

“IT IS THE VERY THING THAT DEFINES ME”: HUNTING AND FISHING ON BLM LANDS

Garrett VeneKlasen

I am a third-generation outdoorsman—the son of a son of men who loved to hunt and fish. To them, it was more than just a hobby or form of recreation—it was a lifestyle deeply ingrained in my family’s history. Black-and-white photos of my grandfather hunting and fishing adorn the walls of my home. His Damascus double-barrel black-powder .12-gauge shotgun sits in my gun cabinet alongside my father’s .30-06.

Like so many during the Great Depression, my great-grandfather barely made ends meet. The game he harvested and the fish he caught from public lands and waters literally kept him and his family from starving to death. Hunting and fishing then became my father’s passion. Black-and-white photos of him in a canoe with a fishing rod or standing next to a deer he harvested on public lands also adorn my walls.

Aside from feeding his family, hunting and fishing also played a special role in his life. A member of the US Third

Army under General Patton, he fought in the Battle of the Bulge and then went on to liberate the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau. His photographs can be found at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

The veterans of World War II came home and went to work. They married and raised families. And like my father, most never talked about the horrors and suffering they saw and endured. They put it in a vault deep inside and never opened it up again. Hunting and fishing became my father’s therapist. When the dark memories welled up inside him,

Elk herd, Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, New Mexico. BOB WICK, BLM



he would pack up the fishing rods and head for the river or take his trusty Labrador into the field to chase his demons away. When he stepped into a cool trout stream you could literally watch the river wash his pain away. When asked about his religious leanings, dad always told folks he was a devout member of the “Church of the Blue Dome,” meaning the church under the great blue sky in the forests, lakes, and rivers that gave him both hope and faith.

My parents moved to New Mexico in 1953. They were middle-class folks who worked hard to build a life for their children. Like so many Americans, we didn’t own a ranch or a private stretch of river to fish on. The vast public lands, rivers, and lakes that surround Santa Fe were our playground. It was here where I caught my first trout and harvested my first mule deer buck. It is here to this very day where I hunt elk, deer, and turkeys, and fish. And like my grandfather and father, this to me is so much more than a hobby or a casual form of “recreation”—it is an integral part of my lifestyle. It is the very thing that defines me.

This year, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the National Landscape Conservation System, now known as the National Conservation Lands. These lands, especially those with durable protection like national monuments and designated wilderness, are my favorite places to hunt and fish because they truly are refuges where wildlife thrives and hunting and fishing opportunities and experiences are at their finest.

Take our Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (RGDN) and Sabinoso Wilderness, for example. RGDN boasts 74 miles of some of the best wild trout fishing found in the West. If you spend a little extra effort and hike into the Rio Grande Gorge within the monument, you will leave behind the crowds and have miles of stunning pocket water that holds big brown, cuttbow, and pure-strain Rio Grande cutts all to yourself.

Unit 50 is my go-to place to hunt elk. Although the New Mexico elk lottery can be a tough draw, the monument

Sabinoso Wilderness Area, New Mexico. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



offers a unique hunting opportunity, where you're chasing elk through boulder fields strewn with elk and hunting petroglyphs that date back thousands of years.

Located southeast of Las Vegas, New Mexico, the Sabinoso Wilderness is also a spectacular off-the-beaten BLM inholding to both hunt and fish. Or just camp and enjoy stunning red canyon country devoid of people.

Public lands and especially those lands with durable conservation protections have remarkable hunting and fishing traditions in New Mexico dating back to the days of Aldo Leopold, who was the leading advocate for

America's first wilderness in 1924. An avid hunter and angler, Leopold wrote that "public wilderness areas are, first of all, a means of perpetuating, in sport form, the more virile and primitive skills in pioneering travel and subsistence." Whether chasing a big Coues buck in the Gila Wilderness or casting to native Gila trout, hunting and fishing in protected wild backcountry was near and dear to Leopold's heart. Like Leopold, pursuit of game and fish in my favorite protected public backcountry haunts is near and dear to my heart as well. And like my grandfather and father before me, these lands are my larder, gymnasium, church, and therapist all rolled into one.

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