

Bowhunting and buck fever – gender differences

By Dr Nicola Davies



Although hunting is still a predominantly male activity, over the last decade or so many female hunters

have taken to the sport. In fact, women in America are joining hunting groups at a faster rate than men. The motivations for hunting may vary, though research shows there are not many significant gender disparities between male and female hunters. What does seem to distinguish hunters from one another is experience in hunting, rather than gender. There are also differences between younger and older female hunters – in the same way that there are such differences between younger and older male hunters – that impact the hunting experience.

The notion that there might be gender differences in the experience of buck fever – a state of nervous excitement when hunters spot a deer or other animal – is an interesting one. It begs the question: do female hunters experience buck fever after a shot, while male hunters undergo the experience before the shot? Dr Nicola Davies explores this issue based on the experiences, opinions and beliefs of novice and expert hunters.

The experience of buck fever

Buck fever refers to a physiological and psychological experience among hunters that can be described as nervous excitement at the sight of deer or game. It's a natural experience, and the excitement comes from a sudden rush of adrenalin when hunters spot a target they are about to shoot. Generally, hunters describe the sensation of buck fever as wonderful or mesmerizing, even though such an experience is likely to make them miss the shot. Some hunters, under the momentary spell of buck fever, talk of seeing a deer growing two heads, or

becoming larger than smaller. Clearly, the experience of buck fever engages both the mind and body.

Experienced hunters regard buck fever as an inevitable and welcome part of hunting. The interesting aspect of buck fever is that experienced hunters tend to get gripped by it after a shot, whereas novices generally undergo it before taking a shot. Consequently, newcomers to hunting are likely to miss their first shot, given the effects of buck fever. Buck fever can be so intense that first-time hunters even miss easy shots.

The best cure for buck fever lies in experience; the more you hunt, the more control you learn to establish over the experience you anticipate. Every hunting opportunity presents the chance to learn to engage with, and get the better of, buck fever. After enough hunting outings and shots, which often takes years for many hunters, buck fever is likely to shift from before a shot to after a killing shot.

Hunting, buck fever and gender

The answer to the question of whether male and female hunters experience buck fever differently seems to be inconclusive. Before taking a closer look at the issue, two slight detours are in order: one pertaining to the motivations for hunting, specifically if men and women have different kinds of motivations when hunting. The other concerns the problematic notion of gender differences itself.

Research on differences in motivation between female and male hunters shows that although there are general differences in patterns of motivation, the most significant finding is that motivations change over time. Some findings include the following:

Older females who hunt tend to take more hunting trips than younger female hunters. There are a myriad of reasons for this, including the fact that younger women who hunt tend to be more preoccupied by other aspects of their lives such as family, children, or work commitments.

Most female hunters are primarily motivated by familial and utilitarian concerns, like hunting for the meat, and to be with family and friends on the trip. This does not mean that every female hunter goes along for the sake of being social on every occasion, however.

While younger male hunters tend to be primarily motivated by the thrill of the experience, and for the sake of recognition by older hunters, older male hunters regard recognition as less important.

Both younger male and female hunters have an interest in achieving success on a hunting trip, and link this to their self-image. Self-image becomes less of an issue with hunting experience among both male and female hunters, when being with friends in nature starts to assume more importance with experience and age.

Both male and female hunters regard the social aspect of hunting, being with family and friends, as equally important. They value the establishment and development of positive social relationships among hunters.

Harvest success, or whether or not you've bagged game, and how many animals you shot successfully, do not seem to have an impact on the motivation to continue hunting for either men

or women. In other words, hunting success has little impact on whether or not a hunt is satisfying.

Some women hunters experience buck fever before taking a shot, while other women hunters undergo the experience afterwards; in other words, this is not a gender issue.

On gender differences

It seems premature to attribute irrevocable gender differences to the experience of buck fever between male and female hunters. What does emerge from the research is that hunting experience, rather than gender, has more of a fundamental role as to whether a hunter experiences it before or after a shot. Even in cases where many female hunters undergo the experience afterwards, it would still be risky to draw hard and fast conclusions about the issue. If, for example, out of a group of ten female hunters eight undergo buck fever after a shot, how do you make sense of the experience of the remaining two? Moreover, in light of research, it seems unlikely that the eight in the example will continue to experience buck fever after a shot throughout their hunting careers.

The important point to remember regarding research and observations about gender differences in general is that scientific studies deal with statistical averages, which says little about the experiences of individual male and female hunters. For example, men are generally taller and stronger than women. However, some, or many, women are taller and stronger than some or many men. In the same way it's probable that while many male hunters experience buck fever before a shot, some will experience it afterwards. The same goes for women hunters; many younger female (and male hunters) get buck fever before the shot, while older, more experienced hunters (both male and female) get it after a shot.

The biggest recorded differences between male and female hunters, therefore, relates to motivations for hunting. However, these motives are fluid and dynamic, and change. Even among female and male hunters, there are disparities related to age and experience, rather than masculinity or femininity. The motives of novice female hunters, for example, are generally different than those of older expert female hunters; whereas many younger female hunters are excited by the possibility of bagging game, older female hunters are by and large less concerned about a successful harvest.

Another interesting observation about buck fever is that hunters learn to control buck fever through practicing specific breathing techniques. Since buck fever seemingly never goes away, how a hunter deals with it is important, otherwise it might ruin a successful hunt. There is the possibility that the more adept a hunter becomes at controlling buck fever through breathing – along with their increasing practice in hunting game – the less the experience might become an obstacle before making a shot. In other words, buck fever might shift to after a shot has been made because a hunter has learned to control when and how it manifests. It might show up after a shot because of prior excellent breathing control. After a shot, when the need to control breathing is no longer important, the delayed experience of buck fever kicks in. This has nothing to do with gender, but experience.

