In an early autumn Wisconsin woodland 18 hours from his home in Alabama, 17-year-old John Paul Montgomery maneuvers his wheelchair and his rifle and takes careful aim at the first live black bear he has ever seen in his life. Moments later, a dream fulfilled.

As recently as April, Wesley Johnson of Spencer could never say, even though he had hunted with his family for years, that he had taken an animal of his own. Wait. Here comes a turkey, and before his father, Ron, can get the videocamera ready, the bird is down. Another lifelong wish granted.

Like hundreds of youths with disabilities across the country who have come to know the thrill of a hunt, fishing trip or other outdoor experience they never thought they’d have, the connection for an Alabama teenager who will soon have a black bear rug for his wall and a young Spencer man who’s looking forward to his first real deer hunt this fall is the United Special Sportsman Alliance.

Through the nonprofit organization founded by a Pittsville woman with a dream of her own, John Paul, Wesley and other children and young adults from every walk of life have come to now the exhilaration of time spent field. Many of them never believed they would.

Wesley Johnson didn’t, nor did Ron, as they took part in the annual family tradition of deer hunting. Wesley, with Downe’s Syndrome, could not handle a gun, his parents recognized, so he could tag along with Dad and his older brothers, but could never point to a buck on the wall. As his. But then one day in April 2005, a seemingly innocent-looking youngster stuffed into his school backpack hanged all that.

The flyer, which had found its way to the school office and been assed through two teachers to Wesley, was literature for USSA, organizing growing experiences supported by donations such as the Brett Favre Foundation. It is a “dream fish-granting charity that specializes in sending children who are sick and disabled out on the outdoor adventure of their dreams,” according to its website (www.childwish.com) and, oh, boy, did Wesley ever have dreams.

At age 19 and 2006 graduate of Spencer High School, Wesley had been part of many a deer drive, a romp through the woods after big chasing bear, or winter jaunts for coyotes. The only thing missing from his experience was the ability to shoot by himself. Ron said he and his youngest son had resigned themselves to the reality that he probably never would.

“Obviously, I’ve taken Wesley hunting with me, but he hasn’t been able to carry a gun or shoot,” Ron said. “I didn’t know there was anybody out there who could teach a hunting safety course at his level. There are certain things he’s going to be limited to. He accepted it. He was always happy to just be along. He’s mad if I can’t take him along.”

Brigid O’Donoghue did know of someone who could help. As president and founder of USSA, for a year she has been matching kids with disabilities who can address their specific needs. In Wesley’s case, the first thing he needed was the training he could not get from a usual Department of Natural Resources hunter safety course.

Brigid hooked Wesley up with a Birmamwood instructor specially trained for just this situation. In July 2005, Wesley completed his course, learning how to safely carry and load a weapon and how to recognize situations in the field. Before long, he was ready to roll. Game awaited.

Wesley’s first USSA-sponsored chance came in October. At a game farm near Dodgeville, he trudged afield for the unmitting time, but the first while shouting his own gun. When a pheasant floated up from the grass, he fired, as did a back-up shooter who was there to make sure wounded birds didn’t get away. The bird went down. Wesley’s heart went in the opposite direction.

Later in the month, Wesley tried European-style pheasant hunting (birds released from a tower over hunters positioned at stations), but did not connect. In November, Brigid sent him on a deer hunt in Illinois, where Wesley sent a bullet at a whitetail buck.

“He was excited. He was at least happy that he got a shot at one,” Ron said.

Because Wesley is readily available and willing to go at every opportunity, he gets in on more opportunities as Brigid sometimes needs enough hunters to fill a group excursion. And, Ron said, he is able to afford the incidental expenses that accompany the trips. O’Donoghue uses the donations she can find to cover travel, but there are families too decimated by their child’s medical costs to even afford the gas to drive somewhere.

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who can’t afford a lot of this stuff,” Ron said.

In April, Wesley and Ron set out on their first turkey hunt. In a blind near Marion during a DNRF-sponsored event for first-time hunters, Wesley and Ron were waiting early on a spring Saturday morning when a bird strutt near. As Ron reached for his camera to get the harvest on tape, Wesley let loose a shotgun blast that took the turkey out. Talk about one pumped up hunter, his dad recalls.

“Can’t believe it! Can’t believe!”’ Ron said Wesley yelled. “I want to call Mom.” He’s just screaming on the phone. ‘I got a bird!’

Later that same month, Wesley added his first big game animal to his growing list of hunting feats. At a game ranch near Huntsville, Texas, he bagged a black buck, during a hunt and stay entirely donated by the property owners.

June brought a salmon fishing trip on Lake Michigan, and the Johnsons were looking forward to a possible...