

# Hunters: Recruiting the Next Generation

By Keith Griglak, Senior Biologist

11 years after observing his first rabbit hunt, the author's son Cody now shares his hunting experiences with his five-year-old sister Sierra.

**Less than one out of four kids in a hunting family are taking up the sport. Thirty years ago, nearly one out of every two children of hunters chose to hunt. Sportsmen and sportswomen are failing to secure the future of hunting!**

**Competing interests abound along with short attention spans and information overload in this age of video games, smartphones and social media. Consider these valuable points when welcoming new hunters to the sport:**

## Don't Use Pressure

Before even starting to recruit a new hunter, be sure this is something that *they* want to do. Don't try to push someone into hunting. If forced, the results are nearly guaranteed not to be positive. Be mindful that your child's hunting career can be made—or broken—within the first few hunts. There are ways to introduce a person to hunting s-l-o-w-l-y.

## It's Never Too Early

If you wait until your kid turns 10 to introduce them to hunting, *it might be too late*. By then, time is already at a premium, competing with sports and other after-school activities. The earlier you plant the seed, the better to grow an interest in hunting.

Include your kids in pre-seasons scouting, checking trail cams, setting up ground blinds, running the dog and blood trailing a deer. *Make it a family event*. Invite mom, dad, nieces, nephews, brothers, sisters and close friends. There is no such thing as too early to start introducing a youth to hunting.

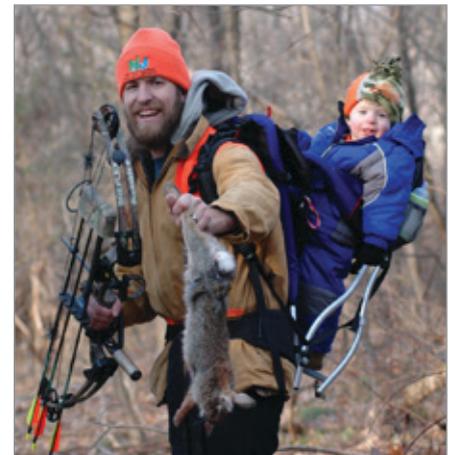
Before kids are old enough to hunt, supervised shooting of the bow or air gun can go a long way to trigger an interest and to instill lifelong, safe shooting practices. Inviting youngsters on short hunts will help prepare them for when it's their time in the woods.

## Choose Hunt Days Wisely

While *you* may enjoy goose hunting in a blizzard or sitting in a treestand when it's 6°F outside, most newcomers will not find this to be fun. Be selective on when to take out a new hunter! Wait for enjoyable weather. Don't make them wake up at 4:00 a.m. unless they want to. Don't make them stay out when the hunt is no longer fun. Let the youth call the shots on when—and how long—they want to hunt.

## Instant Success

Any newcomer to hunting needs to experience success for motivation to stick with the sport. Deer hunting may not be the best introduction—unless there is good preparation. If a new hunter goes afield



Author with then-15-month-old son Cody on his first archery rabbit hunt.

six times and doesn't see the quarry, they are likely to try another activity that is more exciting. Don't force a new hunter to hold out for the biggest buck in the area. Any "first deer" is a *huge* accomplishment, be it a fawn, doe or young buck.

For the attention span-deficient youth, small game hunting might be the ticket. Target-rich environments—whether they are squirrels, rabbits, waterfowl or upland birds—provides them with much more shooting action.

To guarantee seeing pheasant, get in on the action with New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife's Take a Kid Pheasant Day. (See page 25.) Or book a hunt at one of New Jersey's commercial hunting preserves. Another option to consider is buying birds and stocking them on your own land. Except for commercial or semi-wild hunting preserves, the regular season dates and bag limits must be followed.

## It's All About the Experience

Make the day fun! Pulling the trigger should be only a small part of the day. Whether cooking breakfast in the duck blind, having lunch at the diner or sitting around the campfire in deer camp, there is an important social aspect that shouldn't be overlooked.

It's okay to talk or whisper in the blind while waiting for your quarry to show. Kids will have questions. Make it a learning experience.

Youths now spend an average of seven hours a day in front of electronic devices. It's not the end of the world to let them bring their cell phone in the woods—as long as that doesn't become their main focus of the day. Make the hunt as special as possible so that they want to get back in the woods. These are the days that form great family memories.

## Celebrate the Game

Take plenty of photos and videos, not just after the harvest but of all aspects of the day. Simple things like posting these images on the refrigerator door, setting as a screen saver or sharing them on social media will help to memorialize their successes for others to see. Let them be proud of their accomplishments, but best not to force them in front of other kids at school.

There is a powerful feeling from providing food for the family from the field. Cook it the way the new hunter prefers. Jerky, snack sticks and other specialty meats may be more exciting to them than cooking roasts or steaks on the grill. Whether it's a single meal from that first pheasant or filling the freezer by harvesting a deer, young hunters can celebrate an accomplishment that very few other kids will claim.

## It's Not Too Late!

Even though hunters comprise less than two percent of New Jersey's population, research from Responsive Management—a public opinion survey research firm specializing in natural resource and outdoor recreation issues—along with the National Shooting Sports Foundation, show that *nearly 80 percent of Americans support legal, ethical and regulated hunting.*

There is still interest in continuing our hunting tradition! As adult hunters, parents, friends and mentors, it is our job to be sure that we properly foster and welcome this next generation into the sport of hunting.



Cooking breakfast in the goose blind.