

A Montana Hunter in Bavaria

Could the highly successful German system of hunting and wildlife management offer insight into sustaining a hunting culture in the increasingly urbanized Treasure State?

BY JAMES HAGENGRUBER

IT WAS A BRIGHT January afternoon, and sun rays wove through snow-covered fir branches in a thick Bavarian forest. My friend Gerda and I were hiking to a small tavern accessible only by foot for a snack of beer, bread, and sausage.

Clumps of snow blew down from the fir branches, landing around us with soft thuds. Through the sunny snowstorm, Gerda spotted a man hoisting bales of hay from a wagon.

"It's Hubert, the hunter!" she whispered to me, her pace quickening.

He was tall and wore a green wool cape and funny-looking (to me) pointed hat, out of which sprayed a brush of boar bristles. My mind swirled with memories of the huntsmen depicted in illustrations from childhood fairy tale books. So this was a real German hunter, I thought. How quaint. He's probably a millionaire, maybe from one of those royal families that forced my peasant ancestors to flee this very land generations ago.

The huntsman kept working as he offered the traditional Bavarian greeting, "*Grüss Gott!*" ("God's greetings!").

Gerda knew him, and they exchanged



JAMES HAGENGRUBER

PARADE PRIDE In Munich, hunters are actually cheered by onlookers as they march in the annual Folklore International Parade.

small talk. We watched as Hubert spread hay on the forest floor. He explained that icy air from Russia was on its way. With the snow so deep, the local elk herd could use a little extra food. Winter was hard this year, he said.

I mentioned that I, too, was a hunter. He

smiled, removed his gloves, offered a hand and said, "*Waidmann's Heil!*"

Later, sitting next to a fireplace at the tavern, Gerda explained that this greeting was the way hunters say hello. It means something to the effect of "Greetings, good hunter." Before draining our mugs, Gerda asked me why I hadn't told her I hunted.

Before traveling to Germany, I had been living in a liberal Midwestern college town, a place where saying you were a hunter would be akin to proclaiming, "I eat kittens." Gerda, like most young people I knew in Germany, had political views far to the left of most Americans. I told her I hadn't mentioned my passion for hunting because doing so usually meant the start of a long debate.

Not in Germany, she replied. People might not agree with all aspects of hunting, she said, but most everyone respects hunters. At a party that night, Gerda cheerfully announced to her friends that I was a hunter. It was a strange feeling.

That was seven hunting seasons ago. Since then, I have moved to Billings and begun a life working and hunting in Montana. I hadn't thought much about my glimpse into Germany's hunting culture until the



THOMAS BAUMEISTER

HONORING HERR BOAR Around a bonfire, hunters celebrate a successful wild boar hunt after carefully arranging the animals on fir boughs. In Germany, hunters are expected to pursue and kill all game animals with respect, according to centuries-old traditions.

summer of 2002, when I returned there for a two-month journalism fellowship in Munich. Along with other story interests, I wanted to use the time to explore the German system of hunting.

I found one of my best sources of information before I left Montana. His name is Thomas Baumeister, a native-born German who now coordinates the Hunter Education Program for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Baumeister, who has a doctorate in wildlife management from the University of Montana, gave me the rundown on hunting in Germany. He painted a picture of a highly industrialized country with strong hunting traditions and an abundance of game. It's a country where hunters, not professionals, manage wildlife and do it well. And in Germany, hunters show a great reverence for their kill and for the traditions of hunting.

In exchange, Baumeister said, they are afforded respect by their fellow citizens to a degree unmatched in the United States, even in Montana.

The hunting culture and wildlife management of Montana would seem hard to beat. We have an abundance of big game, waterfowl, and upland birds. We also have millions of acres of public and private hunting land. Baumeister agreed. That's one of the main reasons he decided to live here. As a young hunter in Germany, he told me, he often dreamed of Montana's vast game herds. Yet he also had high praise for the German style of hunting and wildlife management.

"I think American hunters could learn some things from the German hunting system, especially as urbanization keeps encroaching on the wildlands here," said Baumeister.

I was skeptical. Despite my earlier experiences in the Bavarian forest, I couldn't help but cling to the notion that hunting in Germany was all about rich people chasing half-tame deer in game parks. Besides, Germany is a densely populated country. What type of hunting opportunities could such a crowded, urbanized place afford?

Before I left on my trip, Baumeister told me to keep an open mind: "You might be surprised by what you find."

After settling into life in Munich, I began to notice the influence of hunting on everyday life in what is one of the world's most socially liberal nations. Mostly, it was small things. One of the busiest stalls at the farmer's market, for instance, sold cuts of wild game (hunters are allowed to sell their harvest). Nearly all



JAMES HAGENGRUBER



JAMES HAGENGRUBER



JAMES HAGENGRUBER

HALL OF HORNS Hundreds of mounted red deer, fallow deer, and other trophies line the halls of the German Museum of Hunting and Fishing in Munich. Calligraphy on bleached skulls, mounted European style, record the hunter's name as well as the kill date and location.

TODAY'S SPECIAL At a wild game grocery in Munich, signs advertise deer steaks, elk and hare filets, and the daily special: young boar.

the best restaurants headlined their menus with game dishes: wild boar goulash, peppered hare, venison with cranberries, pheasant stew, and the like.

To learn more about hunting in Germany, I arranged to meet with Bernd Ergert, director of the German Museum of Hunting and Fishing. The museum is in the heart of Munich's old town, and before our meeting I strolled through the airy institution. On its white walls hung hundreds of stag mounts and antlers. Lining vast hallways were oil paintings of royalty standing before neat rows of fallen deer and boar, epic battles between hound and bear, and St. Hubertus, the poacher-turned-holy man, who changed his ways after seeing a glowing cross between the antlers of a stag. (That cross-and-stag image adorns the green bottles of

Jagermeister—"Master hunter"—liquor, bottled in Germany and available throughout the United States.)

Many of the museum visitors wore the same pointed green Robin Hood hat I saw on the hunter I had met seven years earlier. I learned later from Ergert and Baumeister that the hat is a signature piece of clothing for hunters, who wear it and other apparel in public whenever possible.

Before going any further with this story, let me address the popular notion of hunting in Germany being only for the elite: It's not true. "You don't have to own a castle on a hill to be a hunter," said Baumeister. "If you have the commitment, hunting is available to almost anyone in Germany."

It's true there is almost no hunting allowed on public land in Germany, but many working-class citizens are able to afford a hunting lease on private property. Though lease payments can cost up to \$10,000 per year, they are often split

among members of a small hunting group.

Leased hunting areas usually run about 500 acres. After being sold the lease, the hunter must submit a game management plan, which is reviewed and approved by a local official. If the hunter does a good job of managing the land and the wildlife, then it's common for the lease to be extended.

I was surprised to learn that many landowners don't automatically have the right to hunt on their own property. If a parcel is less than 150 acres, a landowner who wants to hunt there must compete with other hunters in bidding for that right.

Far more important than money to becoming a hunter, Ergert said, are brains and dedication. Hunters spend a year studying for their license, and half fail on their first try. Even wealthy owners of large estates must pass the difficult exam if they wish to hunt.

Hunters are expected to memorize a dizzying array of laws. They must be able to identify not only every species of animal in the forest, but also its sex and age. Their shooting skills must be precise, and they must learn how to develop wildlife management plans. Also, they are required to practice elaborate hunting traditions, such as singing the proper song to announce the death of a prized stag.

Just as intense as the education requirements are the considerable responsibilities that come with being a German hunter.

James Hagengruber is a journalist and hunter who lives in Billings.

Germany is almost exactly the size of Montana, but with roughly 80 million more residents. The 450,000-some hunters in Germany play the combined role of game warden, wildlife biologist, and agricultural pest controller. They also must ensure that wild game animals have sufficient food and habitat.

“The hunting right and the conservation duty are inseparable,” said Baumeister.

When something goes wrong, such as a wild boar destroying a farmer’s corn crops, the hunter who leases that land is responsible for the damages. If deer continually raid a citizen’s apple trees, the local hunter could face accusations of laziness and incompetence. The complaints might not be direct, but whispers and side glances from neighbors are no less stinging. In Germany, community pressure can be extremely powerful in ensuring a hunter fulfills his obligations, Baumeister said.

The burdens of a German hunter might weigh heavily, but the country also affords its hunters rewards and respect rarely seen on this side of the Atlantic.

This was evident nearly every weekend when I traveled through the countryside. While stopping for lunch at a country tavern, it was not uncommon to see a uniformed hunter—wire-haired pointer resting at his feet—sitting next to the police chief and *Bürgermeister*, or mayor, holding court at the best table. Citizens would stop to talk with the *Bürgermeister* about a sidewalk construction project or complain to the police chief about a neighbor’s noise. Then, before leaving, the visitor would ask the hunter about his latest field excursion. It was through the local hunter, not a state or local agency, that people learned what was going on in the woods.

Though Germany’s politics run to the left of center—the nation’s Green party was one of the top vote-getters in last year’s elections—the liberal politics have not

spelled unreasonably bad news for German hunters. Because they maintain the health of the land and wildlife populations and have a strict code of ethics and honor, hunters continue to occupy a place of respect in most communities, Ergert said.

I saw this for myself during the massive Folklore International Parade, which marks the beginning of Oktoberfest. Of the nearly 10,000 people who marched in the parade, some of the loudest applause from the crowds went to a group of costumed hunters. The normally stoic spectators lining the street shouted and pumped their fists in the air as the hunters marched past while gently tipping their hats to the crowd. It was the applause that onlookers at a Montana small-town parade would give to volunteer fire fighters or decorated military veterans.

Each aspect of a hunt in Germany is laden with tradition and symbolism. Though modern breathable fabrics and fleece have snuck into the hunters’ wardrobe, traditional dark green or gray are the only colors hunters would consider wearing. One exception, said Baumeister, is a strip of blaze orange now worn on some hunting hats for safety. “And even that was considered extremely radical and controversial,” he said.

Hunters who shoot a deer or other animal are expected to pause in silence for at least a few minutes, Ergert told me. This is a time meant to contemplate the complex mixture of elation and sadness that comes with killing any animal. A downed deer is laid on its right side, with a small branch of fir or oak—known as *Der letzte Biss* (“the last bite”)—placed in its

mouth as a mark of respect. A second branch is placed on the deer to show that the hunter has assumed ownership of the dead animal. Hunters who follow all the appropriate rules and traditions of the hunt are presented with a shooter’s branch, which is worn in the left side of the hat-band until sunset on the day of the kill.

Baumeister said that after the hunt, the hunters gather and celebrate with traditional songs, accompanied by horn players, honoring the animal, the hunt, and the hunter.

“It’s so emotionally powerful,” he said of the traditional evening celebrations. “When I think back on it, the hairs on my arms stand on end.”

Among the most revered of the German hunting traditions are the annual hunter gatherings, where skulls from all harvested big game animals are displayed. A committee of hunters scrutinizes the skulls to see if each hunter has killed the animals identified in his or her official game management and harvest plans.

These plans are required for each hunting lease and specify the precise number of game animals that should be harvested to keep wildlife numbers in balance with the land. For instance, a lease might call for



THE LAST BITE In Germany, showing respect for downed game animals is a traditional part of the hunt. When a deer is killed, it is laid on its right side and a small branch of fir or oak is placed in its mouth. A second branch is placed on the mortal wound, indicating symbolically that the hunter has taken ownership of the animal. Hunters also keep meticulous records, noting in their journals weather and habitat conditions, measurements of the animals they kill, and other observations relevant to the hunt.





THOMAS BAUMEISTER

harvesting 10 elk, 20 roe deer, and an equal number of wild boar. Moreover, the hunter is expected to kill both male and female animals of various ages, to ensure a healthy population structure.

If, for example, a hunter shoots a six-year-old stag when the harvest plan calls for shooting a ten-year-old, a committee member will place a red dot sticker on that animal's skull. According to Baumeister, such measures are remarkably effective at pressuring hunters to make cautious choices.

"The red dot, which is visible to everyone at the gathering, is a huge disgrace," he said.

Bermany's hunting system is ruled by peer pressure, strict ethical codes, and a demanding hunter education system. Yet it produces abundant game and opportunities—not to mention public respect—for hunters. Would such a system work in Montana or other states?

Montana bowhunters would certainly scoff at trading their 3-D camo for lederhosen. And it's hard to imagine a successful antelope hunter in the middle of Garfield County sounding his trumpet. What's more, managing wildlife solely with hunters probably wouldn't work in a place where the tradition for 100 years has been for hunters to leave most management work and decisions up to trained professionals.

RESTING PLACE A German drahthaar, a versatile hunting breed, lies beside a dead red deer stag. In Germany, these and other dogs are used to hunt upland birds, waterfowl, and big game.

Nevertheless, some aspects might be worth considering. Baumeister certainly thinks so. During the past few years, he has been meeting with colleagues in other states, and hunter education instructors in Montana, to introduce them to the German hunting system and discuss new ways to think about hunting and wildlife management.

"I talk about how sharing wildlife management responsibilities with the hunting public could lead to hunters being more willing to accept responsibility for their actions," he says.

To some extent, Montana hunters already have a role in managing the state's wildlife. Private conservation groups such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Montana Wildlife Federation play a vital role in improving habitat, codifying laws, and securing access to hunting land. There remains, however, a gap between hunters and the professionals whose responsibility it is to manage the fish and game of Montana, Baumeister says.

"In some cases, hunters could become more involved in the day-to-day management of wildlife, and I'm not talking about

just hanging up some bluebird nesting boxes," Baumeister says.

One idea is for bear or mountain lion hunters to systematically record their sightings for use by FWP as a population monitoring tool. Many of these hunters have decades of field experience and are eager to share their expertise, Baumeister says. Another is the possibility of a state-sponsored website where hunters, hikers, and others could record sightings of rare species or those difficult for wildlife managers to count. The information could help managers identify distribution patterns for those species.

Montana's wildlife management system has been a great success, emulated in other parts of the country and the world. And the hunting tradition in Montana remains strong. Hunters are tolerated here perhaps more than anywhere else in the nation. But that may be in large part because we are still largely a rural state. Hunters fare less well in New Jersey and California. And as more and more people move into the Treasure State, many of them with anti-hunting sentiments, maybe we Montana hunters could learn a thing or two from the Germans. They might be able to show us how hunting could continue to thrive as our state becomes more urbanized.

Maybe there will even come a time when people actually cheer when we walk past. 🐾