

## **Wildlife Cooperatives: We Need Community**

*by Anna Mitterling, Wildlife Cooperative Coordinator, MUCC*

I love fall. The colors, temperatures, crisp air, apple cider, and of course the hunting! Deer, pheasants and turkeys are my favorites, and I can do all three in the fall. The peace and excitement of sitting in a stand watching for deer, leaning against a tree listening for turkeys, or walking the field scanning for pheasants take me back to a place of balance and perspective. The business of life washes away, the to-do list becomes forgotten, and the chaos of my brain slowly becomes silenced by the sound of the wind in the trees, the chatter of squirrels, and the hope of a harvest.

While we all have different motivations for why we go out in the field, there is a lot we can all agree on. Primarily, it is just part of who we are and what we do. We can go back and find who we are in the woods, something the busy-ness of life and family can cause us to forget time-to-time. As much as we need the quiet times in solitude, we also must be honest with ourselves and accept that hunting wouldn't be as great without the other crazy nuts out there also sitting in their blinds in the snow storm.

These are the guys we talk deer with all summer, the first ones you call when you get that double bearded turkey, and the ones you give a hard time for taking the spike. Without them, we wouldn't have the camaraderie and competition that help us strive to be better hunters, learn with us as we discover better ways to hunt, and be there to hear about the biggest buck you ever saw, over, and over... and over again.

We all need some kind of deer camp and hunting community. It doesn't matter if you are a bear hunter, goose hunter, hound hunter, deer hunter, turkey hunter, pheasant hunter, duck hunter, grouse hunter.... your hunt is always better when you can tell a few people about it, or when a couple guys can be part of the hunt with you. When you miss your target, you can lament with a fellow hunter and wallow in the sadness together. And when you drop the biggest/best/oldest species of choice of your life, you can brag to all your hunting friends and they share in your excitement and be very jealous - dreaming of the day they too can have such a trophy.

Wildlife cooperatives are one solution to creating this community setting. A wildlife cooperative is formed when landowners communicate and make joint management decisions. The great thing about cooperatives is that you can work with your neighbors to improve habitat and harvest in your area as well as cultivate a network of relationships with whom you can share your hunting passions with.

Many cooperatives only have one or two meetings a year. A pre-season meeting can be used to talk about what everyone has seen over the summer, share some trail cam pictures, pick a few shooter bucks, and have a pre-game huddle to talk strategy and goals for the coming season. A post season meeting can be used to highlight the successes of the previous season, and show off some bone. Both of these meetings allow hunters to come together and share goals and

information with each other. They also create a venue where neighbors can meet each other, relationships can grow, and good food and stories can be shared by all.

As we are getting close to the seasons opening up, you may want to consider planning a pre-season event. You could have it as simple and laid back, or planned and structured as you would like. Ask neighbors to bring a dish to pass and trail camera pictures from their properties. Trail camera pictures are a great way to start conversations about what the local herd looks like and what kind of deer hunters are looking to harvest this fall. You could plan a fun activity to go along with the meet and greet. Bow golf tends to be a big hit. Maybe you have a clay shoot, or a handgun range. Some cooperatives play cards or have a pig roast. Food is always a good addition to a gathering.

Deer and other wildlife are on the brain of most hunters this time of year. Now is a great time to reach out and see what interest there may be in forming a cooperative, bringing an existing group back to life, or just talking to your neighbors. I have heard time and time again that the benefits of being in a cooperative go far beyond seeing bigger deer. The relationships built within cooperatives can be some of the most frustrating and most rewarding. While we don't always see eye-to-eye as hunters, we can at least all agree that there is nowhere else we would rather be than in the woods or out in the field.

Interested in learning more? Want to start up a deer or pheasant cooperative in your area? Feel free to contact me at [amitterling@mucc.org](mailto:amitterling@mucc.org) or 517-346-6454.