

Training Future Waterfowlers

WWA's Volunteers: Giving Something Back...

By Bruce Urben

A few years back, the Green Bay Chapter of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WWA) had assembled a committee of young, ambitious hunters and conservationists, and seemed to be on track to be one of the most efficient fundraising committees in the association. There didn't seem to be a challenge this group wouldn't tackle: Need a large fundraising banquet in spring? No problem! How about a fundraising shoot in the fall? You bet, let's go! What about WWA's Abrams property in Oconto County that was just sitting there, grossly underutilized? Let's improve its access so disabled hunters can use it too! Nothing seemed to stand in the way of accomplishing a goal for this committee of volunteers. In late March of 2009, a vision was discussed which would change the lives of many potential waterfowlers. The team discussed the continuing loss of waterfowl hunters in the state and decided to take some action to try to reverse that trend. How so? They decided to undertake one of the first "Learn to Hunt Waterfowl" programs (actually a Learn to Hunt Geese program, that first year) in Wisconsin. How were they going to pull this off? Well, that task fell to me, the writer of this article to "see what we needed to get this thing rolling that year...!"

My first contact was to fellow DNR employee Ben Trembl. Ben is a conservation warden with the WDNR (now warden supervisor for the northeast region) and a good friend; in fact, Ben was a soccer player for me while he was in high school. Ben's first reaction was positive, "...we can make this happen..." but he shared his concern that since this was a first-time program we would need to get some help from

an experienced, certified hunter safety instructor. Ben's first call was to Jack Van Sistine. Jack, a certified hunter safety instructor for more than 40 years, is a past awardee of the prestigious Hunter Safety Instructor of the Year award. With only a little encouragement from Ben, the wheels were set in motion for the first mentored session, to be held in October of 2009. With Jack's help and direction, the first Learn to Hunt – Waterfowl (LTH) curriculum was devised and approved by WDNR. Application to hold the event was made to WDNR and was approved to proceed. Mentors were recruited and vetted, and our program was off and running. Our classroom sessions and instructional shooting were hosted at the Pittsfield Trap Club, one of the longest-standing clubs in Wisconsin. WWA Green Bay chapter volunteers rallied to raise donations for Learn to Hunt; for food, soft drinks, trap shooting and instructional materials, shot-shells and even "goody bags" for each participant (always includes a duck or goose call, a lanyard and face paint).

That first class in 2009 was a group of six youth students (12-15 years of age). They assembled, along with their mentors, on Friday night for classroom and shooting instruction, in positions that they would encounter the next morning on their mentored hunt. The participants were selected because they came from non-hunting families and had never hunted waterfowl previously. All of the mentors that first year came from the WWA's Green Bay chapter except for Jack's son, Jeremy, (also a skilled hunter safety instructor) and several of his goose hunting peers. It was certainly a learning experience that first year, for everyone involved! We needed to utilize

youth-sized guns for some of the smaller framed youth. We found we not only had to hide a youth in a layout blind, in a hot goose field, but usually at least one parent that wanted to witness the hunt! It sure made for an interesting camouflaging challenge, to say the least. Sometimes, with three youth LTH students, their parent and a mentor for each, this meant hiding nine layout blinds, whew!

Mentors did their work in scouting to find active goose fields, and obtained permission to hunt, in the weeks leading up to the planned sessions. After the classroom and shooting instruction concluded on Friday evening, each mentor confirmed a meeting place and time for their respective students, for the next (early!) morning. That first year produced mixed harvest results; with three geese being killed, in total, but with all the mentees having opportunities for taking a goose. All of those participating had high praise for the experience and the knowledge they obtained.

Later that same day, all of the mentors, students, WWA organizers, WDNR wardens and parents met back at the trap club by noon, to discuss the hunt, enjoy a picnic lunch, receive their participation awards and perhaps most importantly, to observe the proper method of preparing a goose for the table, as well as cleaning their firearms. The first year was a great success and planning was soon underway for the team's second LTH Waterfowl program, which took place in 2010. A number of the mentors, including myself, have described the experience as the most rewarding they could remember.

This past October, the Green Bay chapter of WWA completed their 8th annual LTH Waterfowl, hosting 12 students,



LTH students, left to right, Emily McParlane, Leah Bell, Lisa Zomorowski, Lauren Posego and Thomas Kirsten after a successful day in the field. Below: Classroom instruction with a WDNR warden discussing hunter ethics. Bottom: Range training, with hands on practice shooting at clay pigeons from the layout blind position.





Top: Mentor instruction of the firearm the Learn to Hunt student will be using for range and field hunting.

Middle: Learn to Hunt student, Lauren Posego, and mentors posing before a water hunt on the Bay of Green Bay.

Bottom: The 2016 LTH Waterfowl class and mentors. Students were selected based upon being from non-hunting families and having never previously hunted waterfowl.

Editor's Note: In memory of Jack Van Sistine, May 5, 1943 to February 19, 2017

half of which were young adults (18-25), with 40% female students, and with more than 12 mentors who volunteered their weekend. Now, our mentees experience one of several different hunting scenarios: marsh hunting from shore blinds, water hunting from boat blinds, layout boat hunting on Green Bay, as well as field hunting from layout blinds just like when we started. An exciting addition this year, was the return of one of those first students, from back in 2009, joining the team to work as a mentor to a youth, and "completing the circle," from mentee to mentor. In early November, I ran into one of our mentors at a local boat landing, coming off the Bay from a morning of hunting with their student (and their parent) from the October class. There were smiles all around and two ducks in the boat, a great confirmation of the willingness of our dedicated mentors to give something back, and go the extra mile!

Almost 100 youth and young adults have participated in our sessions, since the first class in 2009. Not all have continued to be avid waterfowlers, but many are, to this day. The experience has certainly enriched their understanding of the sport, which is important in itself, in this "modern age" of opposition to many hunting sports. The 2016 class also featured a special addition, with a new relationship with UW Stevens Point's waterfowl class, under the direction of Dr. Jacob Straub, as part of their training to be waterfowl biologists.

This program would not have been possible without the help and support of many terrific partners: Wisconsin WDNR's North East Region's conservation warden team, the Pittsfield Trap Club, Jack Van Sistine and his team of hunter safety instructors, several certified shooting instructors from WWA, and the active volunteers of the Green Bay chapter of WWA; who solicited donations, mentored youth, scouted fields, grilled burgers and brats, baked pizza, helped with cleanup chores, and gave up several key days of their own waterfowl hunting seasons, every year, to help build new hunters for another generation.

Our LTH Waterfowl program has expanded since the first class in 2009, and has been used as a model by several other programs around the state. We are certainly proud to have helped guide and mentor other aspiring mentor teams, to help them get their own programs up and running, joining several other groups that are actively running LTH Waterfowl programs being held around the state. The more opportunity for aspiring new waterfowl hunters to "learn the ropes," the better!

If you would like more information about WDNR's Learn to Hunt programs, consult the DNR's website at Wisconsin.gov under the Natural Resources tab, or visit WWA's website at wisducks.org, and select the Education section, then the Learn To Hunt tab. Want to sign up for our team's next class? Don't be surprised if there is a waiting list!



Bruce Urben is retired from the WDNR after 38 years of service and currently serves as president of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association. He lives north of Pulaski, WI with his wife, Diane, and enjoys waterfowling with his sons, Eric and Bryan, and carves decoys in his spare time.



Actual trail cam photo captured on this property.



Tim Winchester harvested this impressive buck in Fall of 2014 on this Pickett Property.

STEALTH CAM

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217 acres of hunting land located just west of Oshkosh in Pickett, WI.

Intensive management efforts coordinated with the State of Wisconsin through the Glacial Habitat Restoration program, have yielded 140 acres of diverse prairie and 60 acres of wetlands. Several scrapes and a planned water control structure further enhance the property's ability to attract and hold deer, pheasant and ducks.

17 acres, including a 10 acre building site, have been withheld from the state programs, allowing the owner the opportunity to build a dream home in the middle of this hunting paradise. Property currently generates \$13,200 per year from the rented out barn and farmhouse.

30 YEARS, 7.000% LOAN
\$5,595 MONTHLY
4 Buddy Plan \$1,399



Actual trail cam photo captured on this property.

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