Citizen Science: The Great Backyard Bird Count

By Dr. Charles R. Berry Jr.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a 4-day, citizen-science event to create a snapshot of the bird community in North America. News about this event, now in its 13th year, claimed that “Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts...takes as little as 15 minutes on one day...free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds.”

So, Mary Lou and I participated for the first time and discovered that indeed it was free and fun. Easy? Well, it was - after we fixed a few things. We learned that we couldn’t identify birds as well as we thought, that the little critters don’t sit still very long, and that our windows needed washing.

What is citizen science?

Citizen science is a term used to describe non-scientist volunteers performing research tasks such as observation and measurement. Citizen science has grown immensely in the last 20 years (Box 1).

We wanted to contribute to a citizen-science bird count because we thought we were “birders.” Our feeders and water supply brings birds to our yard, which is certified as backyard wildlife habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

The great bird count web site gave us simple instructions, identification help, data sheets, and data analysis. On the first morning, we thought we were ready.

Our Science Journal

Friday February 18: The birds were coming to our feeders. We could generally identify nuthatches, finches and sparrows, but what finch did we have - purple, house, gold. Which woodpecker and which sparrow? Ugh! We were not ready to participate in the great bird count after all.

We spent a good part of the day attending to our shortcomings and discovered that indeed it was free and fun. Easy? Well, it was - after we fixed a few things. We learned that we couldn’t identify birds as well as we thought, that the little critters don’t sit still very long, and that our windows needed washing.

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We spent a good part of the day attending to our shortcomings as citizen ornithologists. And, I was thankful that the day was sunny and warm as I washed the kitchen window (photo of House finches at the feeder was taken through clean windows).

We looked through our bird books and found two good internet sites. Cornell Ornithology Laboratory, one of the co-sponsors of the bird count, has a wonderful web site that shows pictures of similar species in side-by-side comparison that bring out the color, size, patterns and shape features that helped train out eye to identify each species.

An impressive site for South Dakota birds is titled “South Dakota Birds and Birding.” The owner of the site, Terry Sohl writes, “The website started as a simple place to display some of my photos. As you can see, it’s evolved somewhat since then.”
River and other areas where ducks and geese congregate.

Hunting for deer and other big game, except for turkeys, is prohibited from roads and right-of-ways.

The GF&P biological staff has not made a recommendation on the commission’s proposal to extend the lead ban to roads and right-of-ways. Tony Leif, GF&P Wildlife Division director, said the staff will study and discuss the issue in order to provide an analysis for the commission prior to its vote next month.

Basically, this proposal initiates a conversation,” Leif said. “The commission wanted to get additional input on the petition by Mr. Vanderploeg.”

Commissioner chairman Jeff Olson of Rapid City said the action by the commission Thursday simply started a month of consideration of Vanderploeg’s idea.

“I think it is worth exploring and thus the main reason to accept his petition,” Olson said. “We will see what the public thinks and also what the department comes up with as how enforceable it would be.”

Mark Blote, an owner at First Stop Guns in Rapid City, said Friday that some hunters will oppose the proposal because they don’t want to shoot steel shot, the most common lead alternative, in certain shotguns for fear of barrel damage. Steel and other lead alternatives also are difficult to get in certain loads and shotgun gauges and tend to be more expensive than lead.

“I think it would put a burden on some of the fellows who road hunt, because they’re not going to be able to use all the guns they could use before,” Blote said. “If they show there’s a lot of problems with shooting lead from roads, I could understand. But I don’t think they have that. I think most road hunters would probably not want to have the ban.”

Blote said he also worries that a lead ban for roads and right-of-ways could be another step toward banning lead shot totally.

“I’m concerned that this would be the next step for a non-tox regulation statewide,” he said.

Vanderploeg likes that idea as well. Over time, he wants to see all lead banned for hunting, including rifle bullets. He prefers copper bullets to lead, which are more likely to fragment and taint meat.

Vanderploeg said improvements in steel shot have made it competitive with lead in price and performance. He requires all those who hunt his property, for big game or birds, to shoot non-toxic bullets or shot.

“The result has been that the hunters still come to my place, all those who hunt his property, for big game or birds, to shoot lead,” he said.

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“The result has been that the hunters still come to my place, gladly,” he said.
Executive Director’s Update

by Chris Hesla

The recent proposal by a landowner to the GF&P Commission (see accompanying story in this issue) to ban lead shot from road and Right of Ways (ROWs) hunting has opened many old wounds and is sparking much of the same debates. Early in the 80’s, many sportsmen/women fought over the decision to require steel shot when hunting waterfowl in SD. The steel shot debate continues today and has sparked much interest in the recent proposal. I believe the steel verses lead shot issue is different than in the 80’s because of the commercially manufactured loads and performance of modern shot shells.

Let me clarify My Personal Opinion, not the opinion or stance of SDWF or the Camo-Coalition. I gave up using lead shot 15 years ago, I only shoot steel shot for all my bird hunting. I hunt on private and public land and did not want to have to worry about the shot I have on my person or in my vehicle. I do not worry about taking a shot at passing waterfowl as I am upland bird hunting. I only worry about the shot size. At the time it was my personal choice and I do not regret it. I do not think anyone can argue against the toxicity of lead in the environment or to the quarry you are hunting. Its hazards have been proven many times in valid studies.

The interesting segment of the proposal currently being considered by the Commission is it only addresses road hunter.

It would only affect us poor stiffs who are not fortunate enough to own hunting land. The amount of lead shot deposited from road hunters is probably miniscule and I doubt there is evidence of road hunting lead shot impact on the environment or wildlife. I suspect that just one shooting preserve has far more lead deposition and negative impact than all the lead deposited by road hunters statewide.

I am not sure of the real intent of this proposal, but it looks to be another attempt to further restrict and ultimately eliminate road hunting in South Dakota. Commercial operators have attempted to do this for years so they can corner the market and eliminate the non-private paying sportsmen/women. This would be an economic catastrophe for South Dakota and would adversely affect many businesses and women who rely on the road hunter’s money to make ends meet. This would also crush the non-paying hunter’s enjoyment of South Dakota’s hunting and fishing opportunities.

Remember, this is only my personal opinion and not the stance the SDWF or Camo-Coalition will be taking. Lead is a proven toxicant and needs to be eliminated from our environment.

The state could implement the ban for the 2014 season, giving those of us who reload or have a big supply of lead shells the opportunity to use them up.

If this is a good thing for the environment and wildlife, then make it a statewide ban and be done with this highly divisive issue. Targeting it only for roadides will result in a lot of pain for very little gain.

President’s Column

by Bill Antonides

The sportsmen and women of this state should be very proud, not only of themselves, but of the majority of our legislators who listened to our collective voices during the 2011 legislative session. Over thirty bills tracked by the SDWF were passed or killed as we had recommended. At this writing, only three pieces of legislation are questionable. We will discuss those bills in a later issue.

The legislative process can be frustrating, even disheartening at times, but is a necessity in our democratic society. We have the choice of people who clearly believe they belong to a superior class over the average South Dakotan and should be treated as such, but overall, we do just fine in the legislature. The sportsmen of this great state have refused to sit back and allow special interest groups to take ownership of our publicly-owned natural resources. And our legislators have listened to our message.

In my humble opinion, the following proclamations are the basis for much of what the Federation believes and does. We have very few demands, but we have compromised far too often on these principles, and they should be non-negotiable:

1) The natural resources of South Dakota belong to all the citizens, not just a few. These resources must be equitably distributed. We want our fair share: no more, and no less. We insist others get their fair share, too.

2) Whether we are talking about wildlife or trees, only the harvestable surplus can be used. We must conserve what cannot be replaced for future generations to enjoy.

3) Irreplaceable and unique ecosystems such as virgin grasslands must no longer be abused at the expense of the public. If a private landowner or developer wishes to destroy something of great value, it should be done without the benefit of taxpayer subsidies.

4) Rights are not without limits. The right to drain wetlands, for example, does not bestow the right to flood downstream farms and towns, pollute our waters, and deplete our aquifers.

Others may consider the fight to maintain equal rights for everyone as futile, but we don’t. Even though the legislation has been relentess year after year to privatize and commercialize the natural resources of this state, we have maintained our lawful right to protect the public’s share of these resources. We can still purchase land with sportsman’s dollars. We can exert control over how our money is spent. We continue to have some input into how our public land is used. We can hunt and fish and simply enjoy our natural resources without paying homage to the king.

We have beaten the drive to overturn the Open Fields Doctrine six out of six times, and our conservation officers can legally continue to enforce the laws in a fair and equitable manner.

Lest we become complacent, not all is right with our world. While we have the lawful ability to purchase land through the GF&P, our new governor has put a moratorium on purchases. This moratorium will deny sportsmen and women the enjoyment of some very unique and wildlife-rich land, and some far-sighted landowners who want future generations to enjoy their land will never realize their dream. The Open Fields Doctrine is still in effect, but in deference to certain lawmakers, GF&P policy in recent years has mirrored the laws these legislators want, and has severely hamstrung our conservation officers. Perhaps the results of the current legislative session and the realization that policy changes and compromises by sportsmen will not satisfy these legislators will give our leaders the political will to properly serve the majority of their constituents rather than the few.

Theodore Roosevelt, one our nation’s greatest conservationists, wrote this simple but profound statement message over 100 years ago.

“IT is foolish to regard proper game-laws as undemocratic, unrepUBLICAN. On the contrary, they are essentially in the interests of the people as a whole, because it is only through their enactment and enforcement that the people as a whole can preserve the game and can prevent its becoming purely the property of the rich, who are able to create and maintain extensive private preserves. The wealthy man can get hunting anywhere, but the man of small means is dependent solely upon wise and well-regulated game laws for his enjoyment of the sturdy pleasure of the chase.”

A century later some have still not grasped the concept of his message, but we will not stop trying to convey it.

Please remember to thank the fine citizen legislators who listened to reasonable dialogue and made choices which benefit all South Dakotans, present and future. For those who didn’t, remember them at the voting booth. This is the democratic process, and the SDWF is proud to be part of it.

Renew your membership online at sdwf.org
SD House defeats plan to restrict game wardens

A measure that sought to limit game wardens’ ability to enter private land to check for hunting violations was rejected Wednesday by the South Dakota House after opponents said such a move could lead to more poaching.

The bill, defeated 21-48, would have required game wardens to get permission from landowners to enter private land unless they had reasonable suspicion or probable cause to believe that laws were being violated, needed to investigate a report of law violations, had to retrieve wounded wildlife, or needed to respond to emergencies.

It would have scrapped the so-called open fields doctrine, which is based on court rulings that allow game wardens to enter private lands away from houses to check hunters without getting permission from landowners.

Rep. Gene Abdallah, R-SiouxFalls, said the bill would have encouraged illegal activity by preventing conservation officers from checking hunters. Wildlife belongs to the public, not to landowners, he said.

“Don’t handcuff our conservation officers from enforcing the laws that protect our wildlife,” said Abdallah, a former U.S. marshal and superintendent of the state Highway Patrol.

The bill’s main sponsor, Rep. Stace Nelson, R-Fulton, said the bill should be passed to protect the property rights of landowners. Game wardens should not be allowed to enter private lands to check hunters without reason to believe laws are being violated, he said.

Neither the South Dakota Constitution nor state laws include language allowing law officers to enter open fields without a landowners’ permission, Nelson said.

“It’s illegal,” said Nelson, a former Marine and retired investigator for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

Grants Available for Habitat Projects

Beginning this spring, grants will be available from SDWF to cover direct costs in establishment of habitat and wetlands restoration. Both individual homeowners and organizations are eligible to apply. The funds are provided by the Evelyn & Bill Lohmann Conservation Fund, a permanently endowed donor advised fund established with the South Dakota Community Foundation. The purpose of the EBLCF is to support beautification and natural area conservation projects in South Dakota, with a special emphasis on native wildflower plantings, songbird habitat, and wetlands development and preservation.

The E&BLCF was endowed by the family and friends of Evelyn and Bill Lohmann in their memory. Day Breitag of Pierre provided this statement:

In 1954, my mother caught polio, just two months before the Salk vaccine went into general public use. From the time she contracted the disease until her death twelve years later, she never again left her rocking bed or wheelchair. She breathed with a respirator. She couldn’t sit up, turn, lift her arms or legs. She was twenty-five years old.

She had a great love of the wildflowers and songbirds of her native Midwest, and although her days of running through the fields and by the streams were done, she found joy and the strength to live a full life from the birds and flowers she could see through her window. From her rocking bed she taught her daughters the names of the species, the needs of habitat, the special beauty to be found in nature. Our father shared her love, and by removing exotic species, planting native grasses, and adding a pond, he created in our suburban Chicago home one of the National Wildlife Federation’s first Certified Backyard Habitats®. He died in 2002 of Lou Gehrig’s Disease.

It is natural to honor their memory with projects to beautify and conserve wildlife habitat. I am pleased to join the South Dakota Wildlife Federation in administration of the Evelyn & Bill Lohmann Conservation Fund grant-making program, and to support SDWF’s work on behalf of the wildlife of our state.

To apply for a grant, please use the application form printed on page 7 of this newsletter [or write or email to request an application from sdwf@mncomm.com], to describe your project. Grants will be awarded in the range of $250 to $1,000. The application deadline is April 15, 2011. A committee of members of the SDWF Board of Directors will consider all applications; funds will be awarded as available. The endowment currently contains approximately $26,000. Interest only will be used to make grants, and to support the operations of the SDWF.

Contributions may be made to add to the endowment by sending to: the South Dakota Community Foundation, P.O. Box 296, Pierre SD 57501, and specifying the Evelyn & Bill Lohmann Conservation Fund. Gifts are tax-deductible.

- Day Breitag of Pierre is currently a development officer with the National Wildlife Federation.
The big snow last night meant some feeder cleaning chores before we could start our counts. We had a bird “riot” in our yard. Dozens of House finches and American goldfinches fluttered here and there; we had to estimate the number. And, we added a new species – Downy woodpecker. We counted for 60 minutes and saw seven species.

Final Analysis

Continental totals were 596 species and 11.4 million birds reported on 92,000 check lists. South Dakotans in 61 cities recorded 101 species and 72,000 birds. The most common bird was the Canada goose. Among the nongame species, most common was horned lark (6,700), American goldfinch (4,200), European starling (2,700) and snow bunting (2,600).

Who was the sharp-eyed birder who saw the single American Three-toed woodpecker?

In Brookings, we recorded 24 species and 526 birds on 11 checklists. Our most seen birds were starlings and goldfinches. Someone saw one bald eagle and one each of the barred, long-eared, and Northern saw-whet owls.

We recommend participating

First, it’s fun to see the “crunched” numbers, but the project has more serious applications. Real bird scientists use the power of this huge data base to ask questions of the birds. The birds don’t chirp responses. Their answers are found in the counts of their numbers, kinds and distribution. Patterns in the data are used to alert scientists to issues that guide follow-up studies. Long term patterns in abundance are becoming apparent after 13 years. For example, some years we have pine siskin and common redpolls, and some years we don’t. Understanding patterns helps scientists identify species that are really increasing or declining rather than just being in a cycle.

The data also point to shifts in ranges and migration patterns that may signal changes in habitat and climate. For example, South Dakotans are now seeing the non-native Eurasian Collared-doves (113 this year), which have expanded from 10 to 39 states in a decade.

This citizen science projects allows people to have a better understanding of the process of science. Science is “a body of knowledge and a process.” The scientific process is how we know what we know. It has been said that “One good measurement is worth a hundred opinions.”

While doing this simple citizen science project, we practiced some of the steps in the scientific process. We used standardized methods for data collection and reporting, and reported variables that might influence the data. Real scientists analyze the data and even give “peer review” of data sheets. They call if your data has unusual outliers that need conformation.

The public is often unsure about the process of scientific research and sometimes even skeptical of its value. This is bad news at a time when science means so much to our lives. South Dakota needs a scientifically literate public to support the State’s commitment to opening the frontiers of knowledge about physics health, education, energy, and the environment.

Citizen science also has benefits to us as individuals. The bird count helped us realize the variety of life in our yard. When we see the variety of nature, we understand the beauty and complexity on the earth. It has been said that “humans seldom value what they cannot name.” If we cannot name the different birds, or at least recognize that they are different, we will not value them enough to conserve them. When we care about Creation, we will work for its preservation.

The great bird count web site gave us a certificate in recognition of our participation. Yes, we downloaded our colorful “Great Horned Owl Award.”

Finally, the great bird count, like other citizen science projects, can be fun for the whole family - even the dog. For the rest of the year, I will be watching birds with a new level of awareness, and I’m sure I’ll be thinking about participating in next year’s event. Meanwhile, I’m looking in to lilac watching in project BudBurst this spring.

Noem co-sponsors bill keeping gray wolf off endangered list

Rep. Kristi Noem is co-sponsoring HR509 to prohibit the federal government from listing gray wolves as an endangered species.

Noem said in a prepared statement that the gray wolf is a “thriving species that has fully recovered and should no longer be listed as endangered.”

“The wildlife managers on the ground, researchers and land owners are in the best position to create and implement new wolf management policies, not bureaucrats in Washington, DC...” Noem’s statement said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists South Dakota as one of the states in which gray wolf populations exist. Several wolves have been reported in the state in recent years.

The Fish and Wildlife Service proposed removing the gray wolf from the endangered species list in 2008, but several environmental groups sued to put the wolf back on the list.
SD Wildlife Federation Donors

At the 2003 Winter Board Meeting, the SDWF Board created the SDWF Wildlife Legacy Council. The Council was created to enhance public awareness of the role that non-hunters play in the future of the SDWF's Wildlife Legacy operations. Please consider your donation today. Donations can be sent to SDWF, PO Box 7075, Pierre, SD 57501.

The Legacy Council consists of five different donation levels: Level V Eagle $1,000 & Above; Level IV Buffalo $500 - $999; Level III Elk $250 - $499; Level II Deer $100 - $249; and Level I Pheasant $50 - $99.

February 2011

Level III Elk

STASMO, LEONARD - CA

Level II Deer

DEER, KARL - SD

January 2011

Level IV Buffalo

OLSON, JEFF, JR. - SD

December 2010

Level II Deer

BERG, ROBERT - SD

Valentine, June - ND

Level I Pheasant

RIDER, R. - SD

November 2010

Level II Deer

GREENWOOD, KEN - OK

Level III Elk

ABEL, ROBERT - SD

October 2010

Level II Deer

ROBERTS, JAMES - SD

Level III Elk

CAMPBELL, STUART - SD

September 2010

Level II Deer

CRAWFORD, JAMES - CA

Level III Elk

DUFF, JAMES - SD

August 2010

Level II Deer

GILLIS, RAY - SD

July 2010

Level II Deer

KIRCHGASLER, ARTHUR - SD

Level I Pheasant

KIRCHGASLER, ARTHUR - SD

June 2010

Level II Deer

WILSON, KEVIN - SD

Level I Pheasant

WILSON, KEVIN - SD

May 2010

Level II Deer

WHITE, JIM - SD

Level I Pheasant

KIRCHGASLER, ARTHUR - SD

April 2010

Level III Foundation

STANTON, R. - SD

Level II Deer

STANTON, R. - SD

March 2010

Level IV Eagle

SCHMITZ, DAVID - SD

Level III Elk

SMART, R. - SD

SD Why Hunt?

by Don H. Meredith

Part 1 — Tradition

The question is sometimes asked when I'm making a presentation about wildlife or the outdoors to school classes, youth groups, or even adults. I've told a story about a hunting experience or how wildlife agencies use hunting as a management tool. I notice some surprised looks and heard shaking in the audience and then a brave soul finally asks, "Why do you hunt?"

At first, I was startled by the question. I had grown up during a time when hunting was considered to be a natural choice for someone interested in the outdoors. Although I lived in an urban area and most of my friends did not hunt, most did understand my interest in it.

Over the last few years, however, attitudes have changed and now I've come to expect the question. Our society has become more urbanized, and many more of us are separated and screened from much of the environment that gives us life. Most of the friends with whom I grew up were only one or two generations removed from living in a rural economy where the taking of wild game for food was as natural as butchering a steer. Today, many young people are three and four generations removed from that sort of background. Stories of hunts past are more myth and legend than inspirations for a lifetime pursuit.

When I first answered that question, why do I hunt, I fell back on my biological training and explained how regulated hunting only takes from the annual surplus of animals that are surplus to the population's needs. We are going to die anyway because there isn't enough food and shelter to go around. But I quickly learned that I was missing the point. These people didn't care about the science. What they were asking was more fundamental, more philosophical. They wanted to know why I wanted to kill something that was enjoying life as I was.

I have to admit I first stumbled for answers to that question any longer. As a group, we make up an increasingly small amount of the total population (about 7% in North America, down from about 10% ten years ago), and the vast majority of non-hunters are no longer as accepting of hunting as they used to be. Anti-hunting organizations have become much more media savvy and are being heard a lot more than pro-hunting groups. We hunters must explain what we do in terms non-hunters can understand and appreciate or we may find ourselves without the societal support we require to continue what we enjoy.

I believe that hunting is a fundamental part of who we are... it's an activity that celebrates the fact there are still wild places on this earth where a person can learn and use some of the skills our forbears used to pursue wild game and survive. Using those skills and feeling the emotions and excitement that accompany our use reconnects us with the land, a connection that has been lost to most urban people. Although I fish, hike and photograph wildlife and wild places, it is only through the process of the hunt that I truly feel involved with the rhythms and cycles of the land and my environment.

Hunting is a traditional, natural activity that dates back at least 15,000 years in North America. Many aboriginal North Americans still consider it an important part of their heritage, culture and indeed spirituality. Although we hunters of European background can claim a similar hunting heritage, culture and indeed spirituality, Why Hunt? has failed to give it the same
recognition in our culture as have our aboriginal brothers and sisters. The result has been that many non-hunters support aboriginal or subsistence hunting but not so-called recreational hunting. To me, hunting is more than a recreation. It is an acknowledgement of who we are as human beings, part of the fabric of life on this planet.

Part 2 — The Predator

The following statement may not sit well with some people, but I believe it to be true. Whether eating hamburgers at your local fast food restaurant, having eggs and bacon for breakfast, or munching on a lean venison steak, you are a predator — an animal that lives by killing and eating other animals. Sure, you don’t participate in the actual killing of a steer or hog, but you share in the product of that killing. The people who kill our domestic animals in slaughter houses are merely agents of our society, acting on our behalf. Because we choose to eat meat, we share in the responsibility for killing those animals. We are predators. Even if you’re a vegetarian, chances are you share this predacious responsibility. If you wear leather belts or shoes, fertilize your garden with bone meal, or feed your dog, cat or tropical fish, or use certain medicines or cosmetic preparations, you are a predator. Animals died by the hands of people to provide these products.

Consider the produce we buy in the supermarket and place on our tables. Hunting helps bring many of those products to market cheaply. Many deer and elk hunting seasons and bag limits are set to reduce damage to crops, whether they be alfalfa, soy beans, or strawberries and wine grapes. For example, in Alberta this year, additional hunting licences have been placed on sale to help reduce the damage deer and elk have been causing to crops. Without hunting, the prices for our produce would be greater. Indeed, without recreational hunting, governments would be forced to control these wildlife populations by other means — again, acting as an agent for us all.

Humans have been predators for a long time — as evidenced by the skin scraping and meat cutting tools found at anthropological sites around the world. Our teeth and digestive organs are those of an animal that readily eats both meat and vegetation — much like bears.

Predation is also a source of our intelligence. An animal that grazes solely on plants doesn’t have to solve the complex problems that predators must solve to obtain food. Plants are stationary, they don’t run on your approach. You just have to know where they are in the right season. On the other hand, a predator must understand something of the behavior of its prey — where it will be, how it will react. It also must make complicated decisions in a hurry as circumstances change during the hunt.

Think of the wild animals we judge to be the most intelligent — for example: coyotes, wolves, cougars, bears. Most are predators. We now think of the popular pets we’ve judged to be intelligent — dogs and cats. We consider them intelligent because they can solve relatively complex problems and indeed judge and relate to our own behavior. This intelligence was not acquired by accident. It evolved with a predatory lifestyle.

Our intelligence developed in a similar way. When our ancestors decided to exploit wild animals for food, their perspective on the world changed. They had to learn more about and understand other animals, to further understand the nuances of their environment, and to understand how that environment could be changed to aid the hunt and their community.

That understanding has caused us to be the most successful species on the planet. It has also given us an arrogance that we can solve any problem, even while ignoring the environment and our relationships with it. As a hunter, I have chosen not to ignore these fundamental relationships. By hunting, I acknowledge them, and seek to understand them better. That is why I contribute both time and money to wildlife conservation. I know in my heart why we cannot afford to lose these connections with the natural world.

Part 3 — The Kill

During any good debate about the pros and cons of hunting (where each side is willing to listen and address the points raised by the other), the argument eventually boils down to the kill. Why must hunters kill? Instead, why don’t we hunt with a camera, or just be satisfied with seeing an animal? Why must we take an animal’s life?

José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher who is often quoted on this subject, perhaps said it best in his classic book, Meditations on Hunting: “One does not hunt in order to kill. On the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted.” In other words, the activity of hunting is what’s important, not the kill. But if killing a game animal is not your goal then you are not hunting.

When I’m photographing wildlife, I’m not hunting. Sure I’m going through similar actions — stalking an animal, trying to get close enough for one good picture. But I’m not really a part of that animal’s world. I am an interloper, a visitor stealing a moment of the animal’s time. There is little relationship with the animal that it understands or that improves my knowledge of my connection with it. On the other hand, when I’m hunting, I’m playing a role that both my prey and I understand all too well.

My body definitely tells me that hunting is different from other outdoor activities. Whether in anticipation of the coming hunt or during it, my excitement and awareness is higher than when I’m planning or taking a hiking trip. In a previous article in this column, I wrote about the risk of heart attacks among hunters. Most of that information came to light because of the waxing and waning I was going through to determine why people choose hunting over other outdoor activities. Hunters are less likely to achieve the goals of their trips than are hikers or canoeists. Yet when people who both hunt and hike or canoe are asked to rank these activities, the majority placed hunting as their first choice. The heart-rate studies sought to explain why. Hikers or canoeists rarely achieve the heart rates or excitement levels that hunters do. Why? I believe its because hunting taps that fundamental relationship we have with the natural world, a relationship that may be built into our genes, a relationship that once tapped is difficult to turn off. That relationship centers on the kill.

Conscientious hunters work hard to make sure an animal is killed as quickly and cleanly as possible. They have studied the animal’s behavior, have come to know how it lives, and while it will be at certain times of the day. They may spend days working to position themselves to place one fatal shot. Such work and study forges an understanding of an animal that goes beyond simple knowledge.

When a kill is finally made, a hunter’s emotions are mixed. There is the joy of success tempered by the sadness of the death of a fellow living creature. This mixture of emotions leads to some inescapable conclusions about the transience of life and the finality of death. Indeed, it is at the kill that traditional aboriginal hunters hold small ceremonies acknowledging the spirit of the animal and the life it has just given the hunters and their families. Such recognition is rarely considered for the animal that provided the steak bought at a supermarket.

I’m not advocating that everyone become a hunter. If everyone did, there wouldn’t be enough game or space to go around. What I am advocating is a non-hunting public that understands and supports the right to hunt. In the past, this right was easily given to a rural based society. Now, hunters must speak out and seek understanding from an urban society. If hunting is abolished, either by decree or lack of interest, then we would all lose an important perspective on our role in the web of life on this planet.

APPLICATION

Evelyn and Bill Lohmann Conservation Fund

This fund was established in memory of Evelyn and Bill Lohmann to “provide financial support for beautification and natural area conservation projects in South Dakota, with special emphasis on native wildflower plantings, songbird habitat, and wetlands development and preservation.” Individuals, clubs, and nonprofit organizations are eligible to receive grants.

Name

Mailing Address ________________________________  Phone ____________________  E-Mail ____________________

Purpose of Grant

For what will these funds be used? How will this project help add to beautification and/or natural area conservation in your community? Will this project contribute to songbird habitat, native wildflowers, or wetlands development and preservation? How will the project be maintained? Who is responsible for maintenance over time? Please describe in simple terms your budget: what are your expenses, and any other sources of income. Why is this project important to you?
Kintigh named state officer of year

The National Wild Turkey Federation has named Regional Supervisor Mike Kintigh of Rapid City its 2011 South Dakota Wildlife Law Enforcement Officer of the Year. The NWTF’s Wildlife Law Enforcement Officer of the Year awards program honors the nation’s top wildlife officers in appreciation for their dedication to conserving wildlife and upholding the law.

Kintigh was among 21 winners who were eligible to win the NWTF’s National Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award during the NWTF’s 35th annual National Convention and Sport Show recently held in Nashville.

Cpl. Roger Tate of Arkansas was awarded the national honor.

“The movement for the conservation of wild life and the larger movement for the conservation of all our natural resources are essentially democratic in spirit, purpose, and method.” Theodore Roosevelt, 1916

State finds more chronic wasting disease

PIERRE -- Another 25 cases of chronic wasting disease have been found in wildlife in southwest South Dakota.

The disease kills deer and elk by attacking the brain. The Department of Game, Fish and Parks tests hunter-donated deer and elk heads each year.

Since July 1, the department said the disease was found in three elk, eight mule deer, and 14 white-tailed deer. The GF&P tested 1,650 elk and deer from Custer, Fall River and Pennington counties.

The department has tested more than 23,000 samples and found 165 cases of the disease since testing began in 1997.

“...the larger movement for the conservation of all our natural resources are essentially democratic in spirit, purpose, and method.” — Theodore Roosevelt

“The mountains are calling and I must go.” — John Muir

“...what a country chooses to save is what a country chooses to say about itself.” — Mollie Beattie

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