

Girls Just Want to Have Guns

By Hayley Mick

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With her manicured nails, Prada heels and slim 5-foot 9-inch figure, Kelly Miller can hold her own at any cocktail party.

But this week the mother of four swapped her chai lattes for a Winchester rifle, matched wits against the wilds of Northern Alberta -- and caught a doe in the crosshairs for the first time.

"I am really not sure who was more scared," she said in a text message from the bush. "Me or her."

"*Sex and the City* meets camo" is how the 31-year-old occupational health inspector describes herself. But, she admits, that's "not exactly the stereotype of what a hunter looks like."

Or is it?

Alarmed by the decline of hunting's popularity across North America, hunting organizations in Canada are wooing new species of sportsman rarely encountered in the bush: kids, women and the elusive city slicker.

The recruitment effort surfaced in Quebec last week.

The province's hunting and fishing federation has launched a \$150,000 campaign to encourage urbanites to step out of their condos, pick up a weapon and head for the wilderness.

"Hike and grocery shop at the same time," read the bold-letter newspaper advertisements, along with the messages: "Eat organic" and "Popular for the last 3 million years."

The message has been spreading across Canada in recent years: The Winnipeg-based Delta Waterfowl's website boasts a slick video of giggling young women blasting ducks out of the sky. An ethnically diverse bunch of camouflage-clad doctors and teachers beam from the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters' recent ad campaign. And hunting groups from PEI to Vancouver Island are offering women-only courses on how to take an animal from forest to table - recipes included.

A report by the B.C. government published last year had more than 30 recommendations on how to recruit new hunters, including hiring a publicist to promote the sport as "a cool thing to do."

Much of these campaigns emphasize hunting's softer side. It's depicted not as a murderous activity, but as good exercise, a source of organic protein, and something that helps with conservation and fosters respect for nature.

The push comes at a time when the overall number of hunters in the United States has dropped significantly from 1996 to 2006, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife services. Several Canadian provinces have experienced similar trends, particularly British Columbia, which has seen a drop of about 20 per cent since 1981.

Hunting advocates cite a number of reasons for the decline, including the faltering economy, rising gas prices, stricter gun laws, the high cost of hunting licences and the influx of immigrants who may not have a hunting tradition. But some also point to mediocre public relations, which hasn't done much to combat the stereotype of hunters as gun-toting rednecks who shoot for a thrill.

"It's a miserable failure to communicate," sighs Randall Eaton, a researcher and hunting advocate whose latest book, *Why Hunters Save the World*, is due out next year. "They were the original conservationists. But when it comes to being good publicists and promoters of what they do ... they're failing."

It's too early to tell whether these new recruitment campaigns are working, government officials say. But Patti MacAhonic, executive director of the B.C. Wildlife Federation, says the women-only outdoor programs have skyrocketed in recent years. This year's annual camp, where about 115 women learned to shoot and skin game, was so popular there was a 20-person waiting list.

It's a far cry from when she started hunting almost 20 years ago, as a recently divorced mother of three who needed a cheap way to feed her family. Other women, she says, often turned up their noses. Once, when a female friend was visiting from the city, Ms. MacAhonic skinned a grouse after wringing its neck. "She was horrified," she said.

But with the increasing visibility of female hunters, such as Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, those attitudes are changing, Ms. MacAhonic says.

"I think it's ... showing people the benefits and what it's really all about," she says. "I'm feeding my family meat that doesn't have hormones. It's all natural, less fat. It's just a healthier choice."

Kelly Semple, executive director of the Hunting for Tomorrow Foundation, a coalition of hunting, fishing and trapping organizations in Alberta, says women make up the fastest-growing segment of hunters in Alberta.

Many aren't looking to tag along with their husbands, she says, but are planning weekend trips with girlfriends. Among five female beginners who went on a duck hunt last week were a police administrator, a banker, an accountant and a university student.

A recent graduate of the Hunting for Tomorrow Foundation's women's program was Ms. Miller, who grew up watching her father hunt, then accompanied her boyfriend on his trips before deciding earlier this year that she wanted in on the action.

This week, armed with the proper accreditation, she headed out into the bush determined to bag her first deer. On Wednesday, heart pounding as she stared down the scope at a doe grazing in a field, she had her first opportunity.

"I am sure both the deer and me had the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights look as time stood still," she wrote in her message. "She began to move - bolt, actually, and I was not sure of my shot so I said 'I can't' and bowed out. As an ethical hunter I know my skill and limits, and I want to make sure I don't make a mistake."

After that experience, however, she's still determined to make her first kill. Her desire to hunt has more to do with the experience than the food, she says.

"It's this heart-stopping, 'Omigod, you see me and I see you - what's next?' " she says. "I really want the sport of it, not just filling my freezer."

That's why, some people say, the recent ad campaigns promoting hunting's eco-conscious virtues are missing the mark.

"Yeah, sure, I love to eat wild game, but that isn't really why I hunt; and it's not really why a lot of people I know hunt," says Bob Scammell, who has hunted for 60 years and whose hunting column appears regularly in the *Alberta Outdoorsman* and the *Red Deer Advocate*.

"I love to go back to the country where I grew up. I love to see my dog work. I love the exercise. ... If we happen to get a partridge, they are great delicacies which I relish very much. But they're not going to feed my family for very long or anything like that."

Similarly, Dr. Eaton says that hunting organizations should be promoting how hunting helps to develop better people.

"When a creature dies so you might live, it teaches you on an emotional and spiritual level that life is interdependent," he says. "It gets us out of ourselves and it connects us with the Earth and the creatures. And that engenders respect."

But respect from the guys?

That's up for debate, says Ms. Miller. Like many female hunters, she hears one question when she turns up in hunting shops: "Where's your husband?"

Those guys had better get used to a new type of hunter in the woods, she says.

"Just wait until I get pink camo out there, baby."