Hunting wish comes true for autistic boy

By Todd Schmidt

Thanks to the generosity of a local guide service, the wish of a 14-year-old first-time bear hunter was fulfilled.

Joe Eckert, owner of Black Beard Guide Service of rural Colby, worked through the United Special Sportsmen Alliance (USSA) of Pittsville to take John Kohlman of Prairie du Sac bear hunting.

Black Beard Guide Service has been in business for eight years, offering scouting, baiting, removal and skinning services. Hunting bear over bait is Eckert's specialty; although they have purchased a few dogs and will be working with them next season.

The hunt was a success beyond John's wildest dreams, as the autistic child dropped a 300-pound black bear with one shot Sept. 7 while hunting with Eckert and others in the Goodrich area approximately 12 miles east of Medford. They had a number of people helping out with four-wheelers and a trailer.

Things happened pretty fast for the youth, who had been on several deer hunting trips with family members as an observer.

Bridget O'Donaghe, founder of USSA, called June 30 to follow up on an application submitted by Theresa Kohlman, John's mother. They had planned to attend a July 29 USSA outdoor water sport event that included fishing, tubing, waterskiing, boating and professional fishermen coming to help the kids catch a big fish.

O'Donaghe said USSA will do everything humanly possible to fulfill the dreams of children. USSA has granted over 2,800 hunting and fishing wishes nationwide since its inception in 2000.

"We have made a significant impact on the lives of thousands of children and their families," she said. "The public's image of all sportsmen is enhanced through this valuable community service. Many new, lifelong friendships are made."

John Greetan of Coleman donated his bear tag for John to use on the hunt. Bob Lochner of the Wilderness Fish and Game club, Sauk Prairie, outfitted John with camo pants, jacket and hat, and Steve Schmitt of The Shoe Box, Black Earth, supplied Itasca scent-free rubber boots.

O'Donaghe arranged for John to take hunters safety education July 21-23 in Birnamwood. Evidence of his hunting dream starting to come true was his 100 percent score on the final test.

Theresa Kohlman, John's mother, said Joe called July 25 with news of the hunt.

"We weren't home at the time," she said. "His message on the answering machine said, 'Hi, I'm Joe Eckert. I hear you have a bear hunter who would like to go hunting. I'm the lucky guy who gets to take you, John.'"