Paul “Pab” Benford hunts in period dress and with one of the muzzleloaders he built. Benford is one of the hunters enjoying the new Mountaineer Heritage primitive hunting season.
Going PRIMITIVE

Old-school hunters enjoying the new Mountaineer Heritage Season.

WRITTEN BY DAVE LAVENDER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TORIL LAVENDER PHOTOGRAPHY
We call it the Mountaineer Heritage Season because hunters may use only the types of rifles and bows that the original mountaineer settlers had available,” says Division of Natural Resources Director Stephen McDaniel. “At a time of year when hunting activity is usually slow, we hope this will encourage people to get outside and enjoy a hunting adventure without the aid of modern technology, and that it will give them an understanding and appreciation for the historical significance of hunting in West Virginia. This is a great opportunity to hunt in January and test your hunting skills.”

How the First Season Went
During the first Mountaineer Heritage Season, 659 deer and one bear were harvested. Muzzleloaders were responsible for 636 of those deer killed. There were 23 deer taken by archery.

Gary M. Foster, assistant chief of Game Management of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources for the Wildlife Resources Section in Elkins, says the season went as expected: not high harvest numbers, but a high satisfaction rate among the primitive weapons hunters who trekked into the woods during arguably the toughest time of the year.

In January, hunters in most states are usually home sitting by their fires, cleaning their guns, and enjoying hearty bowls of venison chili.

While a good number of West Virginia hunters are doing the same, there are a few, the proud, the old-school Mountaineers, who dare brave a West Virginia winter to hunt big game as their ancestors did: the hard way.

For the second season, West Virginia will host a Mountaineer Heritage Season, Thursday through Sunday, January 9–12, 2020. The format includes hunting on both a Saturday and a Sunday, when most hunters are off from work. During the four-day season, hunters may take a deer or a bear using only primitive weapons.

During this season, hunters are restricted to using only long or recurve bows or single-shot side-lock or flintlock muzzle-loading rifles of .38 caliber or larger. Only long and recurve bows are legal in Logan, McDowell, Mingo, and Wyoming counties. Telescopic sights, in-line muzzleloaders, and firearms that have been converted into muzzleloaders by use of plugs as well as double-barreled or swivel-barreled muzzleloaders are illegal during this season. New in this second Mountaineer Heritage Season is that hunters are also allowed to use black powder pistols.

“We call it the Mountaineer Heritage Season because hunters may use only the types of rifles and bows that the original mountaineer settlers had available,” says Division of Natural Resources Director Stephen McDaniel. “At a time of year when hunting activity is usually slow, we hope this will encourage people to get outside and enjoy a hunting adventure without the aid of modern technology, and that it will give them an understanding and appreciation for the historical significance of hunting in West Virginia. This is a great opportunity to hunt in January and test your hunting skills.”
“Historically, in January, things are closing down, and it is not a time when there are a lot of big game opportunities,” Foster says. “We knew it would not impact the resource and didn’t anticipate a big harvest, and so it fell in line with what we expected. We didn’t anticipate a lot of bears because most of them are in the den at that time. I think overall we are pleased with the harvest. We got a lot of really good public feedback from folks who really enjoyed the primitive experience, so I think overall it was a success. I would anticipate it is going to be a popular season with some hunters and that it will continue into the future.”

Foster says they also are fielding calls from some out-of-state hunters interested in coming to the Mountain State to try the new winter primitive season.

“After the word about the season went out, I got phone calls from non-residents who came down and hunted,” he says. “They also wanted to see if this was a one-and-done thing or if we were going to do it in the future. I talked to one guy who was trying to figure out if he was going to buy a side-lock muzzleloader just for the season.”

Why Go Old-School Black Powder and Bows

Foster says the season was created because a large number of hunters have been requesting additional hunting opportunities in the new year, following the end of the traditional big game seasons in December. Of the five states that border West Virginia, Maryland (December 21–January 4), Ohio (January 4–7), and Virginia (December 14–January 4) have muzzleloader seasons that go into January.

“Over the years, we heard that a lot of folks wanted this,” Foster says. “The primitive groups wanted a special season, and of course they can use those weapons during the regular firearms seasons as well, but the muzzleloaders wanted a special season. In the past decade or so we had been getting a lot of requests for a season after the first of the year. We kind of kicked it around and came up with this Mountaineer Heritage season to carry on the strong hunting heritage we have in West Virginia.”

Keeping it primitive sits just right with longtime hunting buddies Paul “Pab” Benford and Fred Harmon. Both of them veteran Boy Scout leaders, Benford, a pioneer reenactor, and Harmon, a Revolutionary War reenactor, not only took advantage of the Mountaineer Heritage season to hunt primitive—they hunt with primitive weapons during the regular seasons as well.

“I use a muzzleloader on all seasons except for archery season, and I use a recurve bow on that,” says Benford, who works for Marshall University. “I am old school. I just automatically use my muzzleloader, and in turkey season I use a black powder shotgun.”

Benford has been building muzzleloaders for more than 15 years. He uses a 25-caliber for squirrels, three different 40-caliber guns for deer (a small percussion, a mule ear and a flintlock). For bear, he uses a 54-caliber percussion with a bear paw carved on the side.

Benford says he appreciates the state honoring its hunting heritage with the Mountaineer Heritage season. During the season, hunters cannot use in-line rifles that use modern inventions such as a closed breech, sealed primer, and fast rifling to allow for considerable accuracy at long ranges.

“It has to be a muzzleloader, not an in-line, which is a modern rifle to me,” Benford says. “What has happened in several other states is that they have dropped the muzzleloader season because in-line rifles killed too much game, because you can shoot them at 200 yards with basically a rifle bullet. You can shoot a regular muzzleloader round ball at a pretty good accuracy under 100 yards, but most of the deer I have killed, I have killed at under 50 yards.”
Blackpowder poured for a muzzleloader rifle. Benford takes aim with his recurve bow. Benford’s bear claw necklace. Benford takes aim with his muzzleloader. Traditional tools of a primitive hunter: A muzzleloader, powder horn, traditional antler/bone knife, and leather bag.
Benford and Harmon often dress the part as well in full pioneer regalia, carrying tomahawks and bags and wearing clothes accurate to the late 1700s.

“It’s more of a challenge, but Fred and I hunt with several other buddies who have gotten into it and so we just dress the part, too,” Benford says. “I figure if you are going to do it, you might as well go all-out. You should see the look on people’s faces when you’re walking out of the woods like something out of the 1700s.”

What You Need To Join the Heritage Hunt

Hunters must have 2020 hunting licenses and stamps to participate in the Mountaineer Heritage Season. Bear hunters must buy Bear Damage stamps unless they hold senior lifetime licenses or qualify for free licenses. Hunting licenses and stamps can be purchased online at www.wvhunt.com and at license agents and DNR district offices around the state.

During the season, hunters may take a bear or a deer of either sex. Hunters who took their limit of three bucks in the 2019 fall seasons may only take an antlerless deer. Hunters also are not permitted to hunt with crossbows or compound bows or to hunt bear with dogs. They must wear blaze orange outer garments of at least 400 square inches, except for those hunting in the bow-only counties. Hunters also are required to use their permanent DNR ID numbers to check their game at www.wvhunt.com, by calling 1-844-WVCHECK, or at a hunting and fishing license agent.

Animals harvested during Mountaineer Heritage season will be applied to hunters’ 2019 bag limits.

One modification for the 2020 season is that hunters can also use flintlock and side-lock muzzle-loading pistols as well. More details about the Mountaineer Heritage season are available in the 2019–20 West Virginia Hunting and Trapping Regulations Summary. You can view a PDF of this document online at http://www.wvdnr.gov/hunting/Regs1920/19-20_hunting_regs.pdf.