

If it's autumn, it's time for bow hunting in Rappahannock



Stealthy and sporty

BY BOB HURLEY | *For Foothills Forum*

"Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me;" — BOOK OF GENESIS 27:3

In Rappahannock County, many still do each fall. It's as much tradition as it is sport, with the love of archery hunting handed down through generations.

The bow and arrow have played a critical

role in human survival for millennia. Over 65,000 years ago, hunters in the Middle Stone Age in South Africa developed a simple technology by tying both ends of a stick with a string and modifying a spear into an arrow.

It was a game changer. The speed of the arrow enabled hunters to kill their prey at greater distances, giving them a big edge in getting food as well as defending themselves against wild animals

Linn Barnes with his crossbow, which can shoot bolts over 440 feet per second.

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BOW

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and human enemies.

As firearms became more widespread in the 15th and 16th centuries, archery used for hunting and warfare dwindled. Today, high-tech versions of the old weapons are used at sporting competitions, including the Olympics, and by a group of hunters who enthusiastically embrace the challenges of bow hunting.

Modern “compound” bows and crossbows – which use a system of cables and pulleys to create greater power and accuracy – are not made of wood but of artificial materials.

Hoffman Archery in Warrenton has served archers in the region for 30 years. Farron Moss, owner and the “go to” expert on archery for many bow hunters in the area, sells more than 1,000 bows a year, and services another 5,000. Prices for compound bows and crossbows range from \$300 to almost \$3,000, depending on accessories.

“Although hunting overall is unfortunately a dying fraternity, our sales picked up over the past two years due to Covid,” he said. “People were looking for a reason to get outdoors and archery benefitted from that. We had about a 25% jump in sales during Covid. About 40% of sales were to folks new to the sport.”

According to the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, archery hunters took 14% of the more than 190,500 deer harvested during the 2021-2022 season. Hunters using muzzleloaders and rifles took 23% and 63% of the total harvest, respectively.

Moss said most bow hunters are a little more selective in what they harvest and are not always looking for the opportunity to shoot a deer.

“There is a reason they say bow hunting is a challenging sport. It is not easy, as it is a close-range sport that takes practiced skills,” Moss said. “About 90% of bow hunters take their shots inside 20 yards. It is the art of stealth, the art of stalking, and the art of concealment. All those things go into bow hunting.”

Crossbows are fired horizontally and can be pre-loaded because the “draw” string can be locked into place. “If you want to just hunt, a crossbow is very hard to beat. It is a lot like shooting a rifle. With a greater draw weight and higher level of energy transfer, arrows fired by crossbows can travel up to 500 feet per second,” said Moss.

By comparison, hunting with a compound bow is more challenging. You have to load the arrow when you see your target and manually draw the bow. A pulley system is used to increase the draw weight. Arrows from a compound bow can reach speeds of 300 feet per second.

Father and son

Roy Pullen of Gid Brown Hollow began bow hunting when he was 12 years old. “My stepfather gave me an ‘old school’ compound bow that was given to him when he was a kid,” he said. “It was way too long for me but I practiced day in and day out with him



“It is the art of stealth, the art of stalking, and the art of concealment.”

FARRON MOSS
Hoffman Archery

Bob Day of Woodville on a misty day near Five Forks.



Day's compound bow has bright pin fiber optic sights that glow in the lowlight of optimal hunting hours.

until I finally got the hang of it. I ended up getting my first deer with it.”

Pullen, whose stepfather taught him how to hunt and fish, is passing on those skills and traditions to his eight-year-old son, Mason. “It is not just about the sport part of hunting, but giving him the ability to provide. If he ever needed it, he could get out there and fend for himself.”

“He is still too young to pull back on a compound bow so I’m teaching him with a toy-like bow and arrow,” he said. “He actually took his first deer with a rifle when he was six years old. He was sitting on my lap, did all the aiming, and pulled the trigger. I think I was more excited than he was.”

Stringed instruments

During the fall archery season, when they are not playing stringed instruments at concerts, professional musicians Allison Hampton, who plays the harp, and Linn Barnes who plays the lute, mandolin, guitar, and viola, are plucking different kinds of strings – those of a crossbow. This year the husband-and-wife team – bow hunting for about 40 years – hunted almost every day of the archery-only deer season which ran from Oct. 1 to Nov. 4. They each bagged a deer.

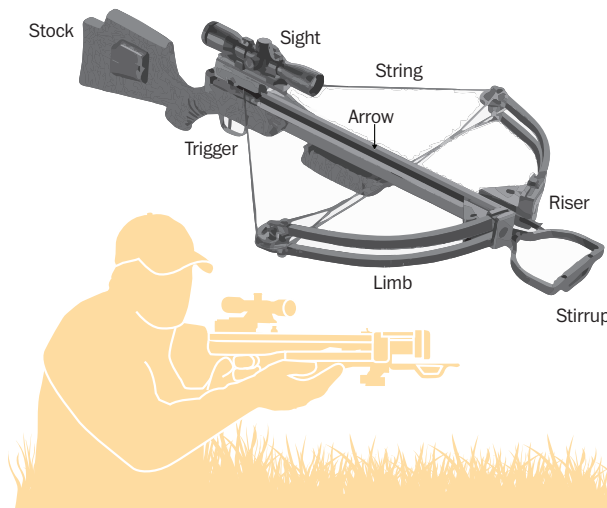
“I was a competitive archer when I grew up in Washington, D.C.,” said Barnes. “Our family later moved to Munich, Germany, where venison was readily available in the

Bow hunting explained

While the number of hunters has fallen in recent years, there was a surge in interest during Covid, as people looked to new ways to enjoy the outdoors. Hunting with a bow and arrow takes patience, which is part of the appeal for many of the hunters who choose it for the quiet enjoyment of being out in nature. A comparison of two types of bow hunting:

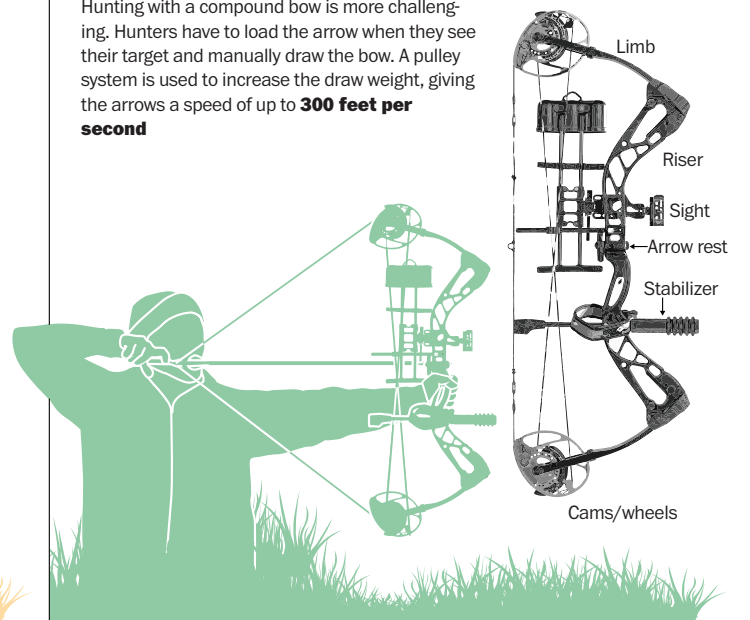
Crossbow

Crossbows are fired horizontally and can be pre-loaded because the “draw” string can be locked into place. Firing is a lot like shooting a rifle. With a greater draw weight and higher level of energy transfer, crossbows arrows can travel up to **500 feet per second**



Compound bow

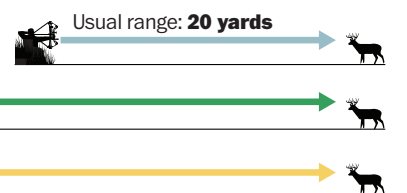
Hunting with a compound bow is more challenging. Hunters have to load the arrow when they see their target and manually draw the bow. A pulley system is used to increase the draw weight, giving the arrows a speed of up to **300 feet per second**



For comparison, shooting with a rifle can hit a target more than twice the Crossbow range – **200 yards**.

Crossbow range: **90 yards**

Compound bow range: **60 yards**



Source: Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, North Carolina State University School of Natural Resources

By Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

“It is not just about the sport part of hunting, but giving him the ability to provide.”

ROY PULLEN

on teaching his son to hunt

Roy Pullen with his son Mason, 8, at a property Roy bow hunts in Castleton. Mason is too young to bow hunt, but he treks out with his dad to learn the ways.

➔ markets. We always had saddle of venison, the prime cut, for holidays. When I returned to the states, I couldn't find it anywhere and that's when I got into bow hunting.”

Hampton got hooked on the sport a couple of years after Barnes. “It is not always about taking a deer,” she said. “There is something lovely about being in the woods in the early morning hours, watching and listening to the wildlife as the forest comes alive.”

When hunting, they often rotate between several deer stands depending on the direction of the wind. “It's all about the wind,” said Hampton. “You don't want to be upwind of the deer because they will smell you and never get close enough for a decent shot.”

The couple does their own meat processing, taking great care to prepare the various cuts. An accomplished chef and caterer, Hampton prepares venison dishes in the French or German style. “I can tell you there is nothing more delicious than Allison's roast saddle of venison with a bottle of good red wine,” said Barnes.

More of a challenge

Bob Day of Woodville switched from rifles and shotguns to bows and arrows in 1985. “A friend of mine got me into bow hunting and that did it,” he said. “I'd much rather hunt with a bow than a gun. It is a pretty time of the year, not too cold, and you have to get close to the animal (to shoot it),” he said.

Although some crossbows are accurate up to 90 yards and compound bows up to 60 yards, many bow hunters

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usually take their shots at much closer ranges.

Bow hunters must make little movement when setting up the shot. "It's more of a challenge than gun hunting where you can shoot at 200 yards," said Day. "You have to be so still and quiet. If you have two or three deer around you and focus on one, when you raise the bow, the others are likely to see you. Then it is over."

Day said he's not really into the killing part of the hunt and has probably passed on 20 shots this year. "I eat the meat and usually just take one deer a year. Mostly, I just like being out there. Because you have to be almost invisible, I've seen some things I probably would never see gun hunting, the way the animals interact with each other. I've had a hawk almost land on my shoulder."

Because bow hunting for deer usually starts in early October – about a full month before the muzzleloader season and six weeks before rifle season – the bow hunter has an early jump on the hunting season.

"I love to hunt and bow hunting gets you out in the woods earlier," said Ken



Williams (left) of Luray, who lived in Rappahannock for 30 years and hunts in the Slate Mills area. "It's quiet and deer are not frightened by shotguns or rifles going off. That gives



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR Foothills Forum

Allison Hampton and Linn Barnes at their target range near Rock Mills.

you an advantage, but you have to be very patient and very still and wait for the deer to come close. You only have one shot. There are no second chances with a bow."

Best part of the day

Matt Phillips, who lives in Woodstock, has been an avid hunter ever since his father took him in a backpack deer hunting. He took up the bow when he was 17 years old. It stuck. "Every year, over the last 20 years, I've taken my vacation to hunt, much to my wife's displeasure," he said.

During the fall season, when the weather cools, deer are usually on the move. But when the weather is warm during daylight hours they tend to

stay put until the night. "This year has been a tough archery season because it has been so warm. It has been the first season in the last seven I've yet to see a buck in daylight," said Phillips.

A member of the Red Oak Mountain Hunting Club in Woodville, Phillips, like other hunters interviewed for this story, expressed concern over the decline in hunting. "It's sad for me to see the decline in hunter numbers," he said. "I wish I knew the reason for the decline. Maybe the parents of the generation behind me never hunted and couldn't pass it down to their kids. I just don't know."

According to the North Carolina State University School of Natural Resources, national hunting participation hit a high in 1982 with

about 17 million hunters, or 7% of the population. Today, about 11.5 million people, or about 4% of the population, hunt.

In Rappahannock County 934 hunting licenses were sold in 2012. In 2022 that number fell to 522, a 44% drop.

To encourage the hunting tradition, Phillips and other members of his hunting club take kids out to fields and forests. "We take as many children hunting as we can," he said. "Not many are able to bow hunt because they are still young, but they do harvest deer and it is awesome to watch.

"These kids," he said, "experience so much more than hunting. Getting in position, experiencing the stillness before daybreak, and then watching the sun rise is just amazing. The wildlife come alive and the birds start chirping. It's the best part of the day."

WHAT IS Foothills Forum?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling

the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

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*Andrea Ferrero
Orthopedic patient*



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