

## **Award-winning outdoorswomen share love of sport**

### **Saturday**

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WESTBORO – Spend a few minutes chatting with Jennifer Ford and Kelly Dalbec, and it's clear their enthusiasm for "all things outdoors" is boundless.

Friends who share a common interest in hunting, especially turkey hunting, the two women say there's nothing better than spending a couple of hours in the woods at the start of the day in pursuit of game.

For sharing that enthusiasm and encouraging other women to discover and enjoy the outdoors, the National Wild Turkey Federation has honored the two with the Annie Oakley Award, a national recognition of the top volunteer or volunteers in the Women in the Outdoors program.

Annie Oakley was a renowned sharpshooter of the American West and for many years the star attraction of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in the late 1800s.

The NWTf selects the award winners based on efforts in promoting the organization's Save the Habitat, Save the Hunt initiative; length of time, leadership and extent of involvement with the NWTf and hunting heritage programs; success in promoting the WITO program in their community; success in recruiting new members; and letters of recommendation.

Ms. Ford explained that she, Ms. Dalbec and Sasha Dyer of Barre are coordinators of the WITO program for all Massachusetts NWTf chapters.

She said the one-day event the past four years has been held at the Auburn Sportsman's Club and has won the NWTf "best special event in the nation" four times.

Ms. Ford said the Annie Oakley Award recognition recognizes work done to prepare for and stage the one-day event. In 2016, 30 classes were available for the 140 women who took part, participants coming from across the state as well as all bordering New England states and New York.

In addition to hunting, classes included wilderness survival, outdoor photography, fishing and fly-tying, bird-watching, beekeeping, game processing and Dutch oven cooking.

Ms. Ford, a MassWildlife receptionist who lives in Holden, characterized herself as an "outdoors newbie," saying her first exposure came four years ago when she enrolled in a hunter education course.

"I wanted to be a pheasant hunter, because I loved watching the dogs work and I have Labs. Kelly and I then took part in MassWildlife's Becoming an Outdoorswoman and it was there we met a National Wild Turkey Federation committee member who pretty much roped us in," she said.

Ms. Ford said it was shortly after that she and Kelly became co-coordinators of the WITO program for NWTf's Massachusetts chapters.

"Growing up in Worcester my outdoor experience had been pretty much walking out in the backyard. No one in my family hunted," she said.

Ms. Dalbec, who lives in Rutland and is self-employed, said she's lived in the woods since the day she was born.

"No one in my family hunted, either, but I've always loved the outdoors and our family hiked a lot and spent a lot of time in the woods. We lived next to hundreds of acres of state wildlife and conservation land," she said.

Ms. Dalbec said she'd never given any thought to hunting until one day a friend suggested she try turkey hunting.

"I guess it was just being out in the woods that I began to love the stillness and the quiet. I love everything about it, sitting still for so long that chickadees land on you. I once had a white ermine run across my lap," she said.

She said her journey began with a basic archery program, a basic hunter education course, becoming a hunter education instructor and the desire to share her outdoor experiences with other women.

A member of the Norco Sportman's Club in Princeton, Ms. Dalbec said she help with the local youth pheasant and turkey hunts, explaining that while the number of boys in those hunts far outweighs the number of girls, the girls that do participate are more at ease with a female mentor.

She said the WITO program is very important in that many women never try something new without encouragement.

"And then there's the satisfaction of seeing those who do take part in the program. It's empowering, whether it's successful target shooting or bringing home fresh game for the table at the end of the day," Ms. Dalbec said.

She noted that many people today are interested in organic and sustainably sourced food, and that describes perfectly what successful hunters are able to provide their families.

Ms. Ford said today women represent the fastest-growing segment of the hunting population, adding, "And moms that enjoy hunting are very likely to share that with their daughters."

Ms. Dalbec said for many families she knows, the quality time parents spend with their children is spent outdoors hunting. She said many of the past participants in the WITO program also take part in the Becoming an

Outdoorswoman program sponsored by Mass Wildlife and go on to enjoy hunting as a social activity among their circle of friends.

Ms. Dalbec said she hunts with both bow and shotgun.

"There are those communities where firearms are prohibited, but hunting is allowed, and also those occasions where a landowner will give permission to hunt private property, but only with a bow, because 'the neighbors don't want to hear guns going off,' " she added.

Ms. Ford said she prefers hunting with a shotgun, because her accuracy with a bow is less than what she'd like it to be.

"I'd need a lot more practice to become as proficient as I need to be to be successful," she said.

Ms. Dalbec noted that recent mild winters have contributed to the state's increased wild turkey population because of the availability of food. Wild turkeys had been absent from Massachusetts woods for more than a century until wild turkeys from New York state were introduced in 1972.

"There's nothing more exciting than calling a turkey, and having it call back to you," Ms. Dalbec said.

As for the national recognition, both women said they appreciate the honor but quickly added their success is the result of "a great group of volunteers on the WITO committee and the additional volunteers who teach the classes and organize the annual event."

Both women said they are excited about the trip to the 2017 NWTF Convention and Sport Show Feb. 15 through 19 at the Opryland Resort in Nashville.

The National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in 1973. At the time, there were about 1.5 million wild turkeys in North America. Today that number is almost 7 million, the net result of science-based conservation and hunters' rights, according to the NWTF.

