



Linnea Leonard of
Mendota, Illinois and
Megan Beach of Minatare,
Nebraska watch intently as
geese approach their blind
at Cheyenne Ridge's North
Platte Outpost.

GOOSE HUNT FOR THE GIRLS

BY JODI STEMLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TESS ROUSEY

Sisterhood hunt in western Nebraska raises funds for a local breast health center.

Sitting in a pit blind has its drawbacks. The daily scenes of the outdoor world are the greatest thrill of hunting. It's like a real-life nature film playing out in IMAX 3D right in front of you. On a waterfowl hunt last November, I watched otters playing on the ice edge and a bald eagle soaring over the brook. I would have missed these scenes entirely had I been in a pit.

However, a pit blind is far more scintillating, more akin to a peep show than a feature film. In the pit, there are brief glimpses of waterfowl in flight silhouetted on a cerulean canvas as their shapes move in between the gaps in the straw. As the soundtrack of goose calls reaches a crescendo, there is a provocative view of a flock turning in flight to come back to the call. With hearts pounding and anticipation rising, there is one last view of the birds' approach, wings cupped and landing gear down as they rapidly lose altitude.

Just moments later, the guide's "Take 'em!" elicits a rapid leap to your feet as you pop through the top, raise your shotgun to shoulder, and try to quickly find, sight and shoot the birds as they reach their point of no return.

Hunting in a pit also allows for freer conversation, perhaps one of the best parts of hunting with other women. In the daily ritual of dropping kids off at school or heading to work, it's rare to find other women who fully understand the draw of heading afield. At home, the response when we say we hunt may, if we're lucky, elicit an interested, "Really?" followed by some polite questions and general interest. More likely the conversation is artfully turned away with very



An experienced waterfowler and conservation officer, Jordan Humphrey of Mims, Florida wanted to experience the North Platte River and support a good cause, all while connecting with other women who love to hunt.

little effort to understand our passion.

To hunt with other women presents a chance to connect with others who understand what draws us to the sport. You don't have to explain what it's like to sit in a blind for hours or to hike miles simply with the faith that you may catch a glimpse of your quarry. You find others with a shared love of conservation and the outdoors, and a deep belief in being responsible for providing our own food. Conversations in the blind quickly progress to tales of the hunt as well as a fair number of silly stories or, perhaps, deeply personal experiences. To hunt with other women is to develop friendships built on our shared love for the outdoors.

This is what drew me to western Nebraska in early February—the chance to connect with other women who share my passion for hunting, and the opportunity to support a cause that has been deeply personal in my family.

This was the Sisterhood of the Outdoors' first women's charity hunt, and proceeds from the event would pay for breast cancer screenings for

local women who couldn't afford the tests. The fact that it was also being held at a world-class hunting lodge was simply the cherry on top.



Victoria Jones of Middletown, Delaware.



Lindsey Bodamer of Leavenworth, Kansas.



Sherry Bombardo of Lapeer, Michigan.



Amy Ray of Dalton, Georgia.



"Gator" of Leavenworth, Kansas.



Heather Ruth of Fraser, Colorado.

IF SITTING IN A BLIND forges bonds, sharing meals around a big table is the flux that welds permanent connections. At Cheyenne Ridge's North Platte Outpost in Minatare, Nebraska, meals aren't an afterthought, and our women's goose hunt was no exception. As the first night's delicious roast quail and wild rice dinner had proven, this lodge, managed by Sean Finley of High Adventure Company, fully lives up to the company's storied reputation.

Finley, who is also the High Adventure Company's executive chef, told us before dinner that his staff prides itself on being a hospitality company that provides top-quality hunting and fishing opportunities. As a Beretta Trident Lodge, North Platte Outpost carries on the tradition of luxury outdoor experiences.

The women gathered this weekend had all participated in hunts with far less amenities, but no one was complaining about the incredible food and wine they were served. Meals like the USDA Prime New York Strip steak—from cattle raised by the lodge owners and aged in-house for more than two months—were cooked to perfection and delicious. These were meals befitting a five-star restaurant, and the fact that they were coming from a hunting lodge was remarkable. North Platte Outpost certainly knows how to take care of its clients.

But if hospitality comes first for High Adventure Company, generosity follows close behind. Megan Beach, who is dating one of the guides at North Platte Outpost, is on the field staff of Sisterhood of the Outdoors and spoke to Finley about hosting a women's waterfowl hunt. Instead, Finley offered the opportunity to make it a charity event; the lodge donated the weekend's lodging and meals to the Sisterhood of the Outdoors, allowing the organization to offer their first women's charity hunt.

THE COST OF THE HUNT and donated funds raised by participants were dedicated to Shooting Sports for Cancer, a non-profit organization started by Carmen Neil who, in her early 30s, survived breast cancer twice. The mission of the organization, best known for the Ta Ta Bang! Bang! sporting clays shoot in Carmen's home state of Georgia, is to help pay for diagnostic testing for women who cannot afford the cost of breast health screening.

Shooting Sports for Cancer turns the funds raised in event locations back to the breast cancer clinic closest to the event. For our hunt, the \$5,000 raised was given to the Regional West Breast Health Center in nearby Scottsbluff, Nebraska, which services mostly rural communities in four states within a 100-mile radius. In March, the center began offering 3-D Tomography to patients,

new technology that is more accurate in detecting breast cancer in women with dense tissue. While 3-D Tomography can be more costly—and some insurance may not pay for it—it can be a life-saver.

"Fundraisers like this can really make a difference for women who can't afford to get tested," commented Dr. Mike Yung, the radiologist at Regional West who urged the center to get the 3-D Tomography machine. "Catching breast cancer early enough in a younger woman can extend their life by 40 or more years."

The Sisterhood of the Outdoors fundraiser will allow 30 to 50 local women to get screened.



Meals at Cheyenne Ridge's North Platte Outpost fulfill the lodge's emphasis on hospitality. The night the hunters arrived, Executive Chef Sean Finley served roast quail with broccolini served on a bed of wild rice.

PARTICIPATING IN THE HUNT was personal for all of us. Eleven women were in the blinds that weekend, and all of us had either a family member or friend who had experienced breast cancer. While a number of loved ones had succumbed to the disease, many had survived, thanks in part to early screening. The cause may have been the initial draw, but the opportunity to goose hunt on the storied North Platte River—and to spend some one-on-one time with Syren's XLR5 Women's Waterfowler shotgun—sealed the deal for us.

The hunt was reasonably priced through Sisterhood of the Outdoors and the women had traveled from Kansas, Michigan, Georgia, Illinois, Florida, Delaware and neighboring Colorado. In addition, North Platte Outpost's staff, wives and girlfriends were able to join us in the blind. We came from very different places and represented a broad age range, and yet the camaraderie and connection were evident from the start.

Late-season goose hunting is always a challenge as the cagey birds are far less likely to be coaxed

within gun range. The weekend's unseasonably high temperatures, topping 60 degrees with bluebird skies, also played a role. Cheyenne Ridge guides Ross Juelfs and Scott Bodamer, along with Sisterhood pro-staff Victoria Jones, blew an alluring goose-calling serenade. However, even with thousands of birds flying around the area, only a few dozen were drawn into our sets.

ON THE FIRST MORNING, a lone bird was called in to our blind about an hour after sunrise. First shot was given to a relatively new hunter from Winter Park, Colorado who had never been waterfowl hunting. Standing through the pit, Heather Ruth rolled the goose with just one shot. After a lull in the early morning, the action picked up for our blind as geese came back to the river to loaf and a few small groups were intrigued with our spread. By the end of the weekend, 16 birds were down and cleaned for the women to take home.



Sisterhood of the Outdoors field staffer Megan Beach organized and hosted the charity goose hunt at Cheyenne Ridge's North Platte Outpost.

But the slow hunting was not a deterrent. As Sisterhood of the Outdoors owner Amy Ray said: “Our Sisterhood hunts are never about the kill. When we tag out or fill a limit, we all celebrate, but that’s not the point. Our goal is to provide a safe and fun environment for women to get out hunting with other women—whether you are a relative novice or have years of experience. We can all try something new, or simply realize what it’s like to share our passion for the outdoors with other women.”

For women to share a bond that is strengthened through early morning wakeup calls, hours together sitting quietly (or maybe not so quietly!) in the blind, or sharing in the opportunity to support other women facing breast health challenges—this was truly a goose hunt for the girls. ■



The women of the first Sisterhood of the Outdoors charity hunt.

SISTERHOOD OF THE OUTDOORS

Sisterhood of the Outdoors offers affordable hunting and fishing experiences for women only. Membership costs just \$45 a year, which provides early access when booking guided Sisterhood of the Outdoors adventures as well as discounts and coupons to an array of industry partners. Membership is not necessary to participate in a trip.

When it was founded, the group offered about 30 slots for women on hunting and fishing trips, and in 2018, they offered more than 200. Trips range from \$150 for a one-day

women’s shooting event or \$250 for one-day upland hunts to several thousand dollars for fully guided big game hunts. Overseas expeditions are planned in the future. All guides and lodges are carefully evaluated to ensure the best experience for women and novice hunters.

**CALL (706) 847-6338
OR VISIT THE WEBSITE AT
SISTERHOODOFOUTDOORS.COM.**



WOMEN’S WATERFOWL GEAR BY SYREN AND SITKA

It’s a good time to be a woman waterfowl hunter. Where outdoor manufacturers once expected women to wear either youth or men’s sized-down gear, or shoot the same guns that men do, there is now a recognition that “shrinking and pinking” outdoor gear just doesn’t fit the female market. Women are the fastest growing segment of the hunting community and the industry has taken notice.



Syren’s XLR5 is designed for the woman waterfowler.



Jodi Stemler of Denver, Colorado with SITKA’s new women’s gear.

SYREN offers a variety of outstanding field and sporting shotguns that are designed specifically for the female form, and, like offering the XLR5 for our women’s hunt, Syren does an excellent job of letting women demo the guns to show there truly is a difference.

The women on our hunt who shot the XLR5 Waterfowler, quickly recognized that it was easy to mount, and the shorter stock and higher Monte Carlo comb made it easy to acquire the target. Amy Ray cycled four different brands of shells through the gun and it worked flawlessly. The gun is an excellent option for the woman waterfowler.

The 12-gauge XLR5 Waterfowler features a Pulse Piston gas-operated system, 28-inch barrel chambered for 3-inch shells, a Realtree Max5 synthetic stock and 13.75-inch length of pull.

**FOR MORE DETAILS
ABOUT THE GUN, VISIT
SYRENUSA.COM.**

SITKA GEAR announced earlier this year that it was launching the first complete waterfowl apparel system for women. Using Gore Optifade Marsh pattern, the system has 13 pieces, including GoreTex Hudson Bibs (three cheers for the drop zippers in back making it easy for those necessary bathroom breaks!), a Primaloft insulated Hudson Jacket with excellent shoulder mobility because of the GoreTex with Stretch technology and a Fahrenheit Insulated Jacket with mid-height pockets and magnetic flaps.

Designed and tested by women, the gear offers great functionality while fitting the female form much more effectively. The warm weather didn’t give me much chance to really test the gear, but I found it extremely comfortable and warm for a wide range of waterfowl hunting conditions.

**FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT
SITKA GEAR, VISIT
SITKAGEAR.COM.**

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