It is officially fall again, and for over 12 million Americans fall means that much-anticipated season openers are here at last. No, not talking about football or boot-wearing seasons, but hunting seasons. From delicious birds, to nutritious big-game, fall marks the time to start filling your family’s freezer and getting primal in the vast wilderness that fills this great country.

While the hunt is on this fall and winter, one species will be mostly absent from the woods – women. An estimated 91% of hunters are men leaving the 9% of women hunters underrepresented in the hunting industry. As one of the 9%, this author aims to represent the underrepresented.

I started hunting at age 12, after taking my hunters safety course (a legal requirement for those born after 1960 in all states in order to obtain a hunting license) in my home state of Michigan. That November, I excitedly woke up before dawn, put on many layers of way-too-big camo clothes, laced up my insulated boots, and headed out into the darkness of the southern Michigan woods with my Dad. I remember details of that morning like it was yesterday despite the memory being over a decade old now. That morning in November became the first of many cherished hunting memories that have taken me into the wilderness all over the country and several amazing places abroad.

I had the very good fortune of being born into a family where both my parents are highly capable outdoorsmen (I prefer this as a gender neutral term rather than “outdoorswoman”). I am convinced my mother is descendant of some female Native-American warrior (despite having no record of such in our genealogy) as her outdoor and survival instincts are unparalleled. My father compliments her skill sets perfectly and together they make sure their freezers are always full and their firewood is always plentiful. I think it is because of their great partnership that I never thought of hunting as being associated with one gender more than the other. It was never expressly encouraged or discouraged to my brothers and sisters and I but rather was always an available activity for any one of us who showed interest. As I got older, I was presented with opportunities to travel for all different types of hunts and I began to realize how rare women were in the hunting community. I believe this is due to several factors and not just the obvious ones.

* Hunting, like many outdoor activities, has a macho reputation that stereotypes it as a man’s sport.
* Girls often are not exposed to hunting as kids from parents, grandparents, etc. like boys are. And the hunting industry does little to market to first-time adult women hunters so its tough to get involved later in life.
* Mentally, women generally have a tougher time dealing with the element of death involved with hunting.
* GEAR is hard to find for women hunters.

As I am able to do more hunting the issue of lack of reliable gear made for women is on my mind a lot. Like all outdoor endeavors, it is of paramount importance that you have confidence in your gear. When talking about hunting, one thing that is very important to understand is the tremendous variety within the sport - not just in the types of hunting available but also in the immense diversity of those 12 million American hunters.

Essentially, there is bird shooting, bird hunting, and big game hunting. Bird shooting is more sport than hunt and generally requires a certain level of shooting skills with a shotgun. Bird shoots are typically done with a group at a club or destination specifically set up to offer a shoot. Shoots are typically “planted birds”, meaning birds farm raised and planted for shooters, and shooters typically pay for a certain number of birds ahead of time. One thing that is nice about bird shooting is that the club or farm where you shoot typically offers amenities such as food and drink and will also dress and prepare your quarry for you to take home and cook. Bird shoots are really fun social events and are a great way for kids and new-hunters to get a feel for shooting. My family does a pheasant shoot at a local farm every Thanksgiving. Bird shooting ranges from relatively inexpensive half-day shoots at local farms to quite expensive destination trips that often feature first-class lodging, food, spa, etc. A few types of bird typical for shoots are pheasant, quail, chucker, and dove. All are delicious and a fun shooting challenge.

Bird hunting is different from shooting in that you are hunting wild birds. Because of this there is often a lot less shooting! Bird hunts are some of the hardest hunting I have ever done. I remember grouse hunting in northern Minnesota with my Aunt several years ago and I could barely climb back in the truck at the end of the day my legs were so worn out. Grouse in particular make for a rewarding yet extremely challenging hunt. The woods where grouse like to live are new-medium growth and are typically very dense. It is hard enough to walk through the trees let alone carry a shotgun and pack. The grouse are smart and often fly before you can even see them and all you are left with is the brief noise of the drum of their wings. If you are lucky enough to see one, they present you with a shooting window of a few seconds at most. Bird dogs are a key part of this type of hunting as they smell the grouse out and can cover much more ground than you could. They also come in handy when your prey lands in a giant patch of thistles. Other types of bird hunting include duck, geese, woodcock, wild quail and chucker, snipe, and of course various grouse species.

Big game hunting is a separate category from bird hunting and is by far the most diverse in terms of types of hunts and hunters. I also think it is often the most misunderstood by non-hunters. Big game hunts range from whitetail hunting in the Midwest where you sit in a blind or tree stand, to high-altitude sheep hunts in the north country where you are packing heavy packs, living out of a spike-camp, and hiking many miles per day. Some big game hunters exclusively hunt with bow and arrow, some exclusively hunt with rifles, some do both. Neither provides easy hunts nor is success ever guaranteed. It is also not at all uncommon for hunters to go after a species many times before they even see what they are hunting for, let alone get a successful shot at it. Reliable and highly functional gear is essential for big game hunting. Fortunately, there are several new and also tried-and-true companies making high-quality gear for big game hunting now. Unfortunately, most of this gear is made for men, which causes a fitting issue for women. It is my hope that by getting the 9% of hunters that are women more exposure, companies will start making clothing and gear for women to the same standard that they are making for the rest of the hunting community. Whether you are new to hunting, went out a few times as a kid and are looking to get back into it, or are a seasoned hunter, I encourage you to represent yourself and your point of view on this wonderful way to enjoy our great wilderness.

Here are two of my favorite brands to check out for hunting clothes and basic gear:

* Eddie Bauer – Sport Shop: this is my favorite new line of hunting and shooting clothes. Actually, its not new as Eddie Bauer is a classic American company that was originally founded to outfit hunters and fishermen. They offer almost all of their men’s products in a women’s version that is of the same high quality. So far, EB’s Sport Shop is aimed towards bird hunting and shooting but I hope they get into the big game market in the future. (www.eddiebauer.com/EB/Sport-Shop/index.cat?cm\_sp=navigation-\_-top\_nav-\_-sportshop)
* Sitka Gear: Sitka is really leading the market in terms of innovative, big game hunting clothing and gear made for the extreme elements and extreme athlete hunters. Sitka’s products often sell out quickly as they do not mass-produce a large amount of gear. They also have paired their products with some of the hunting world’s top guides in an ambassador program and do a great job of promoting and representing big game hunting through various social media platforms. ([www.sitkagear.com](http://www.sitkagear.com))

I hope to write more posts in the future more focused on various specifics related to hunting (and a few fishing posts as well) but wanted to give a general article to introduce this new series.

Representing the 9%!

- Bekah