For youths facing serious medical realities, being a deer hunter is not always possible. At Sahara Woods, it becomes reality.

Another Shot

Awaiting his shot at an Illinois whitetail, disabled Alabama teen John Paul Montgomery once again experiences the thrill of the hunt at Sahara Woods.

Paul recalled of their pre-accident days spent together in the woods near Talladega. "And he was just getting into waterfowl hunting."

But those father-son trips outdoors were suddenly distant history. Without the ability to stand or even hold a gun, John

Located in Saline and Williamson counties, Sahara Woods is undergoing active reclamation by the Department of Natural Resources' Division of Abandoned Mined Lands and is not yet open for public use. Opening of this nearly 4,300-acre State Fish and Wildlife Area will be announced in a future edition of OutdoorIllinois.

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Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

John Paul Montgomery had just made a textbook tackle when the 14-year-old Alabama high school corner back dropped onto the field that August day in 2003. Nobody realized there was a problem, it happened so quickly. Montgomery lay motionless. His neck was broken.

That was more than two years ago. When the devastating diagnosis first hit this young athlete, it not only ended Montgomery’s prep football and baseball careers, he realized another great passion in life was probably gone forever. The boy who loved the outdoors could no longer hunt with his father.

“We used to hunt whitetails and even wild hogs,” Montgomery’s father
Out of his wheelchair and into a specially rigged ATV, mobility obstacles vanished for Montgomery during the special deer hunt.

Paul Montgomery could do nothing but imagine being a hunter as he sat at home in his specially designed wheelchair. Months passed. Deer season came, and deer season went. Montgomery was another year older. Then another.

One afternoon he found himself hundreds of miles away from home, still in his wheelchair, but peering out from a hunting blind at a place called Sahara Woods in the legendary whitetail state of Illinois. Dressed for warmth in the chilly November air, the 16-year-old wore a blaze orange vest, hat and an eager grin. “This will work,” Montgomery said to his father, who stood behind him on that November afternoon after shifting the wheelchair into perfect position. “I’m ready to hunt.”

With a shotgun mounted securely before him, the aim adjusted through slight motions of his head, Montgomery stared out into a clearing where he hoped a deer would appear during the late afternoon hours.

Within the next few days, Montgomery would bag two Prairie State whitetails, eventually heading back to Alabama with a winter’s supply of venison, the ultimate reward of a successful hunt.

“We do like to eat deer meat,” Paul Montgomery acknowledged, adding that the annual harvest meant far more to the father and son than words could describe. “One of John Paul’s main concerns after his accident was not being able to hunt deer anymore.”

But the father made a promise to his son.

Paul Montgomery told his boy, “If I have to tote you out into the woods myself, we will go hunting again.” But making that promise become reality seemed nearly impossible. The reality was, John Paul Montgomery probably couldn’t go deer hunting. The woods aren’t designed for wheelchairs. Montgomery couldn’t walk, or hold a gun. So how could he pull the trigger?

Far away in Wisconsin, about the time of Montgomery’s football accident, a cancer survivor named Bridi O’Donoghue found her calling in the aftermath of her illness. Although she wasn’t a hunter herself, she happened to learn about the lack of options available for the John Paul Montgomerys of America—terminally ill and seriously disabled youth whose only wish was to go hunting again, sometimes as a final wish.

“I thought, ‘I’m not even a hunter. But I wouldn’t take that away from a child if that’s his or her wish. How could anyone do that?’”

She decided to start an organization called United Special Sportsman Alliance, a group which would give terminally ill and seriously disabled children the chance to participate in hunting and fishing once again.

The first hunter was from Texas, and O’Donoghue paid for his trip to a nearby Wisconsin farm out of her own pocket. And then the volunteers started lining up.

After visiting the Illinois Deer and

A specially rigged shotgun, adjusted in the blind, allowed a hunter to pinpoint a target and pull the trigger without the use of hands.
Sahara Woods includes more than 4,000 acres of reclaimed mine lands, including clear lakes and choice upland habitat.

Turkey Expo in Peoria, she met members of the Illinois Bowhunters Society, who offered to help arrange a special hunt in Illinois. The group contacted the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and work began toward bringing a dozen young hunters to Sahara Woods, a 4,001-acre State Fish and Wildlife Area which hadn’t even opened yet for public hunting opportunities.

When the Sahara Coal Company hauled coal out of the property between 1936 and 1969, it was closed to the public. No fishing in those deep, finger-like lakes created by mining. No hunting in the fields and valleys of regenerative habitat. It remained private property through the late 1990s, shortly after Sahara ceased operations altogether. The property was then offered to DNR.

Renamed Sahara Woods State Fish and Wildlife Area, the site remained closed as ongoing reclamation work prevented public access. Limited site staff meant areas which were ready for hunters still could not be opened. But the all-volunteer contributions of the USAA and IBS made the prospect of safely hosting a special hunt at Sahara a reality.

O’Donoghue credits the good will of the State of Illinois and the Department of Natural Resources for making the hunt a reality.

“The DNR has just been wonderful,” she said, “They really opened the door for this kind of special hunt. They made me realize there’s no reason I couldn’t do this in other states.”

Indeed she has. The charitable organization she started with just a single hunt near her home last year provided more than 2,100 terminally ill and seriously disabled hunters a dream hunt in various states around the country.

“It’s given me a whole new outlook on life,” O’Donoghue said. “It’s overwhelming sometimes. Everyone wants to help, everyone wants to get involved.”

Mississippi hunter Kenneth Wall rolls into the woods despite his constant reliance on medical respiratory assistance.

For more information about United Special Sportsmen Alliance, visit www.deerfood.com/usaa.htm.