Wis. bear hunters donate time, tags

Rare opportunity provided for 28 disabled youths

By JIM LEE
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GLIDDEN — It's being billed as "The World's Largest Bear Hunt" but the title is misleading. This is really "The World's Largest Bear Hunting Gift."

Twenty-eight youngsters with a variety of disabilities are taking a part in bear hunting activities this fall thanks to the generosity of Wisconsin bear hunters, bear hunting organizations, the Department of Natural Resources, the United Special Sportsman Alliance and Brett Pavre Fournour Foundation.

"Bear hunts such as these allow disabled and critically-ill youth the opportunity to experience our state wildlife resources, while allowing families a chance to get away from their daily life struggles and make new lifelong friendships," said Brigid O'Donoghue of Pittsville, president and founder of the volunteer organization dedicated to providing outdoor opportunities to disabled youth.

Keith Warnke, DNR deer and bear expert, said the department supports the project as a way "to expand exposure to our hunting heritage" and "meeting a desire for those who want to hunt."

"I started the project at the end of March by writing a letter to almost 1,000 bear hunters in the hopes they would donate their bear licenses to a disabled or critically-ill youth hunter," O'Donoghue said.

"We had several caring mothers raise the capital for stamps and attach mailing labels to the envelopes. We had a very special young man with Down syndrome stuff the envelopes."

"The bear hunters contacted me. I located a disabled or critically-ill youth, filled out the paperwork with the DNR and then located a taxidermist."

In the end, 28 youngsters from 11 states were provided with bear kill tags. A limited number of bear harvest tags are issued annually by the DNR. The number of applicants far exceeded the number of tags available. The DNR and the bear hunting organizations worked vigorously to fill as many requests as possible.

For O'Donoghue's project, the DNR provided two tags through its learn-to-hunt program, and the rest were donated from Wisconsin bear hunters, most of whom had waited 5-10 years to obtain the tag.

Warnke lauded those "who sacrificed their own hunt so someone else could experience bear hunting."

"The Lake Superior Chapter of Safari Club International paid for all of the out of state bear hunting license fees (over $3,000)," O'Donoghue said.

The Favre Foundation - a philanthropic arm of the Green Bay Packers star quarterback - provided funding for a variety of other expenses, including travel for the participants.

"I place each disabled youth with a guide and a taxidermist," O'Donoghue said. "We have a taxidermist donating a free shoulder mount or rug for each successful bear hunter."

It didn't take long for the taxidermists to find work.

Skyler Shelton, 17, of Adell in Sheboygan County, dropped a 176-pound bear at 9:20 a.m. Sept. 5, opening day of the state's bear hunting season, which runs through Oct. 9.

Skyler, a student at Random Lake High School, sustained serious head and body injuries in an auto accident in 2004. With the aid of O'Donoghue's organization, he hunted deer near Birnamwood in 2006 from a wheelchair.

"He's just all about the outdoors...kind of just like his dad," said Shelby Shelton, his mother.

"It was just an awesome experience," said Skyler's father, Steve, a member of the Coast Guard, who accompanied his son on the hunt. "It was so exciting and so much fun. Skyler had a blast. It wasn't just getting a chance to kill a bear... it was the relationship he developed with everybody involved... the joking around... it was really a good time."

"Everybody who meets Skyler just falls in love with him," said another participant.

After two weeks of the season, participants had registered 15 bear.

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