

Features

BRINGING HUNTING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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RMEF is working hand-in-hand with two professors at the University of Montana to create a curriculum that not only shows college students how hunting is conservation, but lays out the red carpet to life-changing adventure.

Jack Hanson, 22, shot his first animal, a mule deer, an hour before last light on a late October day last fall. After waiting 20 minutes to make sure it had died, he and two of his friends got to work field dressing and

loading the meat into their packs.

By the time they headed back to the truck it was completely dark, so they let the light of their headlamps guide them down a gully in the general direction of the road. Despite the steep and rugged country, they elected to drop straight down.



A 30-minute drive east of Missoula, the nearly 3,500-acre Bearmouth property is comprised of steep ridges, grassy faces and cliffs that climb 3,000 feet above the Clark Fork River, etched by old logging roads. A series of wildfires over the past 20 years burned most of the forest on the property but left lush forage for wildlife.

Once you leave the access gate on foot, it's a steep climb up canyons and ravines speckled with scree fields and dramatic rock formations. It is home to mule deer, whitetails, moose, black bears, mountain lions and wolves, as well as prime winter range for around 400 elk.

Those fires followed by windstorms and floods left the gully Hanson and his friends dropped into full of downed trees, so every few steps found them hoisting meat-laden packs over or under fallen logs.

"It was brutal. It took us three hours to pack it out in the pitch black, but also I think that was the best part, just taking it all in, looking at the stars and talking to each other about hunting and life in general. It was miserable, but it was one of the best days of my life."

Hanson had never hunted before moving to Montana from New Hampshire for college. He was drawn to the idea of going off-trail into the wilderness to track down animals but felt like he lacked the time and money to do it as "a broke college kid," he says. "It seemed unattainable."

All the hunters he knew had started in their youth, so beginning as an adult seemed like yet another barrier. At the University of Montana (UM) Hanson discovered the Wild Sustenance Program—the perfect springboard into the hunting world he longed to explore.

That course eventually led him to hunt the Bearmouth Property. After a full day of hiking, glassing and spooking deer left and right, Hanson spotted a mule deer buck just as they turned to head back and call it a night.

It was bedded and seemed oblivious to their presence. After sneaking within 100 yards, Hanson sat down and put the buck in his scope. After a few minutes the deer noticed him and stood up. Hanson took the shot, and the deer fell.

“I wasn’t wearing ear protection, so my ears started ringing and I was like, ‘Woah, I just did that!’ A million thoughts came rushing at once.”



Along with a freezer full of meat, this hunt opened his eyes to a whole new world. “Growing up I didn’t really have a solid idea of what conservation was. I kind of just thought it was purely keeping animals alive and keeping wild spaces wild. Whenever I thought of hunters, I’m like, well, they’re just killing animals. How are they possibly doing anything good for the environment?”

A biology and ecology major at UM, Hanson now believes that hunting is sustainable and helps keep the wildlife populations healthy. “It blew me away.”

Just a day earlier, Hanson’s classmate Brienne Shores, 36, was hiking across the same rugged landscape. It was her third day of hunting, ever.

A few months prior, Shores, originally from California, had never even held a rifle, and here she was carrying one slung over her shoulder with the intention of harvesting an animal. She and fellow classmate Elena Thomas both had ventured out with deer and elk tags in hand.

After searching the mountainside, the two women rounded a corner and spotted two mule deer. Shores couldn’t see antlers at first, but once the deer turned their heads her way, she could clearly see a spike and a large buck. They spent the next half an hour trying to sneak close enough for a shot. Once she hit 200 yards, Shores sat down and debated if she was close enough to shoot. She propped up her rifle on a tree stump and waited for her pulse to steady as the large buck stood broadside.

She tried to recall every tip professors Joshua Millspaugh and Libby Metcalf had taught her in the UM’s Wild Sustenance course she had just completed. She knew her window of opportunity was quickly closing as she replayed what the professors had said: Steady yourself as much as you can and slowly squeeze the trigger only if you are confident it will be a clean shot.

She took a deep breath and fired—but her bullet appeared to have completely missed. The spike ran a few steps, but the larger buck didn’t budge. Shores quickly cycled in another round and took another deep breath. She aimed and shot again. The large buck dropped to the ground. “I sat there staring through my scope like *Wait, I did it?*”



Now she would have to draw on her newly acquired knowledge from another key part of the class: field dressing. But as the hunters made their way toward the deer, it popped up, and Shores had to take another shot. It was emotional to kill an animal for the first time and they both shed some tears, but the adrenaline kept them moving, she says. Using the techniques they'd learned, the two women skinned and quartered the deer then packed all the meat and the head out themselves. "Now I know what I can really do," says Shores. "I know

that I can push my limits, which is a really good feeling."

These monumental first hunts came courtesy of the UM and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Several years earlier, Millspaugh and Metcalf had the idea to offer a program teaching hunting and conservation to students on campus. They created a course that didn't offer any college credits but taught the basics of hunting and sustainability.

The two professors had been working on parallel ideas and decided to team up for the project. But after the first semester, Millspaugh and Metcalf felt it lacked the hands-on aspect needed to fully immerse students in the hunting experience.



With assistance from RMEF and a lot of work by UM, the Hunting for Sustainability Program bloomed into the Wild Sustenance Program: a for-credit college course aimed at students without hunting backgrounds that teaches the ins-and-outs of scouting, marksmanship, hunting, field dressing and meat care, cooking and everything in between. It also stresses the importance of hunting ethics, the role it plays in society and conservation, and how to effectively communicate about hunting.

While many of RMEF's efforts focus on getting women and youth into hunting and the outdoors, this program is one of the first to target adult college students in this way.

"College students are at a time in their lives where they are exploring new ideas and interested in testing out new activities. They offer a huge growth opportunity in new-hunter numbers. Providing them with a safe environment to explore hunting as a potential interest at this time in their life is vital," says Millspaugh.

With female hunting numbers increasing and the “locavore” movement inspiring people to seek more sustainable ways to obtain food, this class could not have come at a more opportune time—or in a more opportune place. Missoula, Montana, is surrounded by tens of millions of acres of public lands, set at the convergence of five valleys and three major rivers, boasting unparalleled access to outdoor recreation opportunities. It’s a huge reason why students and faculty are drawn to UM.

As the name suggests, Wild Sustenance is not about trophy hunting but rather about tapping into the self-sustainability movement and learning how to contribute to conservation, enjoy the outdoors and harvest organic, sustainable meat. It is a unique, all-inclusive way to transform how non-hunting students think about conservation and give them a chance to learn a life-long skill amidst their daily studies.

This class is only the most recent success in a long-term collaboration between Millspaugh and RMEF. He is the recipient of the Excellence in Elk Country Award from RMEF for his influential scientific contributions to elk and elk habitat. He has conducted elk research from Kentucky to Montana, published 300 peer-reviewed studies and played a key role in the Missouri elk restoration. He helped start the Southern Black Hills Chapter and serves on RMEF’s Montana Project Advisory Committee. (Read more about Millspaugh in “Elk Dreams” in the May/June 2020 issue of Bugle, page 103).

Not only is Millspaugh a dedicated elk biologist, he is also a lifelong hunter. He holds the Boone and Crockett Professor chair, a prestigious professorship rooted in wildlife management and the North American Model.



Metcalf has always been interested in underrepresented groups and their access to outdoor recreation. For her dissertation work at Penn State, she researched the reasons why women historically hunt less than men and potential solutions to bridge that gap. At UM she is the Joel Meier Distinguished Professor of Wildland Management, which is based around ensuring that students have access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

The Wild Sustenance course will enter its fourth year this fall at UM. It's only prerequisite is for students to have little to no experience with hunting. Millspaugh and Metcalf want to create a safe space where students feel comfortable opening up and discussing ethics, fears and concerns.

"We try to set the stage in a positive way: the students feel free to express opinions, we show respect of the animals we are harvesting, for conservation, for other hunters and so on," says Millspaugh.

The class is also very diverse and made up of more than just wildlife students, he adds. Participating students have majored in journalism, chemistry, physical therapy, business, forestry, environmental science and more. The chief financial officer of UM even took the class last fall. Typically enrolling 20

students each semester, it has also maintained an even split between male and female students, on average.

“We appreciate the opportunity to bring people together that share different views,” says Millspaugh.

On the first day of the semester, the professors discuss each student’s motivation for taking the class, and make it clear they do not require them to become hunters, just to understand and appreciate the role of hunting in wildlife management and conservation.

Metcalf doesn’t quantify how many of the students become hunters by the end of the semester, but rather she pays attention to how they talk about hunting, wildlife management and conservation throughout the course.

“We have these reflection periods where we have the students journal and we have an open dialogue with them to understand where they are and how they are evolving their thinking,” says Metcalf.

The first lecture also dives into the ethics of hunting, which is revisited throughout the semester. Metcalf says that if, at the end of the semester, students can know how to hunt and what style best matches their values and ethics, she has done her job.

Another component Metcalf and Millspaugh take seriously is addressing students’ worries. Whether they are scared of firearms, concerned that hunting is too expensive or don’t want to hunt because they don’t understand the rules and regulations, Millspaugh and Metcalf make it a priority to break down those barriers.

“If they say things are too expensive, I say let’s get you to Goodwill and let’s find you something brown,” says Metcalf. She believes the students don’t need to look like the hunters in magazines but rather wants them to be able to define what hunting looks like for themselves.

Several weeks into the class, students take a three-day field trip to Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front to visit the Boone and Crockett Club’s Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch. It’s an opportunity to build skills as they safely

handle different firearms, field dress and home-process an animal and sample a variety of wild meats. Some of that meat is donated by RMEF employees, and all of it is prepared by a professional chef.



Back in the classroom, in addition to Millspaugh's and Metcalf's lectures, guest speakers teach students about different facets of the conservation world. For example, RMEF's Blake Henning spoke about the role that NGO's play in conservation, and indigenous graduate students gave a presentation on tribal hunting and their cultural traditions about wildlife.

RMEF provided several grants totaling around \$9,000 between 2016 and 2021 for the original non-credit course that Millspaugh and Metcalf developed. The expansion of this partnership started with a car-ride conversation between UM President Seth Bodnar and RMEF CEO Kyle Weaver. The idea was to expand the program with RMEF acting as a major partner through funding and educational and promotional support.

"UM and RMEF had been looking for new ways to work together, and we thought, 'Let's do this great program in a bigger and better way and let's see if we can enlarge it beyond just UM'" says Blake Henning, RMEF's chief conservation officer.

Once the Wild Sustenance Program expanded, so did RMEF's commitment, with a groundbreaking \$250,000 grant to get it up and running in 2021,

followed by another \$150,000 in 2022. This game-changing funding came from RMEF's Torstenson Family Endowment (read more on the TFE in the May/June 2023 *Bugle*, pg. 52).

RMEF grants cover staffing costs, equipment, training and supplies. "It can be intensive and expensive to train someone on all of the facets of hunting, from learning how to shoot to sighting in a rifle to scouting and butchering," says Henning.

Expanding the Launch Pad

Professor Metcalf says RMEF's stalwart support has been instrumental for cultivating what she dubbed the "Full Hunter Mentorship Cycle," which she explains as the process of taking people who don't know anything about hunting and teaching them everything they need to know to go out on their own.

"Without RMEF funding, we wouldn't have been able to provide this full experience from start to finish," says Metcalf. "And that's what RMEF allowed us to do—create this full cycle."

Millspaugh and Metcalf are continuing to develop new parts of the program. A portion of RMEF funding is going toward a collaboration with the UM Media Arts school on campus to build virtual reality modules with Oculus glasses. The first module is called hunter ethics, where students can virtually encounter and react to different situations, including navigating private land, shooting firearms, experimenting with the trajectory of different calibers and other key decisions integral to a successful hunt. The second virtual reality module allows users to practice field dressing and butchering game animals, mess free.

Millspaugh and Metcalf have started building a relationship with Missoula College's culinary arts program to build upon the cooking aspect of the program, given that a primary motivation of students taking the class is to have access to an organic, sustainable food source. With many college students having to feed themselves for the first time in their lives, having fresh, organic protein with minimal expense is far more attractive than a ramen diet.

Professors hope to expand the number of students enrolling in the class by offering it in the spring semester as well, teaching topics like spring turkey hunting and foraging.

“I feel incredibly lucky to be involved with this program because hunting and conservation have always been personal and professional passions,” says Millspaugh. “And the partnership with the Elk Foundation is so important. The access to property, the resources to build infrastructure, the input on what topics are important when we talk about hunting; I am just so appreciative of this collaboration.”

An Idea to Share

Colleges around the country are taking note. Millspaugh and Metcalf are now fielding calls from other universities interested in launching similar programs. People like Arthur Middleton, a professor of wildlife management and policy at UC Berkeley, says the class is a great fit for his goals as well. He teaches lectures and seminars in a classroom and is concerned his students don't have a connection with nature. “I worry a lot about students losing opportunities to connect with the field and these tangible ways of engaging with nature and habitat conservation, and here's someone really doing something about it.”

The State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry has developed a similar class that will begin this fall and collaborate with the Montana students. The funding RMEF has provided has allowed Millspaugh and Metcalf to develop a curriculum that can be applied at colleges nationwide, Metcalf says.

“When I think about conservation models around the nation, this is the winning combination: organizations like RMEF working with universities, and not telling the universities what to do but supporting the university in doing their work,” says Metcalf.

The parcel of land where Hanson and Shores shot their deer is currently owned by RMEF as it waits for a conservation-minded buyer. While RMEF does not seek to own land long-term, there are instances where it will purchase land to hold to ensure its protection. That's the case at Bearmouth, which was donated to RMEF in 2019 and has been open to the public for walk-in hunting

and other recreational activities since. But starting last year, for the first 16 days of rifle season, it will be reserved for the Wild Sustenance program. That helps give students a leg up and an opportunity to hunt their first animals on prime habitat.

Shores says having that access is a monumental boost since some of the biggest barriers to hunting can be not knowing where to go or how to find areas with minimal hunting pressure. Shores saw maps and photos of the property beforehand, helping prepare her for the hunt. And after her success, she said the experience was life-altering.

“Because of personal things that have happened in my life—being put down for many years and being told that I can’t do anything—this experience really upped my confidence 100-fold,” she says. “Being able to participate in the class and then actually going out there and hunting and harvesting the deer myself just opens the door to so much more. It really does change my perspective on life.”

Shores has no doubt that hunting is something she will continue throughout her life. “Just thinking about it, I want to cry. The professors and the other students don’t really realize what a huge impact it had on me.”

