You can cower in the corner or face the event head on and forge forward. The nation's frontline healthcare workers have forged forward as they perform daily miracles away from television cameras and social media. Instead, they professionally attend to their tasks with incredible bravery and care.

The Whitetail Institute of North America would like to pay tribute to the frontline workers who are helping save countless lives every day during this awful pandemic. These great Americans make all of us proud. The zeal they show as they save lives is unparalleled. They do not ask, "Why me?" as they help treat patients without regard to their own health. We cannot thank these heroes enough for being the caretakers for our family and friends as they battle this deadly virus.

moved from anyone who actively hunted. They wanted to hunt, not for any trophy aspect but simply to procure healthy food — the way hunting used to be.

To capitalize on that interest, the Wisconsin DNR developed Field to Fork, a program developed by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources in 2010. Field to Fork teaches non-hunters, often with no hunting background and from urban areas, how to hunt, process and cook game. The courses normally span several days with classroom and field settings, including range time, and they usually culminate in a hunt. The program has been so successful that the Wisconsin DNR is encouraging hunting and conservation clubs across the state to adopt the framework and hold classes of their own. "We traditionally see these

clubs focusing on youth, but with the success we are seeing from the hunt-for-food-style programs, we are encouraging these clubs to shift that focus to young adults," Lehl said.

Hank Forester, Hunting Heritage Program manager for the Quality Deer Management Association, echoed those thoughts. He said it's imperative that hunters reach out to non-hunting communities for recruits. "For years, we tried the shotgun approach with large group outings for adults and young hunters, but in the long run, that style is hard to sustain and track," he said. "New adult hunters sometimes felt uncomfortable or lost in the large group setting, and youth hunters from non-hunting families didn't always have the resources they needed to continue hunting."

QDMA has also used Field to Fork as one of its most effective tools in recruiting new hunters. "We've had tremendous success recently with the program," Forester said. "What we are finding is that we need to go places where non-hunters are, like farmer's markets and universities. We set up at these locations with cooked venison and invited people over to give it a try. Studies show that over 70 percent of the population approves of hunting for food, making the venison samples the perfect way to break the ice (and) get a conversation about hunting started."

The approach is working. Forester said QDMA's outreach and farmer's market programs fill quickly. The QDMA week-ends end as a social event with wild game as the menu centerpiece. Participants are encouraged to talk about their hunts — what worked and what didn't — in a relaxed setting.

The program doesn't stop there. "We've found that adults who attend these programs together form their own hunting communities," he said. "We try to encourage that by offering follow-up events and hunts to the entire group even after the program is completed. These hunts don't have to be strictly for deer, either. They might be turkey, small game, waterfowl or upland hunts, exposing the participants to a wide variety of hunting styles. What we are seeing is that the members of these groups form bonds that are extending well past the program itself. They come to rely on each other when they have questions or need a hand in the field."

That strong feeling of community also shows up in another favored recruitment method of QDMA and many states agencies. Hunting clubs are popping up on college campuses across the nation. Sponsored by various state game agencies or conservation organizations, these clubs give students interested in learning to hunt a spot to meet and learn about the sport. The clubs help to foster a pro-hunting attitude and pair members with advisors who can answer questions, loan equipment and offer advice to members.

Even before the pandemic when overall hunter numbers were falling, one non-traditional segment was on the rise. Women now make up one of the fastest growing groups of new hunters. The

National Shooting Sports Foundation determined that in 2001, there were 1.8 million registered female hunters in the United States. By 2013, that number had increased 85 percent and almost doubled to 3.3 million female hunters nationwide. Now, about 20 percent of all United States hunters are women.

One of the main reasons for the increased popularity of hunting among women is the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program. The effort began in 1991, first offered through the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. BOW programs are now used by almost every game agency in the country and offer women a variety of hunting and outdoor experiences, including shooting, archery, bird watching, camping, fishing and hunting for multiple game species.

“We’ve found that these all-women groups tend to be more popular and less intimidating to newcomers than large mixed gender groups,” said Tanna Fanshler, R3 coordinator for the Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks and Tourism.

“In fact, I’m excited to announce that we recently scheduled our first BOW program with an entirely female instructor group as well, hopefully removing even more of the apprehension participants might feel about signing up.”

What do these programs have in common? They recognize that one of the main impediments for someone who wants to hunt but doesn’t come from a hunting background or family is the need for an experienced mentor to answer questions, offer advice or just talk about what to expect or what happened on a hunt.

To encourage active hunters to mentor new hunters, the NSSF launched the +ONE movement during the 2019 SHOT Show. “The intent is to motivate those current and active target shooting sports enthusiasts and hunters to extend the invitation and mentor someone new to the sports they love, growing the sports and participation numbers,” Pearsall said. “We added to the movement during National Shooting Sports Month in August by asking everyone taking part in that

month’s celebrations to take the +ONE Pledge.”

The initiative is working. “We saw hundreds of thousands of people take the +ONE Pledge during August alone,” Pearsall said. “The firearms industry has embraced the movement, and we’ve even seen a number of companies holding events to introduce their non-shooting employees to the shooting sports.”

The pandemic has affected the life of every American. Our frontline workers have been selflessly and tirelessly fighting to save our family and friends from COVID-19. There aren’t many rays of positive news. If one of those rays is that more Americans have been able to enjoy the great outdoors — many for the first time — we’ll take this news with a smile.



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