Hunting While Incarcerated

Hunting Survival: How Incarcerated People Turn to Wildlife for Food

Behind concrete walls and razor wire, a hidden food economy exists– one that is birthed out of scarcity, creativity, and resilience. One can find that in some U.S. prisons, people are resiliently turning to the wildlife around them– pigeons, squirrels, even rabbits– as a way of survival nourishment.

Many incarcerated folks describe their plates served with food that is oftentimes inedible– spoiled, unappetizing, or simply insufficient. One former prisoner described prison trays that came with moldy bread or "not for consumption" meat. The desperation for humane food was described by another as, "A constant hunger gnawing at you". The prison food system functions as a hidden punishment.

Improvised Hunts for Real Food

This deprivation has led many incarcerated people to engage in a form of hunting– but not the type of hunting that may exist in your preconceived idea of it: with camouflaged gear and for sport. This is for survival. In many urban facilities, it looks like catching pigeons with makeshift traps. In other more rural prisons, many folks share snaring squirrels or small mammals that share the perimeters outside of their space.

One incarcerated writer described feeding oatmeal to rabbits and sparrows in the yard, and watching the small animals gather:

> "Some mornings … I see a family of rusty tan rabbits munching on grass … I've walked within 3 feet of them … but some bound away."

Another narrative of engaging in the hunt, describes a wounded pigeon that was rescued and nurtured by others in the facility– hand-fed sunflowers seeds to nurse the pigeon back to life.

These are acts of resistance and reclaimed agency– restoring a sense of connection with nature, mixed with a risk-filled method of addressing real hunger and real desperation for survival and nourishment that exist within the prison system.

A Quiet Challenge to the System

These survival practices come with danger. Hunting or feeding wildlife in prison often violates rules. When caught, people can face write-ups, loss of privileges, or worse. And yet, for many, the risk is worth it.

This isn't just about survival. It's about dignity. For some, feeding a bird or catching a squirrel isn't just eating– it's a statement. It's a refusal to be entirely defined by confinement, a claim to a more human way of living, even inside a cell.

These survival practices are inherently dangerous when in the context of incarceration, oftentimes violating rules and facing the risks of write-ups, loss of privileges, or worse. And yet the reclamation of dignity is worth it– often stretching the motive of survival. It is the refusal to be entirely defined by confinement and finding a more human way of living, of nourishing– inside four exclusionary walls to the outside world.

Rethinking Who Gets Counted as a Hunter

Mainstream hunting narratives unsurprisingly rarely include incarcerated folks– it is not part of the sport. Yet there are fundamental values that are present and practiced amongst incarcerated individuals:

- resourcefulness
- connection and awareness to land
- mastery of improvisation
- ancestral practice and gained knowledge of small game
- the desire to have autonomy to feed oneself and others

Whether they are catching a pigeon on the rec yard or snaring a squirrel along the fence line, these hunters operate within constraints few outdoorspeople can imagine. Their practices challenge us to expand our definition of who a hunter can be and who deserves recognition—especially among communities already marginalized by race, class, and the criminal legal system.

These incarcerated hunters practice within constraints that few outdoorspeople can imagine: whether catching a pigeon out in the rec yard or trapping a squirrel along the fence line. The practices utilized ask of us in the outside world to challenge and expand the idea we may have a who a hunter can be and who deserved recognition. This is especially true for folks that are historically marginalized by race, class, gender, and in this case the criminal legal system.

If looking at hunting as a relationship between people, animals, and place then there is a practiced and maintained relationship that incarcerates individuals within very constrained circumstances.

Toward Justice, Dignity, and a Fuller Story of Hunting

These stories that are being acknowledged amongst incarcerated hunters is not to romanticize survival hunting inside prisons. Instead, it emphasizes the interconnectedness between environmental justice, hunger, poverty, and criminalization. It open an invitation to consider more core questions at the heart of food sovereignty and hunting culture:

- Who has access to food, agency over food systems, land, and land-based knowledge?
- Who is allowed contact with wildlife?
- In which ways do systems of punishment create friction with relationships to the natural world?
- How does the practice of hunting expand when we see land and game are reimagined within the constraints of concrete and a high security facility?

These questions are not simply theoretical: they hint directly at how race, poverty, and incarceration influence who has access to being part of the hunters narrative and inclusion when thinking of those we

consider within the conversation of food agency, land based knowledge and access. By sharing the perspective of incarcerated hunters, we recognize the resilience and human instinct to nourish, and connect with land and animals– even in carceral spaces. Hunting has always been about survival with its roots tied to a sense of resilience and agency– agency that hunting provides in choosing how to feed and how to connect with food.