



The Woman in the Wild

Here is a Life Lived by Nature's Laws

By SHIRLEY SHIELDS

There is a lot of strength in Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci's lean body. Her spare frame moves quickly and easily despite her 75 years. Dressed in a dark, long-sleeved workshirt, loose trousers and worn athletic shoes, she looks prepared for whatever labor awaits her on a sunny, summer afternoon. Her soiled, calloused hands and suntanned skin reflect hours of work accomplished in less pleasant weather.

Buyukmihci's face is deeply lined and beautifully flawed by the elements. Her eyes are light brown, clear and attentive. Her manner is straightforward, but with a touch of caution. The lady is a lamb, but there is no doubt she can be a lion.

The sort of strength that allows this dedicated naturalist to live alone a good deal of the time, far from the convenience of corner shopping centers, removed from the benefits and distractions of modern living, has made Buyukmihci (pronounced Byook-mutch) a unique, perhaps even endangered brand of individual.

Her conviction that all living things have natural rights, to live as nature intended, by nature's laws, has set her apart from her neighbors who some-



UNEXPECTED REFUGE: At her 400-acre sanctuary, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci is most often a lamb. But there is no doubt that, when necessary, she can be a lion. Photographs by John Shields

times see her as eccentric, sometimes as troublesome. But these labels mean little to Buyukmihci. They are only a small part of the more important things that occupy her mind.

For the past 27 years, Buyukmihci has been working to make the roughly 400 acres of the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge in Newfield a haven from the carelessness of man and his society. As the owner/founder/operator of the refuge, she has managed to maintain her land in a natural and pristine state, much as it was in 1961 when she and her husband Cavit, a metallurgical engineer who died last year, moved to the property.

The carefully trimmed trails and clearings at the refuge offer access, but they do not interfere with the surrounding woodlands. Handmade birdhouses mounted high on poles to discourage predators are scattered along the walkways and paths through the woods. Uncut stands of brush and grass offer cover for rabbits and other small animals. Large and small ponds are habitats for fish, beaver and otter.

Brown thrashers, wrens, tufted titmice, bluebirds and numerous other varieties of birds flit through the tree-tops. Deer graze in peaceful safety. According to Buyukmihci, a representative of every animal species indige-



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nous to the area finds a home in Unexpected Refuge.

Creating the wildlife preserve was as simple as buying the land and expressing the idea. Maintaining it has proven to be much more difficult.

Planting wild dogwood trees to attract the bluebirds, millet and squash to feed the deer and thistles to entice the goldfinch was the easy part. This was labor born of love. Caring for the needs of the animals has not been a problem for Buyukmihci either, but protecting them has.

"The hardest and most distasteful part (of running the refuge)" Buyukmihci says, "is patrolling (for poachers). I hate to arrest people and take them to court."

If her house sat on a fenced half-acre of land, it is doubtful Buyukmihci would have to patrol her property. But fending off trespassers takes up as much, if not more, of her time than caring for the refuge does. Four hundred acres of woods, ponds and fields teeming with fish, fowl and wildlife can attract both the endangered and

the dangerous.

"I looked out my front window just a couple of weeks ago, and there were two fishermen fishing in the pond," Buyukmihci says. "I asked them to leave and they became angry. We don't fish. We don't want anyone else to fish here. I never know how they (trespassers) are going to react. But it doesn't stop me."

The stated purpose of Unexpected Refuge has always been to offer wildlife sanctuary. Years marred by court battles against poachers and some of the more destructive types of two-legged creatures have made the going tough at times and the purpose a little overshadowed. Yet, as much as she dislikes the legal proceedings, Buyukmihci never allows a trespasser to pilfer from the refuge's bounty without answering for it. It is a matter of both principle and practicality. A court fine sometimes speaks more clearly than anything.

"I don't hate anybody," Buyukmihci says. "I don't hate people. But I do hate what they do sometimes."

"A lot of animal rights people are accused of caring more about animals than people. That's not true. We know animals have nerves and they feel. Their suffering is like our suffering. We care about people, but we care about animals, too."

Slain deer, trapped beaver, rabbits killed for sport, the skills of the hunter and fisherman surface as cruel destruction in Unexpected Refuge. Naturalists abhor the mindless, needless abuses. Spirited naturalists like Buyukmihci vehemently oppose them.

Buyukmihci is active in several anti-of "The Beaver Defenders," a wildlife of The Beaver Defenders, a wildlife newsletter, and often lectures on wildlife preservation and protection. She has written two books, *Unexpected Treasures* and *Beaversprite*, and was a regular columnist for the *Millville Daily News* for 25 years.

But foremost among her pursuits is the operation of Unexpected Refuge. Her relentless effort to make it a success has been supported by hands-on assistance from family and friends. Donations have enabled the purchase of additional land from time to time. But the hours of labor and the money required to maintain the property have all stemmed from Buyukmihci's

own initiative. She has never accepted grants or any financial aid from the state or federal governments.

"I don't want any strings," she says. "If the government gave us anything, they would want to open up the refuge to hunting and fishing — wildlife management."

Buyukmihci's opposition to standard wildlife management practices is not merely philosophical. She practices what she preaches. She is, predictably, a vegetarian. She is also a vegan, "the ultimate vegetarian," as she describes herself.

"When we came to the refuge, we were all meat eaters," she says. "Then one day I caught a poacher, and he said to me, 'I eat quail and venison and you eat chicken and fish, what's the difference?' I stopped eating meat right then. He convinced me that easily. I must have known I was a hypocrite."

Today there is not a whisper of hypocrisy about Buyukmihci. Not only does she not eat meat, she uses no animal products when she "can help it." She even buys the wood that heats her house so that she will not disturb the woodlands that protect and serve the animals. She allows visitors to the refuge by appointment only and only

in limited numbers.

The refuge boundaries are marked only by a single wire strung from tree to tree because as Buyukmihci explains, "What man puts up, he can take down." The wire is not meant as a barrier. It, like the hundreds of posted No Trespassing signs, is meant as an indicator, marking the points where Buyukmihci's land rights and the rights of the animals begin. Her most sincere wish is that those rights be observed.

"She's the last of the pioneers," says Shirley Moore, a friend who travels 25 miles to the refuge each weekend to volunteer her labor. "When the poachers come, it's Jekyll and Hyde. But can you blame her? It's her land."

"She's trying to preserve this one little spot, and I'm going to help her. She is the kindest person. And she is dedicated."

Anyone with any common sense knows that the time to protect our resources is before they become endangered; the time to appreciate what we have is while we still have it. Individuals like Buyukmihci are admittedly already a rarity. Unexpected Refuge is also an endangered entity. Fortunately it is still not too late to appreciate them both. □

