



BY KELSEA HARRIS-CAPUANO | MISSOULA, MONTANA

ASK AN EXPERT

John Kruse is a writer, photographer and radio host and producer of two outdoor radio shows: award-winning Northwestern Outdoors Radio, which plays on nearly 70 stations in seven states out west, and American Outdoors Radio, which broadcasts nationally on more than 100 stations in 30 states. His shows cover a wide range of topics from fishing and hunting, to conservation and outdoor recreation. When he's not working full-time producing the show from his home studio in Wenatchee, Washington, he's getting away for a trip to fish, hike, paddle or visit to one of the many wonderful destinations he talks about on his show.

Q You're well known for your regional and national radio shows, but you began as an outdoor writer. How did you get started?

A My dad became the director of fisheries for the state of Oregon, so I grew up going to a lot of fish hatcheries and fishing with my dad throughout Oregon and on the Columbia River. I also loved to read and write, and I specifically went to Eastern Washington University because they had a creative writing program. Shortly after I arrived, they cut the entire program so I ended up getting a degree in applied psychology and spending time in the military. After the military, I became a police officer in Wenatchee, Washington. Later, my dad and I went up to British Columbia on a fishing trip, and every day we would fly out to some remote lake or river where the trout fishing and scenery were spectacular. I knew I had to write about it.

I wrote this article and the editor of a very small magazine, The North American Sportsman, said they needed some photos. The only photos I had were from a disposable 35-millimeter camera, but they were decent enough to make it work. That was my first published article. From there, I started writing more and was published in a few smaller magazines. I labored in the minor leagues for the next seven years or so writing on a pretty regular basis.

Q How did you transition to radio?

A In my police career, I had been promoted to sergeant and became the public information officer for our department and was talking on the local radio station every week. They wanted to start a fishing and hunting show. The programming director knew I was an outdoor writer and reached out to ask if I wanted to do it. I had no experience, and he brought me in and showed me how to use the software and microphone in a 30-minute crash course in broadcasting. I was told that if I had any questions, to ask the DJ. I would come in at 6:30 in the morning, before I went to work, do a little three-minute segment about a place to go fishing or hunting or a state park to visit. Maybe I would bring somebody in to interview. I did that for about four years, and then the programming director moved on. The new director said, "Hey, would you like to host the live show?" I was terrified, but I said yes.

Q How would you describe your development as a radio broadcaster? Did it come to you easily, or did you work at it?

A At the beginning, I was awful. I think you always try to find a voice, somebody to emulate, especially if you don't know what you're doing. I chose poorly because I decided to emulate William Shatner from Star Trek, which was a terrible idea. (For those of you unfamiliar, Shatner spoke with a lot of dramatic exclamations and long pauses between words.) It was horrific, I can't believe they kept me on air. That went on for a year, and I slowly got better. I was diligent about learning to be better on the radio. I bought a book called "Creating Powerful Radio" by a woman named Valerie Geller that was really helpful for me.

When the recession hit in 2008, radio was hit hard. I thought that was the end of my show. The programming director said they wanted to keep me — I was getting better and there was interest from the local outdoor community in the content. The director wanted me to syndicate and had to explain to me how syndication works — the process of trying to get on more stations and find sponsors. I had to learn to be a salesperson. But that first station broadcasted my show on their sister station, and then I reached out to a really small station by the Canadian border and they picked it up, and I was officially syndicated. I remember one of my first sponsors was Mack's Lure company, and they're still with me to this day.

Q You already mentioned the challenge of finding your radio voice. Is there another significant challenge you faced that stands out to you in your radio career?

A I think the one of the hardest things to learn in this industry not just as a radio host, but anybody who has a TV show, or

tries to monetize a podcast, is the sponsorship game. When I was a government employee, I never had to sell myself, and that was hard for me to do. To approach someone or a business and say, I'm worth X amount of money, you should support me, that was difficult. It took me a long time to compare and figure out the market range for what my peers were doing and be comfortable asking for an amount.

Q What advice would you give to those hoping to similarly combine outdoor passion with the communications/broadcast sector?

A First, you can do it no matter what. Whether you're trying to have a podcast or whether you're trying to have a radio or a TV show or a YouTube channel, don't just say "I'm going to have one." Dedicate yourself to being the best in your niche, and be intentional about it. Do the research, know where you need to improve and work on it. I'm not trained as a writer. I don't have a journalism or writing degree and had zero radio broadcasting background when I started. If you believe in yourself and are willing to put in the work, you can do it.

Be willing to experience a lot of rejection. Grow a thick skin. You get told "no" all the time, whether it's a station that won't carry the show or a sponsor who won't support you. But every "yes" is so glorious. You just have to learn not to take it personally. And along with outright rejections are also a lot of unanswered queries, voice mails or emails that are never returned. Be bold, don't be deterred and keep plugging away and you will find a way into the industry.

Q What would you attribute to the show really taking off?

A After I was syndicated and hosted on those first few stations, I would go in the studio, record the show, put it on a CD and then mail out the CDs to the stations that broadcasted the show. We were on about 11 stations in Washington and had a couple in Oregon. I contacted this small station in Oregon and those folks said they wouldn't air my show with a CD. I had to have an FTP (File Transfer Protocol) site. Basically, I had to figure out how to get my recorded shows online

so the stations could download the show. I give that guy mad credit. As soon as I did that, we went from 11 stations to 29 stations in a year.

Q You have two shows, Northwest Outdoors Radio and American Outdoors Radio. One is regional and the other is national. Is it hard to juggle both shows?

A When the regional show grew to about 70 stations in five states, I had been a cop for about 20 years and I decided to retire a year before I was eligible. I lived on savings the first year and walked away from my career in police work to do the radio. In 2016, I put in my papers, and people still come up to me and ask if I'm enjoying my retirement. I didn't retire — I transitioned to a second career working 50 hours a week.

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As far as content, every week I try to have something that's going to appeal to a wide audience. That's always a challenge because it's easy to be lazy and interview friends that live close to home that I talk to all the time, but then you're not doing your audience any favors. I'm stretching and learning, constantly trawling for information of interest. I subscribe to many different wire services; it's time consuming, but fun. I'm trying to get more people engaged in outdoors recreation. I'm not an expert. I'm an enthusiast, which is the approach I take in my interviews. I also will take audience input. One time somebody contacted me who had a kid with a disability, and he asked if I would do a piece or pieces on places to go with good disabled access. It's something I wouldn't have thought of by myself.

Q What are the main differences between the two shows?

A There are some nuances in the shows. America Outdoors Radio is definitely a hook and bullet show mainly focused on hunting and fishing. But we also do



conservation. And I'm really proud of the fact that we're really the only national outdoors fishing and hunting show that really tackles a conservation issue almost every week on the show. It's really important to me. If you can talk about how to catch the biggest bass or how to shoot the biggest buck, but you're not talking about conserving the resource and the land, it's all for naught.

With Northwestern Outdoors, we do cover fishing and hunting, but we'll also cover a lot of non-consumptive stuff, you know, like, let's talk to the manager of Oregon State Parks about a year of COVID and what they've had to go through operating state parks. That's something you wouldn't hear on America Outdoors Radio. The regional show has more female listeners than the national show. I think it's because we also cover conservation issues and destination ideas.

Q Where do you see yourself and the radio in the future?

A I'm not sure about the long-term future of radio. Young people aren't as interested in radio. Sponsors of mine have hired new marketing coordinators fresh out of college, and they had zero interest in radio and had no understanding of what radio can do. I lost several sponsors because the people making the buying decisions were only interested in podcasts. We podcast the radio show, but it isn't its own podcast. Are people going to grow up listening to the radio, or are they just going to gravitate towards podcasts instead? I don't know. The beauty of this current job is that I can do this as long as I have a voice. I could see myself doing this until I'm 70, and I'm about to turn 57. I can see myself doing this for another 15 years because it's something I love. You've heard that corny saying, "If you're doing a job you love, it's not work at all." I mean, it's a passion. And I do love this.

— Kelsea Harris-Capuano is a writer, outdoor adventurer, educator and OWAA journalism intern.