

OUTDOOR ETHICS

Competition in Hunting: Just Say No

Competition in hunting affects both prey animals and hunters themselves.

BY PAT WRAY

In our family, we throw things. Not at each other (at least, not often). We throw things at other things. We throw rocks, mostly, although anything that's heavy enough to travel and light enough to lift is potential ammunition.

And what, it is fair to ask, does this little family factoid have to do with hunting? Just this: virtually every time more than one of us has thrown things, a spontaneous competition has developed. It's as though we are incapable of throwing together without one of us saying, "I can get more skips out of this rock than you can yours" or "I can hit that tree more times out of 10 than you can."

In the hundreds of hours my son and I have spent playing catch, 95 percent of them involved little competitive games. "First bad throw does the dishes!"

It is an interesting social commentary that in those instances when I have been alone, just throwing rocks for the fun of it, I never felt the need to keep score. I was simply pleased with success or mildly disappointed with failure — and I got to define those terms. But when we threw together, the rules changed. Suddenly, success was not measured on my own personal (and very forgiving) scale but was evaluated against the performance of someone else.

This inescapable competitive urge put an edge on our activity, took it out of the realm of pure recreation and into the world of sport. Unfortunately, the same change is sometimes seen within the ranks of hunters.

Although the vast majority of hunters consider their time afield as a gift during which they can take pleasure in the beauty of the outdoors, put food on their family's table, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends



Although this pronghorn buck is not large, author Pat Wray stalked him for six hours on the last day of a seven-day hunt and considers him a favorite trophy. The mounted head sits in a place of honor in Wray's family room.

and relatives, sometimes the camaraderie provides a framework of competition. When the priorities of a hunting camp shift to killing more quail than your friends or bringing back a bigger whitetail rack than your brother-in-law, that competitive urge is fed by the loss of what is clean and pure about hunting.

Competition is certainly nothing new — it has been present in every civilization and culture since time began. But the marriage of hunting and competition is fairly recent. It could not occur until people had a consistent supply of food from outside the home. Grocery stores and meat markets mean that we can afford to pass up smaller bucks because we don't actually need to shoot anything at all. The animals we kill are supplemental — a nice but not really

necessary addition to the food we bring home from the store.

For many Americans, store-bought food has made game animals less critical and, ultimately, less important to our survival. A bond has been severed that once tied us tightly to our prey and has opened the way for competition. The same instincts that altered a friendly game of catch between father and son can also change the behavior of hunters.

Perhaps a self-test is in order. How many times have you stretched the barrel on birds that were out of range? Have you ever thrown shots at running deer or elk with no real chance of killing the animal outright? How many times have you pushed yourself a little harder physically than you should have?



You should consider every animal you take a trophy. While this caribou bull may not be large by trophy hunters' standards, in author Pat Wray's eyes he is magnificent, made more so by the two week float trip down Alaska's Sheenjek River with his son that made it all possible.

And how many of these events occurred, at least in part, because you were driven by a sense of competition with someone else?

The effects of competition in hunting are varied and affect both prey animals and hunters themselves. Removing the best and biggest animals imposes an inverse Darwinian standard on game species that will certainly be reflected in generations to come. In deer and elk populations, the more mature bucks and bulls come into the rut earlier than younger males and begin breeding earlier. Thus, the progeny of mature males are born earlier than those of younger males and are better equipped to survive their first winters. When mature males become less numerous and immature males do most of the breeding, the impacts cascade through generations. The more competitive the search for the largest animals, the greater the impact on the population.

The "spike only" elk hunts that are becoming more numerous in the western states are an attempt by wildlife managers to reduce the pressure on mature bulls and keep the populations healthy.

The effect of competitive hunting on hunters themselves is primarily emotional. It changes the notion of personal success

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into something relative to the achievement of others. Taking two geese and three ducks in one morning should be a cause of celebration, but a competitive hunter might experience a sense of disappointment if his partner limited out and killed three geese and four ducks. A beautiful five-point bull elk rack can be a source of humiliation if it fits easily within the antlers of another hunter's six-point monster.

Realistically, we have as much chance of removing the competitive urge from people as we do their desire to eat. Competition is

part of the human psyche. But that doesn't mean we should allow it to invade every aspect of our lives. We can try to minimize competition in activities where animals die. We can de-emphasize points and pounds and measurements in general.

Side bets, wagers, and (to the extent possible) the unspoken tendency to compare ourselves to someone else should stay on rifle ranges and out of the woods. We don't have to give up hunting with our buddies to break the habit of competing with them. The next time someone proposes a pool for the gobbler with the longest beard, the biggest buck, or the most chukars, just say no.

Pat Wray, author of Corvallis Reflections and A Chukar Hunter's Companion, is a long-time freelance writer residing in Corvallis, Oregon, with his wife and two hunting dogs. He is a retired U.S. Marine helicopter pilot and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Information Officer.

What are your thoughts on this topic?

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