

PARIS, Tenn. - Brenda Valentine was running a beauty shop in rural Tennessee when her shooting skills came to the attention of the hunting industry. Today, she is a television star and paid speaker at hunting conventions, where fans wait in lines for her autograph.

"People will bring me their grandpa's shotgun to sign or even kiss," she says. "Some have named their children after me."

Mrs. Valentine, 58 years old, is perhaps the most visible face of an industry effort to draw more women into the woods. As the number of male hunters has declined, the sport has targeted women with everything from pink guns to gender-specific hunting courses. Now, they're seeking out spokesmodels and pushing weapons tailored for women, such as lighter crossbows.

Television shows starring women shooters include "American Huntress" and "Family Traditions with Haley Heath," chronicling the hunting adventures of a young woman and her tag-along husband and children.

The campaign received a boost in recent weeks from the Republican Party's vice presidential nomination of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. Photographs have since emerged of the governor posing beside a caribou she'd shot, and supporters boasted that she knew how to field-dress a moose. Gov. Palin is an ideal role model, say some women hunters, because she defies the masculine image of the sport. "She's a babe," says Linda Burch, a bear-hunting Minnesota accounting executive who applies lipstick before posing for kill shots.

Gov. Palin also counters the stereotype of the woman hunter as poor, rural and uneducated. A 2003 survey of Texans who had attended a state hunting-and-outdoors training program for women found that 82% lived in cities, 79% had graduated from college and 39% had household incomes above \$80,000 a year. They spent a mean of \$3,250 a year on outdoor recreational pursuits, said the state wildlife agency, which conducted the survey.

But some women see the media focus on Gov. Palin's hunting as evidence of a lingering gender gap. Only after Vice President Dick Cheney accidentally shot a fellow hunter (causing minor injury) did his hunting habits gain attention. "Why is it news that Sarah Palin is a hunter?" asks Christine Thomas, a Wisconsin college dean and long-time advocate of programs to teach women about the outdoors.

As the overall number of U.S. hunters declined to 12.5 million from 14.1 million in the 15 years ended in 2006, the number of women hunters rose to 1.2 million from 1.1 million, according to a survey conducted every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Women hunters are training a new generation. "I see a lot of single mothers wanting to learn how to hunt because their boys want to," says Ashley Mathews, who coordinates outdoor activities for women for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

### **'Pink It and Shrink It'**

About five years ago, the outdoor-equipment industry began slapping pink paint on weapons, including handguns, and downsizing camouflage. "Initially their attitude was, 'Pink it and shrink it' and women will buy," says Beth Ann Amico, an Oklahoma hunter and dog trainer who notes that pink defeats the purpose of camouflage. "We're savvier than that."

Now, arms makers are offering shorter gun stocks and barrels for women and crossbows requiring less upper-body strength. Apparel makers such as SHE Safari and Foxy Huntress LLC are marketing camouflage expressly to women. "The Foxy Huntress knows she's dressed to kill in more ways than one," says that three-year-old company's Web site, touting "well-designed pieces cut with a female's unique form and needs in mind."



Web sites such as WomenHunters.com offer support and advice. On that site's bulletin board, contributors with names like Susie Sure Shot, bowfishinlady and sheslayer exchange tips.

**Women have become a popular target for the hunting industry.** (Courtesy of Brenda Valentine / The Wall Street Journal)

"I found this site looking for information on whether or not you can shoot a compound bow while pregnant," wrote a contributor named Jill.

"A lot of the women have shot a compound while pregnant," replied Gail. "Just be sure you are not straining when you pull the weight."

By some accounts, female hunters are different than their male counterparts. Unlike most male hunters, for instance, some share poetry with each other. "I wish I may, I wish I might, have a big buck in my sight," reads one contribution to WomenHunters.com's poetry page.

Another difference: When women hunt together, individual success is often cheered as a group accomplishment, says Mrs. Valentine, the onetime beauty-shop owner. In all-male parties, by contrast, she says one fellow's kill generally "gets everyone else pouting."

Men aren't necessarily better hunters. A 2006 ESPN contest to crown the Ultimate Outdoorsman featured 12 finalists, one of them female. Named Haley Heath, she was a Georgia wife, mother and hunter, and she made it as far as the semifinals despite competing while pregnant. That performance won Ms. Heath, now 28, her own hunting show on the Sportsman Channel.

Mrs. Valentine, a pioneer among famous women hunters, stalked game all her life while running a small-town hair salon that doubled as a hunters' hangout. Only after her daughters were older did Mrs. Valentine start traveling to archery competitions in the 1980s, where she often triumphed over men.

At a time when outdoors companies were seeking to appeal to women, Mrs. Valentine's prowess gained attention. Bass Pro Shops, among other sponsors, began paying her to conduct hunts around the country with a film crew in tow. On camera, she displayed wit, skill and knowledge, along with manicured nails and long hair.

### **First Lady of Hunting**

Sports and outdoors channels snapped up the shows, and before long, the host of an outdoors-radio program dubbed Mrs. Valentine the First Lady of Hunting, a nickname she trademarked. Her husband, once the family's primary breadwinner, has retired from a local electric utility and now works for his wife. "I always wanted to visit Wyoming and Montana," says Barney Valentine. "So this is like a dream: These companies are paying us to do it."

Of course, women hunters sometimes stir resentment among their peers. When a shop in Paris, Tenn., called Tower Sports Center held a deer-hunting contest in 1994, Mrs. Valentine won the trophy animals in all three categories: archery, muzzleloader and rifle. Before announcing the results, Tower owner Larry Dunlap asked Mrs. Valentine to bow out of two categories to make way for male winners, and she agreed. "A lot of hunters here in the area resent women being better," says Mr. Dunlap.

In hunting parties, men sometimes assumed she would whine about various hardships. When Browning, the firearms maker, agreed to send Mrs. Valentine on an otherwise male hunt in the 1990s, the man in charge of that company-sponsored event was upset: "I didn't want to have to baby-sit her," says Bill Norton, Browning's national sales manager. As it turned out, he says he learned from her, and has since come to believe that "women are better hunters. They're more conscious of small details."