
Gridlocked

Some urbanites have the will to hunt, even if the way isn't easy—or conventional

By Natalie Krebs

When I moved to New York City to work for *Outdoor Life*, I was prepared to defend hunting. I was unprepared, however, for even casual acquaintances to ask if they could join me in the field sometime.

Sure, you can find anti-hunters, anti-gun activists, anti-you-name-its in NYC. But there's also a rod and gun club full of the crustiest hunters I've ever met six blocks from my apartment, and a 100-yard archery range out by JFK airport where trad bowhunters from Queens and Brooklyn shoot every weekend.

Hunting itself isn't trendy in the city. Or at least, it isn't yet. But the field-to-table movement is, and for all the right reasons: natural food, locally produced and sustainably sourced. Where this trend intersects with urbanites' existing outdoor interests—cooking, camping, that new spot in Manhattan offering archery lessons—there's fertile ground for growing new hunters.

So last year, I decided to see who among my friends was really game to try hunting. By summer's end, five friends had taken hunter's education (a scheduling nightmare here) and I was sick of coordinating. So I stopped talking about hunting and waited to see who would rekindle the conversation.

Two of them did: my boyfriend, Arc, and his buddy Nik. Both guys are in their early 30s and live in the city for their jobs, just as I do.

Nik was browsing Netflix a year ago when he stumbled upon the series *MeatEater*. The cooking segments appealed to him, as did the episodes where host Steve Rinella didn't fill a tag. After watching enough episodes, Nik thought, *I have to try this*.

Arc is a mechanical engineer by training and a cheap bastard at heart. He's also an obsessive do-it-yourselfer who likes to take things apart, learn how they work, and rebuild them, sometimes better than before. He spends his vacations backpacking in the wilderness and has always wanted to learn how to butcher game. He was already a hunter—he just didn't know it yet.

One of our earliest dates involved me lugging a cooler of venison quarters to his Manhattan apartment and commandeering his vacuum sealer, which he owned to package fridge-aged bargain beef steaks before sous-viding them in a mop bucket. I told him about what had been a gut-twisting bowhunt and my best blood-trailing job yet. He listened to the story patiently, then asked how much meat I'd brought back.



So in February, I called in some favors and weaseled the three of us into a winter rabbit hunt upstate.

We spent a Friday driving out of the city, reacquainting the guys with shotguns, and talking through the logistics of the following day. We'd be tagging along with a crew of veteran hunters and their beagles.

After the first flush, we all stop worrying about whether the new guys would hit rabbits. Arc makes a quick killing shot, and Nik follows up with the second. Despite the sub-zero temps, we kick up two dozen bunnies.

Still, it's not an immediate conversion. I hear vocabulary like "harvest" and "take down" instead of "shoot" or "kill."

But it starts to click for Arc. Halfway through the first morning, he mouths at me from a few yards down the line: *This is fun*. He spends an inordinate amount of time admiring each dead rabbit; I can't tell if he's curious or feels obligated to clock a certain number of minutes respecting each animal before stuffing it into his game vest.

Nik is more stoic. He politely declines taking a pic beside a row of dead rabbits and our

shotguns. I know the research—many new, food-focused hunters disapprove of the classic grip-and-grin photos—but forget about it in my excitement.

It strikes me, not for the first time, that my friends will never sound or act like most hunters I know. But that doesn't matter. It's not my job to define how they hunt, just to give them a chance to see what it's all about. Their interest in the meat got them here. I'm hoping the hunting itself will bring them back. When it's time

IT STRIKES ME, NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, THAT MY FRIENDS WILL NEVER SOUND OR ACT LIKE MOST HUNTERS I KNOW.

to clean rabbits, they learn by example and then tackle the rest, becoming efficient butchers as they work at the tailgate and swig bottles of beer.

On day two, we push through thicker cover and wear out by noon, at which point we call it a day and load up, but not before agreeing to do this again over a round of hearty handshakes. Everyone is welcome back. I consider this the last test of the season for my friends, and they have passed.