Hunt gives special needs youths confidence

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Marshfield News-Herald
There were plenty of first-time hunters in the woods this season, but for Alex and Byron Gunn, and Wesley Johnson, this year's hunt was the opportunity of a lifetime. Johnson, 18, of Spencer has Down's Syndrome and has never been able to take a hunter's safety course, required for anyone born after Jan. 1, 1973, to get a license. "He goes hunting with me all the time," said Johnson's dad, Ron. "He's not ever able to shoot anything because he does not have his hunter's safety course."
But Wesley was able to hunt on his own at the Illinois Dream Hunt Nov. 4 through 6 with the Pittsville-based United Special Sportsmen Alliance, which organizes hunting or fishing trips for terminally ill or disabled people.
"This organization offers him things I'm not able to offer him," Ron Johnson said. For Byron Gunn, 7 of Marshfield, taking part in the dream hunt helped him bring home an eight-point buck and earn him a trophy for bagging the largest deer during the special Department of Natural Resources-organized season. "The littlest guy got the biggest deer," said Gunn's great aunt, Kathleen Saucier, who with her husband, George, has permanent custody of the brothers.
Alex, 9, also participated and shot at a doe, but missed, Saucier said. "It's fun," Alex said, adding he had to be quiet. "I did a pretty good job."
Both brothers have ADHD, and Byron has a benign brain tumor. By participating in the deer hunt and several other USSA-organized wildlife events, the boys are learning important life skills.
"I think it gives them a lot more confidence that they can do what the bigger people can do," Saucier said.
Ron Johnson said Wesley really enjoyed the hunt, even though he didn't get a deer. "Obviously, anytime you can shoot something big, it's more exciting," he said. "The deer was more exciting."
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