

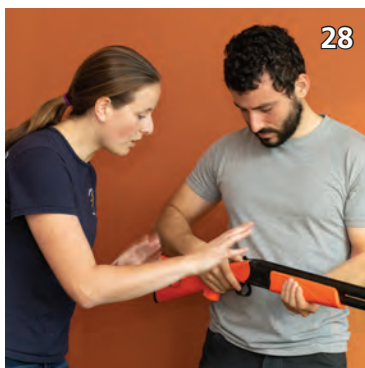
MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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**Little Brown Bats,
Winter Crow Roost,
Northern Red-Bellied Cooters**



MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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On the Cover: Bats, such as these two little brown bats, are highly intelligent and social animals that live in groups called colonies. When bats aren't looking for food or sleeping, they're usually grooming and socializing. Roosting in large numbers provides social interaction, some protection from predators, and temperature stability. Unfortunately, bats have declined significantly over the last decade due to White-nose syndrome and human activity. Massachusetts is home to nine species of bats, five of which are protected. Learn more about bat conservation and how to properly deal with bats in your home at mass.gov/bats. Photo by Troy Gipps/MassWildlife.

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A Hunter's Education

By Tabatha Hawkins

There is nothing quite as peaceful as early morning in autumn. Sunlight filters through dawn mist and all sounds are muffled by the blanket of wet leaves. The nip of chilly air makes me savor every sip of coffee from my thermos; it fills me with warmth and contentment. I stand on the edge of the forest, breathe in the sharp smell of frost, and feel suddenly transported to a similar morning two decades ago.

The air was cold that morning, but as an excited eight year old I would have turned blue before admitting defeat and returning to the car to thaw by the heating vents. My two older brothers and I stalked through the

woods, imagining ourselves as a pack of wolves—silent as shadows. My father and mother, perhaps more accurately, remember us resembling a small tornado. We took turns carrying the shotgun, with which we hoped to harvest gray squirrels that day. The instant the smooth wood of the shotgun's forend came to rest in my hand, still warm from my father's sure grip, I felt the thrill of responsibility. And it was a responsibility, I learned quickly, that was not to be taken lightly.

Being in charge of the firearm meant all games stopped; abruptly and completely. It didn't matter that the gun was unloaded, that the safety was on, or that I wasn't



Photos courtesy Tabatha Hawkins



Photos courtesy Tabatha Hawkins

even carrying ammunition. There was no room for anything less than perfection. I had to maintain complete control of the firearm at all times. The muzzle was to never point, even remotely, in the direction of any person, road, vehicle, or building. Phrases spoken to me by my parents—which I heard endlessly—still echo in my head: Never trust a safety mechanism; always know what lies beyond your target; Keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot.

On those early hunting trips, I wasn't the one who actually shot at an animal. I was, without realizing it, in training. Being groomed to habitually and religiously follow a set of safety rules so that, several years later (when I did have a pocket full of shotgun shells), I would follow those rules with the same ease as breathing.

The years passed, and while hunting remained a constant in my life, I imagined myself pursuing a career in music education, writing, or anthropology. If you had told me when I graduated from high school that in four years I would

be walking away from college with a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Ecology, I would have snorted loudly in amusement. I had started college as an engineering major. However, that didn't last long. Three weeks into my first semester, I was in a materials lab where everyone around me was rapt with interest and I was glassy-eyed with boredom. Clearly, I was in the wrong place. I dropped the class and spent the rest of my freshman year exploring course offerings. Through a series of serendipitous events involving a librarian, a dead chicken, and a Deadhead hippie, I stumbled upon the UMaine Ecology program ... and I never looked back.

It started with the chicken. I was dissecting it as part of an animal science class where I was learning about raising them for eggs and meat. Of all the classes I took, that class—and that experience—sparked something. The longtime enjoyment of working outdoors and with animals was alluring, but I didn't want to work on a farm; and so it came to be, as I was chatting with a librarian one day, ex-



pressing this realization and the fact that I wasn't sure how to use those interests to direct my education, that she revealed to me the existence of the Wildlife Ecology program. I wandered to that unfamiliar corner of the UMaine campus, ventured cautiously into Nutting Hall, and made my way to the administrative office to ask questions about this seemingly mysterious profession. On that day, in that Hall, I met the hippie. She was a professor at the university, but her Grateful Dead t-shirt and well-worn sport sandals would never have given that fact away. By the end of our conversation, I was signing paperwork to transfer to her program.

What followed were a number of years studying and working with nongame species; reintroducing endangered burying beetles, banding barn owls, and cauterizing snakes. All my time in the woods as a child prepared me well for this labor of love and sweat and bug bites. I was stung, scratched, sunburned, and pooped on more times than I will ever remember. Ecology studies are not for the faint of heart. But as much as I enjoyed this field work, there was something missing. I recorded the data and processed the statistics and wrote the

scientific papers and, all the while, I had a hollow feeling because it seemed that all my research was just disappearing into the black box of scientific knowledge. Into journals and reports that only reach as far as the small and intimate island of wildlife professionals. The greater public seemed like a distant land that had no way of accessing or understanding the vast majority of the work we did. In 2015, I graduated from UMaine feeling at sea with myself. I had no idea that I was just around the corner from discovering my passion: teaching.

I fell into teaching outdoor education with the Appalachian Mountain Club in New Hampshire; one of the many jobs I applied for in my post-graduation frenzy. I learned to create experiential lesson plans that took kids from the inner city who were afraid to sit outside on the ground and turned them into wild, happy creatures who were perpetually covered in mud. In the process, I did what I could to ground them in ecological concepts like energy cycles and animal adaptations. Taking science out of the black box in an outdoor environment, and making it not only accessible but fun, was a joy.

I spent several years honing my teaching skills in this way; moving from one seasonal position to another. I had a very memorable season leading hikes in Japan (while teaching through and around language barriers) for a company called English Adventurers. It turns out that explaining how to go to poop in the woods is funny in any language. And then, during my frequent perusing of job boards and hiring sites, I saw a job listing at MassWildlife for a Hunter Education and Outdoors Skills Specialist. The idea brought me up short. Hunting had never been a part of my career before ... just a part of who I was. I'd never been a hunting guide and I hadn't taught hunter education, specifically. It seemed like a long shot, but the idea of getting to teach something I feel so passionately about on a full-time basis was a great motivator.

So here I am at MassWildlife, combining my hunting, teaching, and ecological experiences as a member of the Hunter Education staff. I teach several hunting and outdoor skills classes and, along with my colleagues and more than 300 dedicated volunteers, we certify around 4,000 students in Massachusetts annually in programs like basic hunter education and bow hunter education. When I walked into my first class, I wasn't sure what to expect. My own hunter education class, taken in Maine many years before, had been dry and not at all up to my own educational standards. I shouldn't have worried. It quickly became clear that MassWildlife's classes are dynamic, engaging, laser-focused, and—dare I

say—enjoyable. Every moment revolves around safety and ethics; we emphasize that every time we step into the woods as hunters we have a shared responsibility; to our wildlife resources, to ourselves, and to all the people (hunters and non-hunters) with whom we share the woods. It seems the heart of our hunter education message echoes the lesson I learned so long ago from my parents: there is nothing worth compromising safety for during a hunt. The woods are to be enjoyed and respected.

In the years since, I have often dwelled on the allure of hunting. What makes it so uniquely enriching? Why do we come back year-after-year? I have found, for myself that hunting is about so much more than harvesting game. My love of hunting is rooted in the joy of erasing the lines between myself and the natural world, and of knowing nature so intimately that I can taste the reward of my dedication season-after-season.

Today, when I breathe in that sharp scent of frost on autumn mornings and move silently into the woods like a shadow (or so I like to think), with gun in hand, and beneath a shower of red and gold leaves, I quietly celebrate coming home.

About the Author



Beyond her love for hunting, Tabatha Hawkins has a great appreciation for hiking and fishing and considers any day in the woods as time well spent. She is enjoying introducing her six-year-old niece to the great outdoors.



Photo by Troy Cipps/MassWildlife

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Since 1984, MassWildlife and its partners have headstarted over 4,000 northern red-bellied cooters and released them at sites in southeastern Massachusetts. Nests are protected in June, and by September the hatchlings are distributed to schools, museums, aquariums, and individuals to be raised through the winter. After a winter indoors, the young turtles are the size of 3- to 4- year old wild turtles. As a result of this work, populations of the northern red-bellied cooter have stabilized and are no longer as precipitously close to disappearing from Massachusetts as they were in 1980, when they were federally listed under the Endangered Species Act. Photo by Troy Gipps/MassWildlife



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