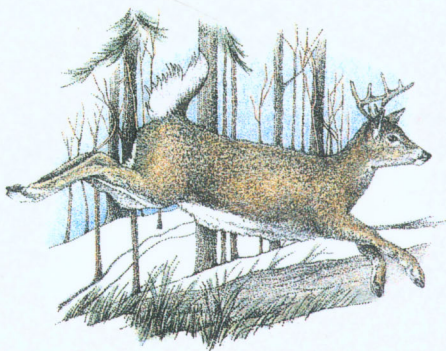


BEYOND

FAIR

CHASE

The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting



*Jim Posewitz*

## Illustrations by Lisa Harvey

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## PREFACE

### *A Story From The Gallatin Range*

The musty smell of elk hung softly in the thick forest. A slight breeze pushed it down the slope to the trailing hunters. Without a sound, the young hunter eased upward through the snowy thicket. He had often joked, with exaggerated pride, that he could “move through the country like ground fog.” Now every fiber in his body was trying to make that true.

Ahead, shadowy forms of elk picked their way upward. The frosty mist of their breath hung in the air as they worked through a jumble of downed trees.

It was a perfect hideaway for elk in Montana's

Gallatin Range. The mountain was steep; it faced northeast; and it was covered with blow-down and old-growth pine that was giving way to a thick growth of spruce. Elk knew the place well, and they took shelter there, secure in the wild tangle.

The law allowed the taking of antlered bulls, and the hunter searched for antlers as he and the elk maneuvered upward, slowly pushing through thigh-deep powder snow. Then suddenly he saw it—right above him, staring straight at him—an elk, watching him! He studied the motionless face that peered through tangled timber. It was close; less than thirty yards separated them. The boy was sure he could see the base of the bull's antlers, but the heavy timber obscured everything else. The two watched each other, first caught in mutual surprise and then frozen in suspended time. The need for a decision was upon them both.

In the stillness of that silent thicket, hearts pounded and tension stretched the minutes. It was the boy's first chance to kill an elk, and years of expectation had been carried up the mountain to this moment. The elk would not move, not a twitch. The hunter needed something to reveal, to confirm without a doubt, the presence of antlers.

The boy's father shadowed the stalk, and the youth turned his head, looking to his father for verification that it was right to shoot. That slight motion broke the stalemate, and the thicket erupted as elk bolted and crashed away through the timber. In a moment, silence absorbed the hunters as the sounds of fleeing elk faded beyond the high ridge and into the frigid November evening.



The memory of that hunt remains fresh. It was a great hunt, and it remains a cherished memory. The richness of the recollection comes from knowing the hunter's first concern was to do what was absolutely right. Doing right, at the critical moment, was more important than killing a fine bull elk. There was a doubt, so the boy did not shoot. In time he would realize that the hunt had already been fulfilled.

Taking an elk is exciting anytime in a hunter's life. To pass up the chance to kill your first because of a small doubt about whether or not everything is absolutely right remains the teacher's trophy. It is part of being an ethical hunter.

The epilogue to this true-life hunter's tale is that the mountain marked that day in a way only mountains, forests, marshes, woodlots, and seasoned hunters understand. In this case, a few

years later, the same hunter took a good bull not far from that tangled slope. As with all game, it was a gift the land gave the hunter, and it is possible there was a connection between the elk passed by years earlier and the elk taken later. The gift of the harvested bull was deeply appreciated. However, the hunters had already been given the highest satisfaction from the snowy thicket on that other November afternoon. It was a magic moment when a young hunter and a mountain looked long into each other's eyes—and they became one.



It is a curious thing that something as private, and at times as solitary, as hunting attracts the attention of so many people with different points of

view. Aldo Leopold, a thoughtful person and the father of American game management, once wrote:

*“A peculiar virtue in wildlife ethics is that the hunter ordinarily has no gallery to applaud or disapprove of his conduct. Whatever his acts, they are dictated by his own conscience, rather than a mob of onlookers. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this fact.”*

Today, there are many thoughtful people saying that perhaps it is time that hunting end. Many of these people are bothered by how some hunters behave. This book is about hunter behavior, or hunter ethics. Its purpose is to emphasize the hunting experience—its importance and its meaning—and to remind all hunters of their responsibility to respect and care for all wildlife.



# INTRODUCTION

The most important measure of hunting success is how you feel about yourself—how you feel when you think about and plan your hunting trip, when you are hunting, when you kill, when you tell about it, and when you remember each experience.

Feeling good about yourself as a hunter depends upon several things. One of those things is how well you understand your role as a hunter. The others are how you behave as you go about the preparation, the hunt, the killing, and the activities that follow. In short, feeling good as a hunter depends on how you think, what you value, and how you conduct yourself.

This book is about values and customs of behavior that guide the actions of hunters. In other words, this book is about hunter ethics.

The ideas in this book will help you on the path of ethical hunting. The learning process will last for as long as you hunt. There will be times when the best hunter will make a mistake. You will get excited, perhaps be tired, or just make a poor decision. The important point is to always make the best of what you do, always keep trying, and always keep improving.

As time goes on, you will find your values and behavior changing. These changes will bring you greater satisfaction as you become a seasoned hunter. While no one will ever be perfect, knowing you did the best you could will help you gain the greatest satisfaction out of being a hunter.

## THE PLACE OF THE HUNTER

For more than a million years our ancestors were socially organized, using tools and hunting. In North America 10,000 years ago, they hunted beaver as large as bear, ground sloths as tall as giraffes, long-horned bison, caribou, horses, musk ox, and mammoths. As recently as 300 years ago, hunting and gathering societies were common throughout the world. We are the children of these generations of hunters.

Today, most people in the world do not have the opportunity to be hunters. Chances are, they never will. How those of us who live in the United States gained this privilege is important. It is important because keeping it will depend on

how you conduct yourself as a hunter and how you care for the animals you hunt. In short, it depends on your ethical behavior.

Although the United States is home to a rich mixture of people from all parts of the world as well as descendants of Native American tribes, the law that grants us the chance to be hunters had its origin in Europe. The exceptions to this are the Native Americans' rights to hunt, which are guaranteed by treaty.

When European kings ruled over land and people, they owned the wildlife, and they granted those they favored the rights to take wild game. As a result, hunting was reserved for the royalty, not the common people. When the American colonies declared their independence, many things changed, and one of those changes had to do with who had the rights to fish and wildlife.

Early in American history, the Supreme Court ruled that property that once belonged to the king had passed to all the people. This meant that wild animals in this country belonged to all the people—equally. This was an important decision. It confirmed that our privilege to hunt was gained the same way as our other basic liberties, and it led to our current system of public hunting and fishing.

As America was settled, many wildlife populations declined. Since wild animals were owned by no one in particular, people were free to kill and sell them. Regulations and limits didn't seem necessary because wildlife was so abundant. As a result, enormous numbers were killed for commercial purposes. Their hides, meat, feathers, and other parts became resources in an unregulated marketplace. It was wildlife's darkest hour, and

national tragedies occurred. One example was the extinction of the passenger pigeon. Another was the tragic loss of the great bison herds.

The disaster was not restricted to the passenger pigeon and bison alone. Deer, elk, ducks, geese, fish, egrets, and all manner of fish and wildlife had commercial or subsistence value. The uncontrolled taking of wildlife went on wherever there was settlement. With the exception of isolated pockets of wild lands and remote parts of the extreme North, the loss was almost total. An awful loneliness hushed our young nation. It was at that point some Americans concluded there had to be a better way. They believed that wildlife could and should be restored and conserved. Those people were—almost without exception—hunters. They began a fish and wildlife conservation effort that restored wildlife to every state in the nation.

There are five important things to remember about your role as a hunter.

First, the opportunity and privilege to hunt is yours by virtue of your citizenship.

Second, the animals you hunt are the result of conservation efforts of recreational hunters who stopped the market hunting and commerce in wildlife.

Third, these early hunters began the restoration and conservation of wildlife that continues to this day.

Fourth, as a hunter, you have a responsibility to future generations to see to the conservation of the animals you hunt.

Fifth, you have the responsibility to be a safe and ethical hunter.

In spite of the excellent conservation record of modern hunters, some people argue that hunt-

ing should be stopped. At times their arguments are based on the behavior of hunters. To keep our opportunity to hunt, we must always remember that wildlife belongs to all the people. The future of hunting depends upon how the majority of people view hunters. These people form their opinions when they see how we hunt and how we care for, and about, wildlife.





## WHAT IS AN ETHIC?

To become ethical hunters we need to understand what ethics are. Here are some general definitions:

- ⇨ An ethic is a body of moral principles or values associated with a particular culture or group.
- ⇨ Ethical pertains to what is right and wrong in conduct.
- ⇨ Ethics are rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular group or culture.

Using these ideas, a definition of an ethical hunter could be constructed as follows:

*A person who follows all the rules of proper behavior in a way that will satisfy what society expects of him or her as a hunter.*

This definition misses something. It is not good enough because it left out wildlife—the animals we hunt. Although some people may not consider wildlife a part of human culture, it is a part of the hunter's culture. Nothing is more important to hunters than the animals they hunt. To be a hunter you must, above all else, know and respect the animals and their needs. With this in mind, the definition of an ethical hunter becomes:

***A person who knows and respects the animals hunted, follows the law, and behaves in a way that will satisfy what society expects of him or her as a hunter.***

This definition has three main parts:

- ⇨ *knowing and respecting the animals*
- ⇨ *obeying the law, and*
- ⇨ *behaving in the right way.*

Each of these parts affects the way hunters think and act. Understanding these parts will provide a foundation for ethical hunting that should satisfy hunters and the society in which they live.

