

Zachary Peglow picks up duck decoys
after the morning hunt.



Young
Naturalists

Photography by Mike Dvorak

Learn to Hunt

Hunting for ducks, deer, and turkey—wild game—is a **Minnesota tradition**. Longtime hunters eagerly show young hunters how to succeed.

By Michael A. Kallok

Think about traditions you enjoy—perhaps eating Thanksgiving turkey or hanging holiday decorations.

Hunting is a favorite tradition of many people. Every year about 24,000 Minnesotans who are at least 11 years old (more than one-third of them are girls and women) get ready to hunt by completing the Hunter Education Firearms Safety Training Program, offered by the Department of Natural Resources.

Learning how to safely handle and shoot a shotgun, rifle, or bow is the first step in becoming a good hunter. To hunt successfully, hunters must understand the animals they are hoping to bag. The best way to learn is to go hunting with a *mentor*—someone with experience. Fortunately, the DNR and its conservation partners make it easy for young hunters and their parents or guardians to find a mentor to help them get started.

Here are the stories of three young people who are learning to hunt ducks, deer, or wild turkeys. With the help of a mentor, you can learn to hunt too.

Zachary Peglow keeps a close eye on the horizon for flying ducks. If he harvests a duck or wild goose that has a small steel band around one of its legs, he may keep the band. Most important, he will follow instructions on the band and report the band number to help scientists learn more about waterfowl.

Whistling Wings

WHY GET UP at 4:30 a.m.? Zachary Peglow, age 12, discovered one good reason: duck hunting. He and 23 other youths joined a hunt sponsored by the DNR, Ducks Unlimited, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. It took place at Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge in September on Youth Waterfowl Day, when only hunters age 15 or younger may pull the trigger.

Scout for a Spot. The day before the hunt, Zachary and his dad, Chip, went scouting with mentor Win Mitchell, a lifelong duck hunter. “You need to know where the ducks want to be,” Win said. The three hunters trudged through muck to the marsh. As they approached their chosen spot, thousands of ducks erupted from the water. Zachary hoped they’d see as many ducks tomorrow.

Place Decoys. At 5 the next morning, Zachary, Chip, and Win headed back to the marsh. In the dark, far from city lights, they saw countless bright stars and the hazy band of the Milky Way.

In a field near the marsh, they dressed for the hunt. To stay dry in the marsh, each hunter pulled on a pair of waterproof overalls called *waders*. To hide from the sharp eyes of ducks, they put on camouflage coats, made of cloth that looked like cattails and marsh grasses.

Win’s two Labrador retrievers, dogs he trained to fetch ducks, whined with excitement as they reached the marsh. Win and Zachary placed *decoys* (realistic-looking fake ducks and geese) in the water near their hiding spot in a stand of cattails. Because waterfowl feel safer around other waterfowl, decoys lure real ducks within shot-

gun range, about 30 yards, or 90 feet—the distance between home plate and first base.

Prepare to Shoot. Zachary and Win hunkered down and waited for legal shooting hours to begin. When the time arrived, Win used a *call*, a small reedlike instrument, to imitate duck sounds and bring ducks closer.

To keep everyone safe and improve chances of getting a duck, hunters should only shoot within range—90 feet or less. This ethical practice shows respect for waterfowl because a hunter is more likely to kill rather than injure a duck. An injured duck might escape and suffer until it dies.

Duck hunters must know how to identify waterfowl species. They must not shoot protected species or bag more than a limit for a certain kind of duck. Hunting with a mentor helps a new hunter learn how to recognize ducks.

Waterfowl mentors recognize species by shape, size, color, and the way they fly. Pintail are graceful flyers with long necks and pointed tails. Blue-winged teal fly fast, and their wings make a *whooshing* sound.

Your Aim. Like miniature jets, a pair of teal whistled through the marsh within range. Win gave the OK to shoot. Zach-

ary shot, but the teal kept flying. “I didn’t think they’d be that fast,” Zachary said.

He had a few more chances to shoot at teal, mallards, and redheads. Between shots, he watched a pair of trumpeter swans fly overhead and a long-legged *snipe* walk past the blind. At the end of the day, Zachary wasn’t disappointed that he hadn’t bagged any ducks.

“Success,” Win assured him, “isn’t measured by the number of birds you shoot.” And Zachary agreed. He’d go again just to see the stars and birds he didn’t usually see in the city.



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Get Started. Check out www.mndnr.gov/discover (Waterfowl Day and special hunts); www.greenwing.org (Ducks Unlimited Greenwings); www.mnwaterfowl.com (Minnesota Waterfowl Association’s Woodie Camp); www.mnduckandgoosecallers.org/youth-programs (Minnesota Duck and Goose Callers Association); www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/birds/duckdist/index.htm (identification tips).

First Deer



Bria Smith and her dad, Tony, drag a deer that Bria bagged during a youth hunt. Like all deer hunters, she must tag or attach part of her license to the deer to show when the deer was harvested. Once out of the woods, she must report her kill to park staff. Then she can take it to a butcher or home for processing the venison (deer meat).

BRIA SMITH, age 14, had hunted deer last season, but she had suffered from *buck fever* (getting too excited to properly aim when a big buck walked into view). Now, this season, she was determined to bag her first deer.

Bria and Tony, her dad and hunting mentor, decided to attend a special DNR deer hunt for hunters under the age of 16 at St. Croix State Park, where hunting isn't normally allowed.

The weekend before the hunt, Bria and her dad traveled to the park for an orientation. Inside the park's Norway Point Group Center, Bria and about 30

other youth hunters were greeted by park manager Jack Nelson. Bria and her dad learned from Nelson where they were allowed to hunt within the park. Bria was instructed that she could shoot one deer of either sex—a *buck* (male deer) or a *doe* (female deer). They were also reminded that they needed to wear *blaze orange*, a very bright color that deer can't see but other hunters can.

Look for Signs. Youth hunters and their mentors then headed outside, where they had an opportunity to walk into the woods with Nelson, who pointed

out things to look for when scouting a place to hunt. Hoofprints, nibbled leaves on bushes where deer have been eating, *buck scrapes* (places where male deer have marked their territory by scraping the earth with their hooves or nearby trees with their antlers), and deer poop are all signs of a good deer-hunting spot. Of course, if you actually see a deer, that'd be a good spot too.

Bria and Tony went to the area where they planned to hunt the next weekend to look for a spot to put their *tree stand*—an elevated platform for deer hunters to sit on and wait for a deer to walk by below.

They found a promising spot with many deer tracks all around.

Watch and Wait. The Friday night before the hunt Bria performed with her dance team during halftime at her high school's football game. She was up too late, maybe, but she was still eager to wake up before sunrise Saturday to go deer hunting.

At 6:30 in the morning, Bria and her dad climbed up into their tree stand.

As they quietly waited, they spotted other wildlife.

"We saw two raccoons and sandhill cranes and geese flying overhead," Bria said. "It was really gorgeous."

Then around 8:30, a doe walked by the tree stand. Bria felt nervous. "I was shaking like a leaf," she said.

But she made a good shot.

"[My dad] was pretty excited; so was I," Bria said. "After the hunt he was bragging to everyone."

Bria plans to continue deer hunting. Someday, she said, "I want to shoot a bigger buck than my dad has."



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Get Started. www.mndnr.gov/discover (youth hunts at state parks); www.mndeerhunters.com (Minnesota Deer Hunters Association's Forkhorn Camp); www.mnarchery.org/MSAA-Bowhunting.html (Minnesota State Archery Association, MDHA, DNR youth archery hunts).



Spring Gobblers

LANDON GRAF, age 14, has been deer hunting since he completed his firearm safety class two years ago. His dad, Doug, who is an experienced deer hunter, wanted to become a better turkey hunter too. So they signed up for a special spring youth turkey hunt sponsored by the DNR and the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Find Turkeys. To learn the basics of safe and successful turkey hunting, Landon and his dad attended a three-hour class. The week before the hunt, Jerry Vinopal, their mentor volunteer from the National Wild Turkey Federation, talked to farmers to figure out where the turkeys might be on the day of the hunt. One gave Jerry permission to hunt on his farm near Red Wing.

The evening before the hunt, the three

hunters went to the farmland but did not walk into the woods. Instead, Jerry tried to find the *roost*, a tree where turkeys gather to sleep and stay out of reach of predators such as coyotes.

When scared, turkeys gobble, so Jerry used a call that sounded like a coyote to try to get the turkeys to gobble. They didn't, but if they had, their calls would have given Jerry more clues about the best spot to hunt. Because he'd already scouted the land and seen turkeys, Jerry had a good idea where to find turkeys.

Hide Nearby. At 4 a.m. Landon, his dad, and Jerry ventured to a spot in the woods and set up a *ground blind*, a small camouflage tent that helps hunters hide from wary wild turkeys.

Near the blind, Jerry placed a *decoy*, a

Landon Graf carries a turkey he shot during a youth hunt. Following the hunting laws, he attached part of his license to the bird before hauling it from the woods. In warm weather, a hunter must quickly register and clean the bird to keep the meat from spoiling.

plastic turkey that resembled a *tom* (male turkey) and several decoys that resembled *hens* (female turkeys).

One-half hour before sunrise, when legal shooting hours began, Jerry started blowing a turkey call. With it, he made noises that sounded like hens to lure male turkeys to the decoys. He yelped—*err-rit, errrrit, errrrit, errrrit, errrrit*—and clucked—*cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck*.


Choose the Right Bird. Landon waited quietly, staying still and listening carefully for turkeys. He watched for toms or *jakes* (juvenile males), the only turkeys that hunters could legally shoot during the spring turkey season.

Toms have a long *beard* (cluster of hairlike feathers on the chest) and *spurs* (sharp, thornlike points behind the legs, which they use to defend themselves and their territory from other turkeys).

Jakes have a shorter beard and small spurs. At 6:30 a.m., a jake came strutting in front of Landon's hiding spot.

"He came in alone, all puffed up, walked up to a decoy, and I got him," Landon said.

Along with the thrill of his hunt, Landon discovered success tastes pretty good too. "It's better than turkey from the grocery store," he said. "Knowing you got it instead of buying it, it just tastes better."

Future Mentors. Becoming a good hunter takes many years. If you stick with it, you might someday be a mentor too. Then you can pass your knowledge along, perhaps helping young hunters begin a tradition they will practice and enjoy for years to come. 



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Turkey. www.mndnr.gov/discover (mentored youth turkey hunts); www.nwtf.org/jakes (National Wild Turkey Federation Jakes program); www.nwtf.org/nwtf_newsroom/turkey_calls.html (National Wild Turkey Federation).

Pheasants. www.minnesotapf.org/page/1000/MN-Education.jsp (Pheasants Forever mentored hunts).

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Find links to teachers guides for this and other stories online at www.mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.