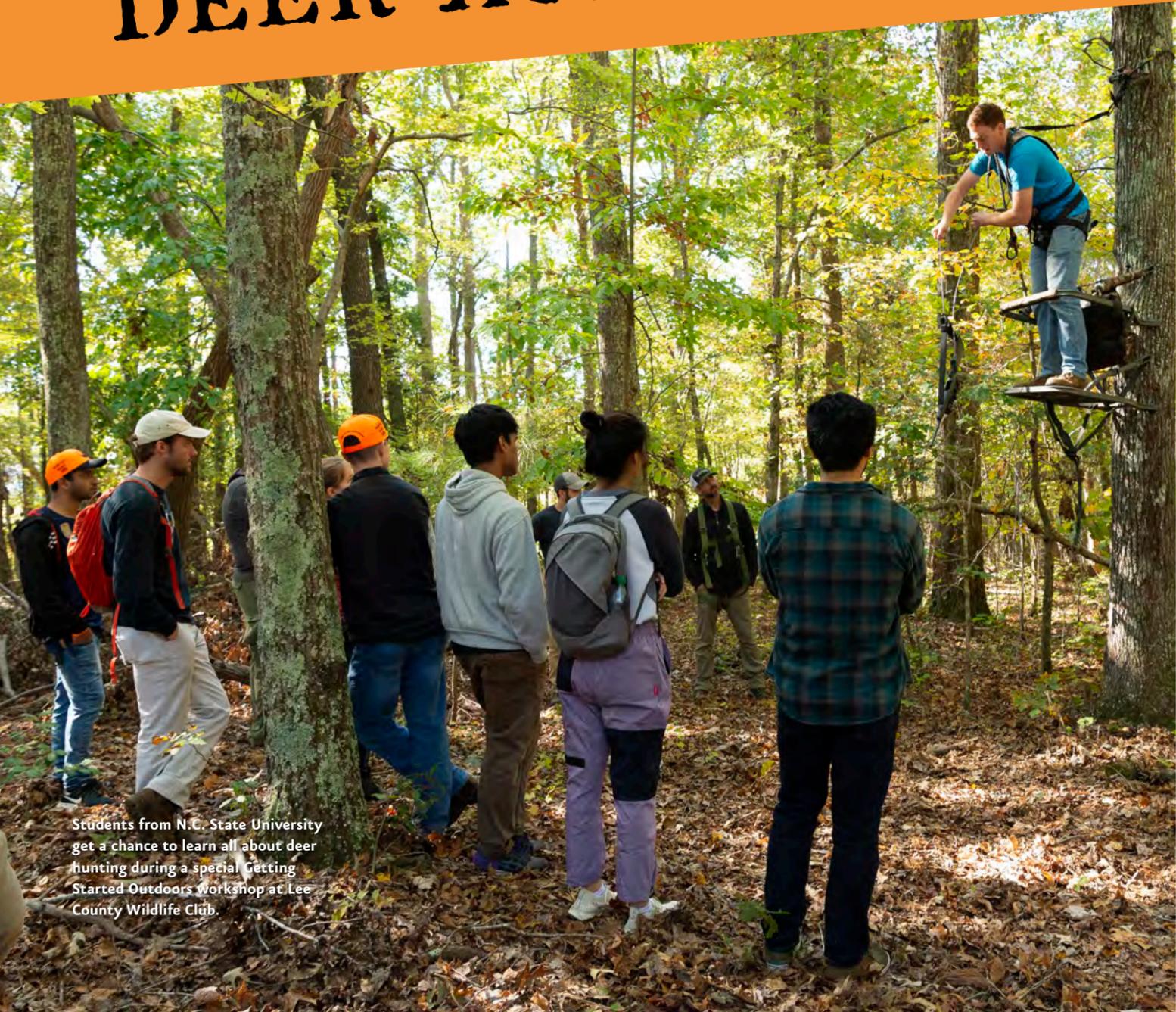
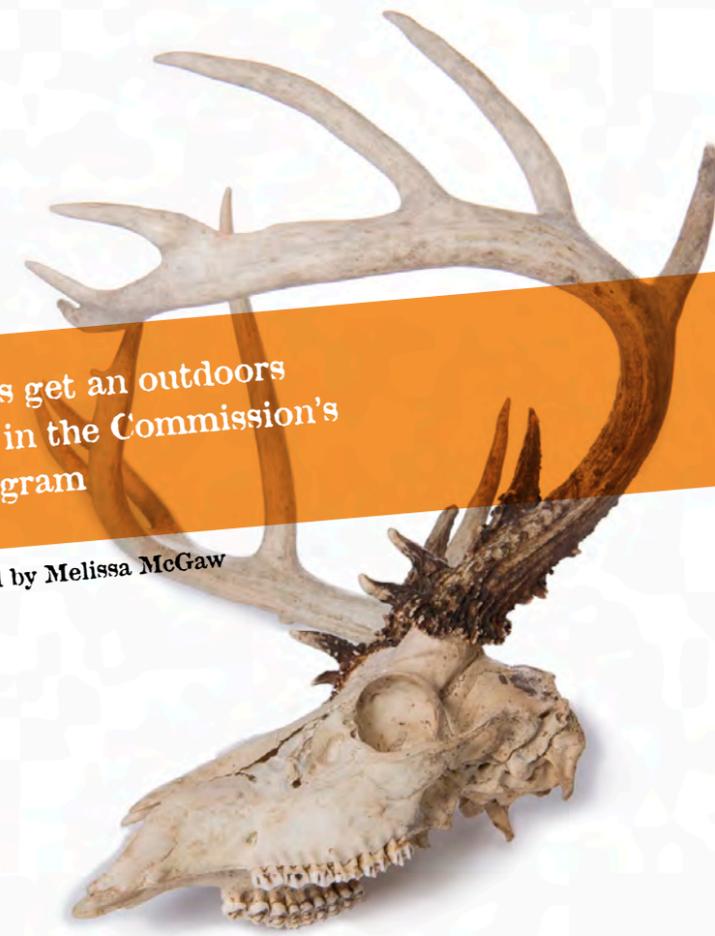




DEER HUNTING 101

A group of N.C. State students get an outdoors education while participating in the Commission's Getting Started Outdoors program

written by Mike Zlotnicki & photographed by Melissa McGaw



Students from N.C. State University get a chance to learn all about deer hunting during a special Getting Started Outdoors workshop at Lee County Wildlife Club.

At first blush, it looked like a typical college classroom setting. Twenty-three students, young men and women of different ethnicities, sat in a horseshoe setting with an instructor up front addressing the assembly. But this class was not taking place on a campus.

The “students” were in a clubhouse, not a classroom. The “professor” was an N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologist. The subject was one of the Commission’s “Getting Started Outdoors” (GSO) workshops on deer hunting, and many of the students had hopes of participating in their first mentored hunt following completion of the workshop.

Following a pilot workshop in 2017, the Commission has hosted several GSO workshops primarily for deer and turkey, offering hands-on instruction for people curious about hunting but lacking social support to pursue these interests. If you are interested in hunting but do not know anyone who does so, the

GSO workshop is for you. This GSO, however, was different. It was only for college students.

“As participation in hunting declines nationally, a light in the tunnel so to speak is growing interest in organic, locally grown, steroid- and antibiotic-free food choices including an interest in the harvesting of local, free-range protein via hunting,” said Walter “Deet” James the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission’s R3 Hunting Specialist.

“Moreover, these new potential hunters being mostly young adults, lack traditional pathways to hunting via fathers, mothers, uncles, grandfathers, etc. and thereby seek out entry level opportunities via non-traditional

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means. That’s where we state and federal agencies have a unique opportunity as catalysts and facilitators, along with non-governmental organization and conservation partners, to educate and initially develop a new culture of hunters.”

The event was made possible through a collaboration of the Commission, N.C. State University and several conservation-partner organizations that were willing to donate both their time and talents. The result was a hands-on workshop at Lee County Wildlife Club last October, which covered everything from regulations to tracking to deer stand safety to safely operating a firearm to processing a deer. It was followed by a mentored hunt in November.

Getting Started

James approaches most of his endeavors with enthusiasm, and that is certainly the case when it comes to hunting. He greeted the N.C. State students and opened the GSO workshop with introductions and an overview of the schedule before jumping into the North American Conservation Model and hunting’s role in conservation.

“Natural resources are not simply targets for our amusement,” James told the students. “Taking wild game through hunting is not the only measure of success. And your greatest asset is persistence, along with a profound respect for wild things and wild places.”

After short presentations on North Carolina laws and regulations by Master Officer Richard Rains, Guy Gardner of The New Hill Mentoring Program gave a talk on basic facts and tactics for new deer hunters. Guy and wife Judy would later cook a collection of venison dishes for lunch.

Earlier, the students had counted off in threes, so each group assembled and moved on to presentations and discussions about hunting stand types and techniques, basic gear, hunting scenarios, firearm safety and archery range demonstrations. I decided to wander the grounds to see the various stations.

At the gear station, guides Eric Jones of Raleigh and Ed Hancock of Caswell County had a spread of equipment on a table and covered topics ranging from first aid kits to satellite phones to knife sharpeners to smartphone apps like onX (a GPS mapping tool for outdoors enthusiasts).

At the hunting stand location, Back Country Hunters and Anglers volunteers Andy Tomaszewski and Evan Trebilcock along with Commission Hunter

Education Instructor Kevin Crabtree were demonstrating the different tree stands and blinds available. While the ladder stand and ground blinds were somewhat familiar (and pedestrian) to most, the portable climbing tree stands drew audible feedback due to their simple-yet-ingenious use of the hunter’s weight to stabilize the stand as one climbed the trunk of a tree. After the air horn sounded the rotation to a new station, I asked one student about how he got here.

“Torey came to speak at the National Parks Club [at N.C. State], which I am a part of, and I’ve always been an outdoors-focused person,” said Keegan O’Connell, a junior from Raleigh majoring in Horticulture. “I have done some fly-fishing. Hunting is something my family hasn’t necessarily done, but it is something I’m interested in.”



First-time hunters and mentors pose before going afield for the first time at the Jordan Lake Depot as part of a Getting Started Outdoors workshop.

“Hunting has always been one of those things where I’m not against doing it, I just don’t know where to start,” said Jackie Hausle, a graduate student in Forestry at N.C. State.

N.C. State graduate student Torey Vayer helped organize the event. A second-year master’s student studying under Dr. Lincoln Larson, part of her master’s project was organizing a large, nationwide survey of college students to understand their thoughts about hunting, to see how many have hunted before and how many think they may want to try hunting in the future. She was able to help organize the GSO through Larson’s joint grant between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) that allows universities across the country to put on hunting workshops for first-time students.



Walter “Deet” James, center, the Commission’s R3 hunting specialist, directs hunters and mentors to their ground blinds previously set up near Jordan Lake.



Clockwise from left: N.C. State students get a tutorial in bowhunting during the Getting Started Outdoors workshop. Josh Jernigan, shooting sports coordinator for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, helps Chelsea Li as she prepares to shoot a firearm for the first time. Jernigan goes over the results with students after they fired at deer silhouette targets on the range.



“That was incredible! It kicked back. The first time it scared me, but now I’m used to it. I really like it.”

O’Connell said that he was surprised to see so many volunteers at the workshop. He thought the tree stand demo was “really cool” because he didn’t really know there were so many different options.

“I didn’t really know what people did. I thought maybe they only put up permanent stands,” he said.

The next stop for this group was the archery and rifle range. The archery demonstration was headed up by Conner Mayes and Andrew Howell, both with BCHA. They went over the basics of bow hunting and demonstrated recurve and compound bows. Josh Jernigan, the shooting sports coordinator for the Commission, coordinated the rifle range portion. He started with a firearm safety talk and then had the students do a simple exercise to determine which of their eyes was dominant for aiming purposes. Then, assisted by experienced shooters, a group of four students shot .243 caliber rifles at a target 50 yards down range, and then another group shot the rifles at another target.

As a hunter, shooter and father, it never gets old watching first-timers experience shooting. The pure joy and empowerment on the faces of these young adults was incredible. A couple of students chose not to shoot, and that’s fine too. Only a couple of students had shot a firearm prior to this station; some had never seen one.

Chelsea Li, a sophomore from China majoring in Wildlife Science, signed up for the workshop because “I wanted to find out about hunting for myself.”

After finishing her rounds on the range and checking her target, Li said with a quiet laugh, “That was incredible! It kicked back. The first time it scared me, but now I’m used to it. I really like it.”

“That was exciting, but pretty nerve-wracking,” said Zafir Alam, a fifth-year Biology major and another first-time shooter. “I may have been a little too eager.”

Watching the pre-lunch rifle range activity was Larson, an assistant professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management in the College of Natural Resources at N.C. State. He spoke on the “big picture” aspect of the workshop.

“For a century, conservation in the U.S. has been funded on the backs of hunters and anglers,” Larson said. “It’s been a great system but the problem is that we have fewer and fewer hunters. The system of funding is crumbling. So state agencies and the Fish and Wildlife Service are trying to figure what to do about it. There are two options. One is to broaden the base of existing hunters by recruiting individuals from nontraditional hunting populations. Those are typically people who are not white, who do not live in rural areas

and who are not male. The other mechanism is to change the funding scheme for conservation.”

So how do you change the face of hunting? Larson pointed to many programs making an impact, like Becoming an Outdoors Woman, efforts to get minority groups connected to hunting and the locavore food angle.

“The one place we’ve come to realize all those different groups are interacting in the same place is on college campuses,” he said.

Of all the activities of the day, lunch was the unanimous favorite of every student I talked to. Guy and Judy Gardner, two of the most active hunting mentors and dedicated conservationists in the state, cooked a veritable venison buffet for the students and volunteers. An open kitchen allowed students to watch or help while Guy, Judy and friend Laura Elliott prepared chili, meatballs, jalapeno poppers and other dishes with a venison base (except the bean salad). I talked to graduate student Jackie Hausle during lunch about why she came to the event.



Judy Gardner looks on as an N.C. State student tenderizes some venison prior to cooking it for lunch. A variety of venison dishes proved to be a favorite part of the workshop for the students.

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“I was in the process of learning to bow hunt with my stepdad, but then he and my mom got divorced, but I was really into it,” she said. “I did my undergrad in Wildlife at N.C. State and they always talked about how good it is for conservation. I don’t eat meat if I don’t know where it came from, so most of it is game from friends, so it would be nice to be able to get that myself.”

The afternoon session continued with more hands-on demonstrations, including pre- and post-season scouting, game recovery and participant shooting practice. It concluded with all participants attending “Deer Processing 101,” where a quartered deer was broken down for the freezer and anyone who wanted venison went home with some.

“Should these new hunters decide to pursue hunting seriously following the GSO, it is but one facet of the original intent,” James said. “Equal and or even greater wins include the development of future conservation stewards, a better understanding of the role that hunting plays in society, discovery of the intimate connection to food acquired through hunting and a deep respect and admiration for wild things and wild places.”

Time for the Hunt

On the morning of Nov. 16, about a dozen of the students who participated in the GSO arrived at the Commission’s relatively new Jordan Lake Depot. By permit, James had procured access to Forest Service land near Jordan Lake. Earlier, James, a colleague and conservation partners had scouted the land and positioned 12 ground blinds for the hunters and their mentors, careful to account for safe zones of fire due to no stand elevation.

Students arrived at 10 a.m. for check-in. After introductions, a pre-hunt overview covering shot placement, what to look for, trigger safety, tagging and field dressing were discussed. A Commission wildlife officer went over laws and regulations and took questions. At noon, venison chili was served. Afterward, blinds logistics and safety were discussed, as well as basic “do’s and don’ts.” Students were then paired with a mentor, went over a firearm review and headed to their stand sites.

I wish I could report a bountiful harvest. Despite the best efforts of James and his crew, only a few groups saw deer and two shots were fired, both missing. It’s not surprising on several fronts. Wild turkeys tend to ignore newly-placed ground blinds, whereas deer act like someone moved the furniture in their living room. Off-hand shots while experiencing your first case of “buck fever” was probably a factor as well. One clear factor was that sometimes deer were

Opposite: Students watch a quartered deer get butchered into usable table-ready portions; some students took some home afterward. Ground blinds are used during the mentored hunt because they allow a hunter and mentor to sit hidden and safely. Bottom: Walter “Deet” James presents at the Commission’s Jordan Lake Depot before hunters go afield. Top: Guy Gardner goes over some details before students take to the woods.

browsing or traveling in areas that were deemed an unsafe zone of fire and safety ruled out a shot.

As the hunters and mentors filed back in the Depot following the hunt, I heard that O’Connell was one of the hunters who pulled their trigger. The disappointment was etched in his face and his voice was slow and measured.

“I’m very appreciative of the experience,” he said, staring at the concrete floor. “It was good, we saw a lot of does. We saw five. I took a shot and we could not find blood. Overall, it was great. I’m just appreciative of the experience and all the willing people who were here to make it happen.”

Missing a shot is part of hunting. Not finding blood meant a clean miss, which is infinitely better than a bad hit. My hat is off to O’Connell and all the other students who got out of their comfort zones to follow up and try something so foreign to so many. Hopefully, with the help of all the volunteers, James, Larson and others, a few seeds were planted over the course of this GSO, and that some hunters grow out of them.

“Whether these students ultimately decided to hunt or not, the availability of opportunities for them to further educate themselves on hunting, including its many benefits, should be as readily available to them as traditional mentors were to us,” James said. “In fact, none of this, in whole or part, can be easily accomplished without the passion, willingness and support from the broader conservation community, including you if you currently are, or have been, a passionate hunter in North Carolina or elsewhere.” ♦

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