

The Well-Mannered Hunter

BY BILL KLEIN

Most hunters know to ask permission before hunting on private land, and to close the gates so the cows don't get out. But private-land etiquette extends far beyond that.

Straddling the peak of the roof on my 100-year-old farmhouse, the roofer had a good view of deer habitat. "I'd consider it a privilege if I could try my luck bowhunting on your place," he said.

When I said maybe he could, he scrambled down the ladder to show me his expensive bow, tucked in a hard case under the roofing tools in his truck. Also in the case was a quiver full of carbon-shaft broadheads and some field points for practice.

From underneath a bow and arrow target so riddled with holes that it looked like a giant round of Swiss cheese, he fished out a dog-eared photo album.

"And this is my son Jason," he said as he led me through several pages of deer hunting snapshots.

"But where are the deer?" I asked.

"Oh, Jason has passed on lots of smaller does and button bucks. He's waiting for the right one."

After telling me he scouts year-round, he asked, "Do you mind if I take a break from the roofing to look for deer signs now?"

"Chuck," I said, "I'm paying you by the job, not by the hour. Have at it."

Unknowingly, or perhaps knowingly, Chuck had hit all of my "yes" buttons for granting permission to hunt. He had obviously made an investment of time, energy and resources in his sport. He knew the critical importance of scouting early. And most important to me, he had made a commitment to teach the next generation of hunters reverence for the resource.

For nearly 20 years I've been granting or denying hunters access to my small farm. And for many more years, I've been asking for permission to hunt all across the Midwest. I've made some mistakes, especially early in my hunting career. And I've learned from them. I've seen hunters who do—and hunters who don't—get the direct connection between their behavior and their access to private land.

Here are some highlights of the lore I have picked up and tried to pass along to my own sons and daughters.



Scout For Land

One of my axioms of hunting: Go where the game is. Check out the wildlife population in your desired area. Then plan one or more scouting trips at least a month in advance of the season opener.

Take along a plat map book of the county you are scouting. If you see game while you are driving around, mark the location on the map. The plat book provides the landowner's name, then you can use the telephone directory or Internet to look up a phone number or mailing address to contact the owner later. Many county offices sell plat maps of individual townships (six square miles) or a plat map book of all townships in a county.

Talk to the Landowner

Whenever possible, ask for hunting permission face to face. It's much easier for a landowner to say "no" over the phone.

When you meet the landowner, light up your face with your warmest smile and state who you are. Begin the discussion by referring to the plat map. The map labels you a serious hunter intent on not trespassing, and it enables you to show the owner where you would like to hunt. Specify when and for what species you plan to hunt. Be candid about how many hunters will be with you. Try to keep your group small.

Property owners like to know who is hunting on their land. When I approach landowners, I always hand them one of my hunter's cards. One side of the card has my name, address, and phone number, and a picture of my dog and me. The flip side has my hunter honor code. I invested about \$35 in my cards at a local print shop.



Introduce Young Hunters

If you plan to have youngsters hunt with you, have them tag along when you ask for permission. This experience serves as a good example for young hunters, and their presence enhances your chance for success in securing permission. Young people bring the right kind of emotions to the moment—anticipation, excitement and joy. And adults find it harder to disappoint children.

If the answer is "no," always say, "Thank you, just the same." I've been stopped in my retreat to my truck several times by people who changed their mind because of my courteous behavior.

If the answer is "yes," ask the landowner to tell you where not to hunt. Mark the location of livestock, standing crops, and any other off-limits sections in pencil on your plat map.

Plan to Walk

On the day of the hunt, park near the landowner's home, let him or her know you've arrived, and then walk—don't drive—to the hunting ground. **Walking is one of the joys of hunting.** And it assures you won't be mashing crops with a 5,000-pound pickup truck.

If you are hunting with a dog, make sure your host has agreed to that. Use a leash until you are away from cats and other temptations. Remember, how you and the other members of your hunting party conduct yourselves will dictate whether you will be welcomed back—or not.

Stick to Your Stated Time and Quarry

A yes from a landowner doesn't mean carte blanche to hunt anything anytime. **Agree on what quarry you will hunt and when you will hunt.** Never assume permission to hunt is for any other day than that one you asked to hunt.

I gave a fellow permission to hunt deer on my property last fall. Hearing several reports from his shotgun before 8 a.m., I thought he was either shooting poorly or had multiple tags to fill. But when he came back to his truck, he was carrying two pheasants. When I reminded him of the 8 a.m. start time on pheasants, he said, "I don't have my watch with me."

Wear your watch. And if you say you want to hunt deer, stick to deer.

Alter the Land Only With Permission

If you want to put up a deer stand, first discuss its construction, placement and dismantling.

If you need to trim branches to open shooting lanes, get the landowner's approval before whacking away.

If you are camping overnight on the property, a campfire is nice; but first ask if you may build one. Always judge dry conditions, humidity and wind before lighting a fire. When in doubt about your ability to contain a fire, do without.

A good rule of thumb: Leave things as you found them. Assume you will be cleaning your game at your own home. In case circumstances such as warm weather dictate gutting immediately, get your host's permission before unsheathing your knife. Ask if you should bury the gut pile.

A compact shovel is a handy tool on all kinds of hunts. Besides using it to clean up after drawing game, you can use it to dig a latrine. The same deer hunter who shot birds on my property also left some toilet paper, flagging his open-air spot, which my black lab found and rolled in.

Say Thanks in Many Ways

After the hunt, take a moment to stop and say thanks. If you've been successful, ask if the landowner would enjoy a share of the harvest. Deliver cleaned, wrapped and labeled game as soon as possible. Remember to give your host a game receipt with your name, address, and hunting license ID number; the recipient's name and address; a description of the gift (including quantity of each species); and the date.

When you are hunting someone's property, you might notice a problem, such as a broken fence or a tree down across a tractor path. Tell your host what you have seen and offer to help fix it.

When you've hung up your hunting boots for another season, write a follow-up letter to your hosts. I once sent a photograph of my daughter to a farm couple who hosted her first pheasant hunt. When I returned a year later, I was pleased to see





the picture still posted on their refrigerator.

I have a list of landowners who get a poinsettia from me every Christmas, whether or not I hunted on their property the previous fall. Expensive? Yes, but consider the money you have invested in your hunting equipment. A gift to thank the people who provided you a place to hunt is a small part of your overall investment in the sport.

Keep Your Friends

The friendships I forge with landowners are among the genuine joys of hunting. Many years ago I was granted permission to hunt pheasants on a farm in Union County. Russell, the landowner, enjoyed teaching me about the business of farming. Now, nearly 30 years later, it has been my privilege to count his son, Ken, and grandson, David, among my life-long friends. The social gatherings after the hunt are like icing on the cake for a bird hunter.

Such friendships transcend the taking of another buck or another duck. And they add a dimension to the sport that lasts well beyond the hunting season.

Bill Klein is a lifelong hunter and a freelance writer.



Hunter Honor Code

I promise to know the rules before the season starts.

I promise to obey the rules even when no one is watching.

I promise to teach the next generation of hunters by good example.

I promise to remember my personal bag limit may be less than the legal limit.

I promise to treat the land and the landowner with respect.