

In Pursuit of WILD PLACES AND WILD FOOD

ARTICLE BY TOVAR CERULLI



Photo by Courtney Bastian



Photo by William Lynn



Photo by Sav Sankaran

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When she was a kid, Hannah Leonard tacked anti-hunting signs to her bedroom wall. In college, she started fly fishing and then – after discovering that wild meat, unlike beef, didn’t aggravate her Crohn’s disease – began pursuing both big game and birds. She now hunts grouse across her home state of Montana.

East of the Rockies by about 2,000 miles, in Quebec, Maude Cyr grew up similarly concerned about animal welfare. In her 20s, she was mostly vegetarian. Then, a stint working with birds of prey sparked an interest in falconry. Three years later, she began pursuing grouse with a shotgun and eating a diet built around wild food.

Sav Sankaran grew up in the central Appalachians of Pennsylvania. When his best friend’s father introduced him to the outdoors, he fell in love with upland hunting. Now, living in North Carolina, he hunts covers that remind him of the hardwood thickets he first explored as a teenager.

For two decades, I’ve been talking with hunters across North America who, like me, deeply value the pursuit of wild food. What matters to many of us, I’ve realized, is not merely the seeking, taking and eating of birds and mammals. What matters are the landscapes of meaning we traverse as we hunt.

Recently, I spoke with Leonard, Cyr and Sankaran. Spread across the continent, they offer a glimpse of these landscapes: meanings particular to each of us – to who we are, where we hunt and the communities we belong to – as well as meanings we find and make in common.

Direct Connections to Food

At its most elemental, hunting creates direct relationships with the animals we eat.

When Leonard takes grouse, she values knowing where and how the birds lived. In this age of mass production and distribution, she wishes more people understood the origins of their food. Like her, Sankaran feels that eating meat should be connected to how an animal ends up on the table. “When I can just go to the corner store and pick up a 3-pound pack of chicken thighs, there’s a severe disconnect,” he reflected. Overcoming that disconnect is especially important to Cyr, who hasn’t purchased poultry or meat in four years. Every bird or mammal she eats is one she killed or received as a gift from friends.

For these three hunters – as for many across the continent – this direct relationship with grouse forges deep respect for them, their ability

to survive difficult conditions and their knack for escaping predators, often including those with guns and Gundogs. When they succeed in the hunt, all three feel a responsibility to handle and utilize the bird in a way that shows respect for the life they’ve taken.

For her part, Cyr pauses to look closely at the particular colors in each grouse’s tail feathers and take a photo that shows the bird’s beauty and serves as a touchstone, reminding her of that moment: where she was, how her setter pointed, how the bird flew. She places the bird in her vest gently. And she takes care in preparing meat for the table. “I think the bird deserves respect till the end,” she said. “Killing a grouse puts weight on our shoulders as hunters not to waste anything.”

For all three hunters, birds are part of broader wild menus that include the likes of deer, hare, trout and mushrooms. Such foods are, as Sankaran put it, “signposts throughout the year,” giving them something to look forward to each season, each phase of the annual cycle immersing them in the outdoors in a different way, requiring a different set of skills.



Photo by Maude Cyr



Photo by Lindsey Dunham



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Wider Webs of Relationships

In addition to connecting eater and eaten, the pursuit of wild food spins a web of other relationships. For many of us, these are accompanied by a sense of responsibility to the species we cherish and the habitats they depend on.

Growing up rock climbing and mountain biking, Leonard thought she was connected to the outdoors. But her sense of relatedness deepened dramatically when she started taking animals for the table. “I think the coolest thing about getting into hunting,” she said, “is truly owning that appreciation and that respect for the land, for the environment, for the animal and everything it depends on.” Powerfully affected by finding a golden eagle debilitated by lead poisoning, she now serves as program director for the nonprofit Sporting Lead-Free, drawing on her marketing background to encourage use of lead-free hunting ammunition and fishing tackle.

Cyr, who grew up near Montreal, also felt an early affinity for the outdoors. But she didn’t have a visceral understanding of nature’s cycles of life and death until she started hunting

– first with a raptor on her fist, and later, after moving to the southern Gaspé Peninsula, with gun and dog. After that move, she worked in schools, teaching kids about wildlife and tracking. Now, she’s devoted to showing people how accessible grouse hunting is. “I want to show that anyone can do it,” she said.

Sankaran, too, was drawn to outdoor activities as a kid and has worked both as a fly-fishing guide and for Orvis, where he partnered with nonprofits like RGS & AWS to make the outdoors accessible and welcoming to everyone. He sees the pursuit of wild food as a way of connecting with ecosystems. “To be an effective grouse hunter, you have to be part forester, part environmental scientist. You have to be in tune with the needs of the species,” he said. “It challenges you to be aware of your surroundings, diving into what makes this particular piece of cover different.”

Chasing wild food, of course, also connects us with our hunting companions, both four- and two-footed. Like most grouse hunters, these three love being afield with dogs. And they love the camaraderie of pursuing birds with other people.

On opening day of grouse season each fall, Sankaran enjoys meeting up with friends who have setters from the same litter as his. Initiating a similar tradition, Cyr has invited friends to join her for an annual grouse camp. And though Leonard often hunts alone – seeking dusky, spruce and ruffed grouse in the mountains and river bottoms near home in north-west Montana – going after sharptails holds a special place in her heart. On the prairie, she hunts with friends she met through the nonprofit HerUpland, where she serves as part of a team dedicated to providing women and girls with opportunities to get involved in hunting and conservation. Thinking about those hunts, she grins: “We all just get together and have a blast.”

Hunting’s Most Essential Story

Like many hunters, these three love cooking. And they find that food presents a unique opportunity to introduce people to hunting and conservation.

Cyr likes to get people thinking about where their food comes from.



Photo by Dan Campbell

She has a passion for showing them that grouse hunting is a sustainable way of procuring wild meat, especially in Quebec's Appalachian Uplands region where the population is abundant. Online, she often posts photos of birds she's taken and meals she's prepared, including grouse poutine and grouse dumplings with wild mushrooms.

A longtime outdoors professional, Sankaran delights in his 5-year-old daughter's curiosity. When he returned from a hunt last fall, she was eager to help process and cook the birds, which he likes to prepare like fried chicken or using one of his mother's traditional Indian recipes. She was also eager to eat them and tell her preschool classmates all about it. Having grown up without an outdoors mentor in his own family, Sankaran loves being able to introduce her to food and conservation ethics so early in life.

Leonard is always looking for ways to encourage others to think deeply about the larger-than-human natural world and their impact on it. She loves inviting people, including those inclined to oppose hunting, to share a meal of grouse prepared like butter chicken, or simply with salt and pepper in a frying pan. Around the table, she likes to tell the story of her hunt and help people understand why habitat protection matters. "That's where we can bring everything together," she said. "That's when those conversations can happen."

Leonard has it exactly right. It's with food on the table, literally or figuratively, that we can tell hunting's most essential story: Eating wild – core to our collective heritage as human beings – still matters. 🍄

Tovar Cerulli is author of "The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian's Hunt for Sustenance." A researcher, consultant and writer focused on conservation, he's a member of the D.J. Case & Associates team. He lives in Vermont. You can find him at TovarCerulli.com.



Photo by Lindsey Dunham

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