

When Julie moved from the mountainous green landscape of the panhandle of Idaho to the high desert of Eastern Washington, she hated it. “I saw a big, ugly void. Nothingness. Brown. Blah. It all seemed so flat and lacking in character”, she said. And as I was driving in from the mountains to meet Julie, I imagined many others having a similar reaction. I left the Central Cascades almost two hours prior, and I was still driving through what most people would call “a whole lot of nothing.” I saw long stretches of vast, arid land with columnar basalt cliffs in the distance: “shrub-steppe” as it is known to ecologists. Treeless plains and shrubs of sagebrush typify this landscape. With each mile out of the mountains, the green hues faded and varying shades of brown emerged. Mighty brown rocks, swirling tan dust, brittle tufts of brown grass. After I got off the mountain highway in Wenatchee, I only took about four turns in an hour and a half of driving. I listened to podcasts to keep me awake as I rattled down a straightaway outside of the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, where I was meeting Julie. I took in the sights around me: derelict wooden cattle chutes, power lines, and a myriad of birds. Quails and pheasants dashed across the road as I turned my head to get another look.

We had arranged to meet at the Potholes General Store, a small gas station across the street from the local state park of the same name. This store seemed to serve as the local watering hole for the surrounding area. Everyone knew everyone else. As I stepped out of my car, I felt eyes on me; I was a stranger in this land of familiar faces. My presence drew attention in this town – if you could even call it that.

Julie pulled up in her navy blue Jeep Compass, hopped out, and greeted me with a hug. Her voice was cheery yet steady and assured. She wore all camo - a tank top and cargo pants. She was slim, with desert-sun-tanned skin. Julie suggested we drive over to the wildlife refuge together. As I slid into the passenger seat, I worked my way around the stuff that littered the seat and floor. She reached over to toss some of her belongings into the back.

She abandoned small talk, and we dove into a discussion as we cruised towards the refuge. Julie drove as I gazed out the windows, trying to balance listening and looking. Out to our left was a vast swath of blue, a seemingly endless lake that looked misplaced, as most sizable bodies of water do in the desert. To our right, a mixed landscape of cliffs and scattered ponds. The hills were a dusty tan color except for the few vibrant green patches where water flowed. We were driving on the bridge separating the Potholes Reservoir from the downstream wetlands and riparian areas that exist as a result of the human development in the area. Dripping from local irrigation systems and the

reservoir established somewhat of an oasis over what used to be a dry, desert landscape. This introduction of water created new wetlands that led to an increase in wildlife activity and now serves as a stopover point for migrating birds.

Julie made a right off the main road into the refuge. She navigated the maze of dirt roads expertly, turning when necessary, carefully avoiding potholes while chatting away absentmindedly. I was merely a passenger along for the ride into her world. After ten minutes on the dirt roads, Julie pulled over into a small dirt parking spot. It was a hot July evening, and the reserve sits in the rain shadow of the Cascade mountains, so the ground looked parched. We hopped out of the car, and Julie carefully examined her parking spot, looking for any tall grass that could catch fire due to the heat of the undercarriage. All clear. Julie walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. Lying there was a hunting bow, larger and more technical-looking than I expected it to be. I had envisioned something out of Robin Hood, so Julie's bow looked heavy and cold. It was made of metal, mostly black, with bright blue accents, yet had a wavy, organic frame. It held five arrows with neon green and blue fletching, the little fin-shaped segments on the end of the shaft. She grabbed the bow and slung a binocular pouch across her chest. We stepped over a low hanging chain into the sagebrush valley and followed a faint path, walking through a golden basin of cheatgrass with umber cliffs towering on either side of us.

The first time Julie stepped foot in the wildlife refuge was only a year before our visit and a year after Julie had moved to the area. On a September morning, Julie and her husband had arrived early to bow hunt. The warm glow of sunrise flooded the valley. They pulled up to the same dirt pullout that we used that day, the rimrocks of columnar basalt directly in front of them as they stepped out of the car. Atop these cliffs, a group of deer stood silhouetted by the rising sun. In that moment, everything had changed; Julie's hatred for Eastern Washington dissipated. She fell in love with this place. She gazed at the group of deer in awe, thinking, "This is the most amazing place ever."

Julie wasn't always a hunter. She wasn't raised in a hunting household. Growing up in Oregon, she was the type of kid who rode horses, kept dogs and cats as pets, and watched nature documentaries on TV. She never wanted to hurt any animal; she thought hunting was cruel and unnecessary. When she was a teenager, her older sister started hunting. When her sister first brought home a deer she killed, Julie didn't understand it. "That's awful," she would say. "How could you do

that?”. But slowly, the rest of her siblings started hunting as well. One day, she went over to a friend’s house for dinner and ate elk meat for the first time. It was the best meat she had ever tasted. Hunting culture surrounded her. Her siblings hunted, her brother-in-law and his family all hunted. They would bring back freshly-killed elk or deer, and Julie helped cut up the meat and package it. She would always take some home to eat, and she realized something: she had established a connection to her food. This revelation changed her perspective on hunting; these animals were feeding an entire, extended family. If she was going to continue eating meat, this was a pretty ethical way to do it. She was the one cutting it up, cleaning it, packaging it; this anonymous process became personal.

Julie hunted for the very first time in 2010 in Oregon with her sister. They attended a workshop series organized by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife called the BOW series: Becoming Outdoor Women. In this workshop series, Julie and her sister acquired survival skills and learned to fly-fish and cook outdoors. They also attended a pheasant hunt. When she was learning, Julie targeted birds with a shotgun. She started hunting more frequently. She moved to Idaho and progressed to rifle hunting deer a few years later. The abundance of rifle hunting in Idaho spoiled her; high-quality over-the-counter tags for mule deer are easy to come by for Idaho residents, Julie explained. Over-the-counter tags are simple; the hunter purchases permits for the animal and location they wish to hunt at licensed businesses or state wildlife offices. But each state manages their tags differently, and in Washington, hunters often have to enter a lottery to hunt big game animals for the entire hunting season. Once Julie moved to Washington, she found herself trying to rifle hunt on smaller bits of public land, with more people, during a short, ten-day hunting season – the only opportunity to use over-the-counter tags. Throughout her first season in Washington, Julie saw a lot of people but not a lot of deer. If she wanted a better rifle hunting season, she would have to put in for a lottery tag – and that was no guarantee. So the next year, Julie decided to pick up bow hunting. The season for bow hunting in Washington is longer than the rifle hunting season – and devoid of crowds.

“Oh, oh shit.” Julie stopped abruptly in the middle of the story she was telling. I snapped my head to get a glimpse of what she was seeing. Julie directed me, “Stay low. Okay, stop, stop, stop, stop. Can you see ‘em?” A couple of bucks stood poised across a small valley, staring straight at us. “Those are nice bucks,” Julie whispered, quietly laughing, her excitement contagious. Quickly, her smile fell, and her face hardened. “I feel bad. I was hoping if we saw any deer, we would see them

first and not scare them. 'That's my bad.'" She moved slowly and pulled out her binoculars to get a better look. From where I stood, beams of sunlight radiated out from behind her. Now it was she who was silhouetted by the sun.

I followed Julie as we hiked across rolling hills and up onto a rise, the scratchy grass wisping around my bare calves. She debated whether or not to continue; she didn't want to stress the deer that we had just seen. We decided to progress upward, trying to move slowly and silently through the tall grass. Step, Crunch. Step, Crunch. The sounds rang louder, each one more distinct. Every step I took was a blaring broadcast of my presence. I didn't understand how Julie could be so quiet. I felt entirely out of my element – I'm supposed to be the one who spends all my time in the wilderness. I'm usually the one pointing out animals to my friends. But here, with Julie, I was loud and awkward, entirely unaware of how to act in front of these majestic creatures. She existed so effortlessly in this environment. After a few more minutes of crunching through the tall grass, we crested the hill and looked across the valley. The bucks we had just seen were still standing in the distance, aware of our every movement. Julie turned to me, "You can see, like, you feel like we're being pretty quiet and moving along pretty slowly, but if we were actually bow hunting, it would be like this times one thousand."

When she is hunting, Julie thinks like a deer – moving slowly, quietly, more intentionally. She is continuously using all her senses to observe her environment. Take, for example, the wind. Hunters often carry a "wind checker," which is a small squeeze bottle of dust that allows them to check the direction of the wind quickly. Julie explains to me that wind is a critical factor to consider because of human scent. Mule deer rely heavily on their sense of smell because of the incredible amount of scent receptors in their noses – almost 300 million compared to a dog's 220 million. So Julie not only checks the wind but tries to remain as odorless as possible by using scent-free shampoo and detergents. To not 'bump' – or scare off – deer, she becomes part of the wildness, rather than a temporary inhabitant.

After Julie picked up bow hunting, she started to see this nuanced landscape with new eyes. Where she once saw empty space, she began to see deer habitat. The place that once felt devoid of beauty, Julie now calls home. And her perspective of 'beauty' slowly shifted each time she set out with her bow – Julie no longer associates this word with Idaho and its trees, mountains, and endless green. She has learned to love the sagebrush, the gently rolling hills, and especially the soaring, basalt cliffs.

“The way a seemingly small dip in the earth can provide cover for a monster buck and his doe, the way one little sagebrush can provide cover for bucks keeping out of the sun on a hot September day in the desert, the way an entire herd of deer can dance their way up the side of what looked to be a cliff with complete ease. It all caused me to see this place with new eyes. What seemed flat and lifeless at first is actually a vibrant, fascinating ecosystem teeming with life and plenty of places for critters to hide.”

Bow hunting turned into a passion for Julie, not just for the activity but for the animals that she hunts and the lands that they inhabit. Julie sees strength and perseverance in mule deer as she observes them firsthand. She noted how mule deer are exceptionally smart and resilient, often spotting hunters first and disappearing well before hunters notice them. Julie mentioned that “Once you get out there and start to learn their rhythms, and what it is they have to go through just to live, you definitely gain a whole appreciation and respect for something that can live out here day in and day out.”

Julie also started to pay attention to the interactions of deer within their ecosystem. She considers the health of plant communities, other species’ populations, and the watershed. Every element needs to stay in balance if deer populations are to thrive. “If you’re a hunter who loves hunting, you have to kind of love the animals you hunt. You have to care for their wellbeing.”, Julie articulated. Not only has this increased her interest in the species’ she hunts, but all the plant and animal communities upon which these species rely. Hunters depend on healthy, balanced ecosystems to have thriving populations of the animals they choose to hunt – and that means preserving places for these creatures to exist.

Julie always spent time on public lands. She grew up close to the Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon, so these forests and wilderness areas were an integral part of her childhood. Her family spent a lot of time on federal lands – camping, fishing, and riding horses. After taking up hunting, she sees these places in a different light. They are no longer simply fun places to spend the weekend but are now a necessity to pursue the activity she loves. She seeks out different public lands to hunt on and relies on these federal and state-run lands as a hunter. But Julie worries about the future of these places; she’s concerned they could get turned over to private corporations for resource extraction, such as drilling and mining. So as a hunter, she wants to see them protected. She

talked passionately, eager to be a voice for the voiceless. “If we don’t protect [them], then what’s going to happen in the future?”

Julie isn’t the only hunter thinking about these issues right now; this discussion is at the forefront of the hunting world as the topic of land preservation enters the political sphere. There’s a divide between individuals in the hunting culture, and Julie feels like part of a minority as a more liberal-leaning hunter. However, a conservative upbringing enables her to see from the other perspective. She thinks that a lot of hunters consider themselves Republicans, politically-speaking, but care a lot about conservation. And right now, she mentioned, those two positions seem to be at odds. “There’s kind of a shift happening. It’ll be interesting to see how it plays out.”, Julie expressed.

Julie proudly wears her hunting identity and wants other outdoor groups to realize that hunters care about federal land protection. She enthusiastically chattered about the money that hunters put into conservation efforts. And she’s right; the hunting community puts billions of dollars into habitat and species conservation through various taxes, licenses, and fundraisers. Julie mentioned the Duck Stamp – the ultimate conservation success story – which hunters must purchase as a license to hunt waterfowl. Ninety-eight percent of all proceeds from the duck stamp goes directly to acquiring land for habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since 1934, the money collected from this stamp has been used to protect over 6 million acres of habitat. And Julie’s favorite: The Pittman-Robertson act which taxes firearms and ammunition to use the revenue for wildlife conservation. Julie said she doesn’t mind paying for her hunting tags or her duck stamp, knowing that her money will go to support habitat conservation for the species that she loves.

Julie rattled off the names of hunting organizations that are doing great work to support the public lands where they hunt. But the most significant shift that she has noticed is that the big names in hunting are taking a stand for public land advocacy. Talented hunters such as Corey Jacobsen, Steven Rinella, and Randy Newberg are promoting a way of hunting that is more in-tune with their environment, rather than battling against it. They are also advocating for continued hunting access for the public and future generations by protecting the public lands where the majority of hunters hunt. And this is something that genuinely makes Julie excited for the future of hunting.

Julie and I stood in the setting sun at the top of the rise, overlooking the town of Othello, the only sign of human development visible for miles. Suddenly, a doe jumped out of the sagebrush behind us and took off across the hills. Each bound of her gait sent a thump that shook the ground

and reverberated through my body. The doe ran for a bit and then paused – from what I saw. It all happened so fast; it was hard to take it in. But Julie noticed everything. She recounted to me what had happened right in front of my eyes. The deer came to a hard stop and then blew out of her nose, alerting others to our presence. “Deer will do that, kind of as a warning to each other,” Julie explained, her eyes still fixated on the doe, which was now just a speck in the distance.

We savored a final moment before heading back down into the valley, gazing out upon the wildlife refuge one last time. The rolling hills appeared velvety in the golden light. In the distance, the bucks still stood atop the ridge – alert, silent, present. A light breeze danced through the cheatgrass and cooled my sun-warmed face. My skin tingled, my senses heightened – a newfound significance to the slight breeze. With the fading daylight, we ambled back to where Julie’s car sat.