

Catherine Blalack:

In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management, Alaska Geographic has published a remarkable collection of over 60 outdoor essays called *The Land We Share*. These essays are written by Steve Meyer, a lifelong hunter, and Christine Cunningham, a lifelong Alaskan who embraced hunting later in life. Accompanied by a family of bird dogs, the two authors delve into how hunting on public lands nurtures the human spirit, sustains physical health and deepens appreciation for the natural world.

Steve and Christine love hunting, and they love their hunting dogs. They are talented outdoor writers who have vividly described their adventures and experiences. In their award-winning book, we see the valuable intersect of good dogs and the people with whom they hunt. This is the Future of Conservation podcast, where we feature thought leaders on the frontlines of protecting wild places and wild things and share their story to inspire us to look at nature in a new way.

I'm your co-host, Catherine Blalack, from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center, located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Catherine Blalack:

I'm Catherine Blalack, and I'm a fish and wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Library. We're here today at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. I'm pleased to be speaking to authors Christine Cunningham and Steve Meyer about their new book, *The Land We Share: a Love Affair Told and Hunting Stories*. This book is a collection of essays all about special places and the relationships that form around hunting.

Steve Meyer is a lifelong hunter and Christine Cunningham is a lifelong Alaskan who embraced hunting later in life. Accompanied by a family of bird dogs, the two authors delve into how hunting on public lands nurtures the human spirit, sustains physical health, and deepens appreciation for the natural world. Together, their outdoor writing and photography have been featured in a variety of conservation publications, including Alaska Magazine, Sports Afield, Pheasants Forever, and Delta Waterfowl.

Although most stories are set in Alaska, in the Dakotas, their messages and themes resonate across the nation, appealing to both hunting advocates and those with a profound connection to the great outdoors. Thank you, Steve and Christine, for being here today. So, you're both outdoor writers and you all have work together writing, alternating columns for Anchorage Daily News. Can you guys share how that work evolved into the book we're going to be discussing today?

Steve Meyer:

Well, it's largely Kevin Painter's fault. Kevin Penner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on January 21st, 2022. He sent us an email, said, you guys going to do a book, put these all together in the book? He said, if you're not, you know, maybe we could talk and something like that. And Christine knows more about it than I do, because I can barely read.

Christine Cunningham:

It's not true. [laughs] Steve can read.

Steve Meyer:

A little bit.

Christine Cunningham:

But no, it was. We started writing an alternating column in our community newspaper, and it was really fun because we would write our column would appear every week, but sometimes we'd write about the exact same thing, and it would look like two completely different stories. Just because the perspective what we focused on was so different. And, that kind of grew.

We did that for about five years, and then the Anchorage Daily News column, a wider audience. And it's hunting. We're writing about hunting in Alaska, but it's to a general audience. So, we were reaching a lot of people who were really interested readers, and they would write us, and we'd run into them on the trails. And it was really great experience, sharing about something where there was a lot more common ground than, than anyone thought going in.

Catherine Blalack:

Nice. So, while writing this book, you mentioned reminiscing through old stories and reliving some of your best memories and moments in your lives. Of the 61 essays, which one is your favorite?

Steve Meyer:

Oh, that's a tough.

Catherine Blalack:

[laughs]I know.

Steve Meyer:

that's really tough.

Steve Meyer:

I guess the one that means the most to me. I can get through this. Yes. The one about, Gunner. He's, He was a chocolate lab that we rescued, and, very special dog. And there's a story in there about saying. Sorry, saying, saying goodbye to him.

You remember the name of it?

Christine Cunningham:

Oh, gosh.

Steve Meyer:

I don't, I don't remember.

Christine Cunningham:

It's the one about Gunner.

Steve Meyer:

Yeah, but that one, that one is the most.

Catherine Blalack:

Vivid still.

Steve Meyer:

Still, it really hits me still. And that was five years ago. Longer than that.

Christine Cunningham:

Yeah. So, for us, our our dogs, they're our family. They live with us, they hunt with us. There's a lot of shared memories. And, so I was going to say my favorite one is in the book is not all about reminiscing about dogs gone before, but there's a couple in there that are our tear jerker is if you've ever loved a hunting dog.

Christine Cunningham:

And there's another one of our English setter, Parker and that's by Steve. But he when it comes to dogs, he tends to be pretty emotional. And I think those are really the best stories when it's not just I can be in my head a lot and he can really tap into that, what it feels like to be out there.

And I think that's why those two, if they make you laugh or cry, they must be good, right? No one makes me cry.

Catherine Blalack:

Good writing. Thank you. Whether it's learning about wildlife and their instincts, deepening your appreciation of wild places, or becoming more responsible as hunters, I'd love to know, maybe a couple of, like, key moments or special memories that shaped who you are today as hunters and conservationists.

Steve Meyer:

Wow. That's- there's so many. And for me, it goes back to when I was five years old and I, my dad and his friends hunted and from the time I was just very little, I just wanted to go with them. I was already, I don't know, I was already in my blood. So, they started taking me long when I was five years old and the most wonderful part about that is when they took me, I was one of the guys. If they were cold, I was cold. If they were hungry, I was hungry. You know, if we crawled through the mud, I crawled through the mud.

Catherine Blalack:

Yeah. You're holding your own even as a boy. Yeah.

Steve Meyer:

And so that's that early memory is still very, very precious to me.

Christine Cunningham:

For me, I didn't I didn't go on my first duck hunt until I was 27. I went with Steve. And in my mind, if you had to ask me what hunting looked like, the only thing I could conjure would probably be like the Warner Brothers cartoons with Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck, and I just didn't really understand what hunting was, even though I grew up in Alaska and I was around it there, there I didn't really have a sense of what it was. So going that first time was really, Steve treated me, like he would any hunting partner there wasn't special consideration. It wasn't like, here, here's a blanket and some snacks, and it wasn't like that.

And in fact, I was surprised we were going duck hunting in the rain, which is I mean, duck hunters know that's when it's the best. But we were we were kind of, we're coming up on some ducks that Steve had saw on a pond ahead of us, and he's like, we're going to have to crouch down like, okay, so we're crouching on the- this is like Elmer Fudd and we're sneaking up on the ducks. And so we're he's like, we're gonna have to get down on our knees. And at the time, we're in a, tidally influenced area, and, the tide had gone out and there's rotting salmon in the in the marsh, and I can see shrews darting into and and cobwebs and I'm thinking, oh, gosh, on our knees.

So we're inching along on our knees. And he says, after we're getting pretty close, we're gonna have to crawl. And I thought, you're kidding me. Like, we're gonna crawl and I'm wearing borrowed rain gear.

And I'd been to the gun range, and I learned how to use the shotgun, and I'm just thinking, oh, my gosh, like, this might be- I'm done.

Catherine Blalack:

Like, you're into an adventure!

Christine Cunningham:

So I start crawling and I'm using my shotgun to clear the path, and I'm just trying to get it over with as fast as possible. And I feel this, this tug on the back of my leg, and I turn around I [say] what? And he goes, what are you doing? And I said, I'm crawling. I wasn't stealthy at all. I took off like I was in a diaper derby, and Steve's never seen anybody crawl so fast in his life. I just was trying to get it over with. So, we stand up, the ducks fly. I shoot once, which I only shot one time. For a long time, I was much more proficient. But, the ducks fly away, and I'm watching them fly off into the sunrise, and Steve reaches down and picks up a shotgun shell and he says, holds up to my nose, and he says, this is what fall smells like to me.

Catherine Blalack:

Mm, and I remember reading that, yeah.

Christine Cunningham:

There's a story in the book. And that was, I was really it was almost like smelling salts, like, I'd missed something, and this was- I wanted to do it all again and understand what I was doing. There was a lot to this. So I that was kind of what hooked me right from the day one, the first miserable day. I submitted my first article for publication shortly after that about that experience. Wow. Because I it was so meaningful. Just felt like there

Catherine Blalack:

Crediting Steve for teaching and passing on that tradition. That's really amazing.

Steve Meyer:

Actually, the title of the article was "No Sympathy" because I had no sympathy for what we were doing. But it was wonderful.

Catherine Blalack:

Can you speak to the advantages and enjoyment of having your loyal companions along for all of your hunting adventures?

Christine Cunningham:

Yeah. We love the dogs. There's just something about how much they love to go and be wild and free. We have abundant natural resources and lands that they can run, and do what they're bred to do. We've got big running setters for upland hunting in the mountains, for hunting for ptarmigan. In the flats along the coast where with the duck dogs and, just them by your side.

I like to think about the setters as being like a medium between the wild and domestic, because they're, you know, we're civilized. They live with us in the house, they're domesticated, and then we're both out there, and yet they have these gifts that we don't have. I mean, and they're closer to the wild. They don't have to hold anything back like a wolf would.

Catherine Blalack:

I think in one of the essays you mentioned, like, as they're in living room, they kind of go crazy, stir crazy. But then when they're in the wild, it, like, makes sense. They're doing the pointing. They're doing the retrieving. So, I love how you captured that.

Christine Cunningham:

Thank you.

Steve Meyer:

Yeah. Do you know what they're bred to do.. And, yeah, I, I don't even know how to start to say what that means. I'll say for, you know, in, especially in relation to public land, when Winchester, he's our he's English setters on the cover of the book when he came into our life, he changed everything because he is so- he loves being in the mountains and he loves doing his job. And he's got more, drive to be out there than any other creature I've ever been around. And when he came in, it was like, okay, I got a partner that I've always wanted and as a result, that really brought Christine in into tune with this wonderful, experience that we have when, when we're out and doing what we do.

You know, sometimes we might follow a trail into the mountains, but that's never really the goal. It's about more about getting to the end of the trail and then following the dogs and as a result, they take us places that we probably never would have gone. And, and we have the freedom to do that in Alaska, which is such a reward.

Catherine Blalack:

Yeah. How did you go about naming your dogs? I love the names.

Christine Cunningham:

The names! It was so, so people think we're crazy sometimes because we're not breeders, but we bred two English setters that we had, and we were going to keep a pup, one of Winchester's pups, but we ended up keeping the whole litter.

Catherine Blalack:

Oh, wow.

Christine Cunningham:

So, Winchester, the mom is Parker. And those are both names after, a shotgun in both cases. But so the puppies, when we weren't going to keep them all, we weren't going to name them, because if you name one of them, you're probably that's the one you're going to keep. So, we had we call them all by their spots- one spot, two spot, no spot. And one day Steve called out to a black and white setter pup and called them Colt and I was like, oh, no, we're keeping that one. I really wanted to keep them.

Catherine Blalack:

It's official. Yeah.

Christine Cunningham:

Right. And, so then pretty quickly we named another one Boss. And then, Hugo is, aberration of, Huglo.

Steve Meyer:

It's all gunmakers.

Christine Cunningham:

Yep yep yep. And then Cogswell. Cogswell and Harrison, another fine gunmaker. And then Purdy. I mean, she the little girl, the only female. And we kept a whole litter and it's, been wonderful. It's been crazy.

Steve Meyer:

And Rigby, he's our latest addition. Okay. He's an English Labrador, so he's named after Rigby's. The great gun maker from Britain.

Catherine Blalack:

That's awesome. I love all those stories. It's really cool. Such a family of dogs, you know, companions.

Steve Meyer:

We miss them dearly. Yeah.

Catherine Blalack:

I have a final question. So, although hunting is an age old tradition, the number of hunters in the United States has declined in actual numbers. And as a percentage of the total U.S. population. *Delta Waterfowl* reports that in 2022, only 6% of Americans hunt. What advice would you give the next generation, or perhaps even a first-generation hunter when they're trying to get started?

Steve Meyer:

That's another really good question. You know, in the perfect world, you get started through your family, with people you trust and who will take you and show you and allow you, yeah, give you permission to be that person. It's a little harder to find in someone who's not your family, but, I think that's really important to be able to connect with someone who you trust, who you accept for who they are and what they are and their values kind of go along with your values and, you know, it's a it's a great question because while hunters, the numbers have decreased, there's also been a decrease in huntable land. You know, the constant progress of society continues to whittle away. So even though there's less hunters, there's still plenty. I mean, there's lot.

Catherine Blalack:

Definitely.

Christine Cunningham:

I think hidden in that number is something interesting and that's that there is a greater diversity in the hunting numbers. And there's been programs that I really love and recommend in Alaska. Becoming an Outdoorswoman is a great program. And it it's great because you're not left alone after that initial workshop that where you learn about, one aspect of it, you can go back and learn more and build on all the different things, cleaning game, using firearms, regulations. So programs like that and every community's different. And where whether it's a conservation group or a local club somewhere, there's going to be a group usually that that helps people so that they're not alone in those early parts of it. And they do have someone they can ask the questions, but it's, it's such a- Steve's right. It's a tradition. It's a way of a way of learning and a way of knowing about the natural world. So you do need, I don't know, I don't love the word mentor, but you need you need someone who cares about your kind of well-being going into that, that you can trust and ask and call.

Catherine Blalack:

And be your teacher.

Christine Cunningham:

And be your teacher. So, if you're if you're lucky enough to find that person, otherwise, there's I think all these programs looking to be that for people in a more general way, a lot of them are great programs.

Steve Meyer:

They can tell you how to do things. You know, you can go to a class or a course or whatever, and they tell you how to do things. But having someone that's been there and done that, that you can have a relationship with and when I say a relationship with, it's not like, well, we're going to go Saturday and then we won't go again for three months. That doesn't build a relationship.

Catherine Blalack:

Or a skill.

Steve Meyer:

Or a skill. It doesn't build much of anything. So, in that regard, you know, the Indigenous people, a lot of the Indigenous people valued the hunting partner relationship as much as they did the marital relationship. So, when you have that in both, it's free. Amazing.

Catherine Blalack:

Yeah. Spoiled. [laughs] Well, thank you guys so much for that quick rundown about your book. So, thanks for listening and we'll see you guys next time.

Steve Meyer:

All right. Thank you.

Catherine Blalack:

Hunting is an age-old tradition that has been an integral part of human history, connecting people to the land and the natural world. America's public lands provide space for many soul nourishing outdoor

activities like hiking, climbing, canoeing and kayaking. Moreover, these places also play a vital role in supporting the hunting tradition. In fact, many of our public lands provide refuge for healthy harvestable populations of game animals.

If you're interested in keeping the tradition alive, be inspired by Steve and Christine's work and find yourself a mentor or guide to show you the way. Thank you to our listeners and a special thank you to our guests, Christine Cunningham and Steve Meyer, for all of your beautiful writing and your love affair told in hunting stories. To continue listening to the Future of Conservation, check us out on Apple podcast or other podcast apps. And if you know of anybody interesting for a future episode. Contact Catherine Blaylock at catherine_blalack@fws.gov. We'll see you next time.