

Working together to make veterans' hunt special

By JoDee Brooke

Darrell Kauth of Nekoosa was working with his bees at Wazee Recreation Area one day last May when Jackson County Forestry and Parks (JCFP) Assistant Administrator Jon Schweitzer asked Darrell if he'd be interested in using parts of the Wazee park for United Special Sportsman Alliance's (USSA) deer hunting program. USSA is an all-volunteer non-profit wish-granting charity specializing in sending critically ill and disabled youth and disabled veterans on a free outdoor adventure.

"Jon explained the park's deer population was a bit too high and wanted a controlled hunt while offering it to veterans with disabilities," explained Darrell.

The hunts are organized by USSA, who serves as the sponsor for the veteran.

Darrell is a veteran himself. "I jumped at the opportunity and had Jon submit the land description for the hunts to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Jim (Zahasky) took the idea to the JCFP Committee and it was accepted, so we were good to go on the county's end."

The hunt has to be accepted by the DNR. "Sponsors of each hunt must submit an application by June 1 each year that lists the properties they gain permission to hunt on," explained DNR wildlife biologist Scott Roepke. "A list of these sponsors is then put on our website and interested hunters can sign up directly with the sponsor by Sept. 1.

The program involves landowners willing to sponsor hunters with disabilities on their land. Hunters wishing to participate and landowners wishing to sponsor hunters on their property work together so those veterans with a passion for the outdoors and hunting can experience the passion.

"I began searching for veterans that wanted the opportunity and fit the DNR's qualifications to hunt in this program," explained Darrell.

Darrell learned the JC Wildlife Fund (JCWF)

helped support hunting, fishing and conservation efforts in JC. "The JCWF donated money to build two blinds that would be used for the hunts," said Darrell. "The COVID had hit by then and the price and availability of building material became a challenge. With the help of some great friends, we built the blinds so they were wheelchair-accessible with three windows to shoot from. Then we received another donation from Green Star Insulation in Blair. They came and sprayed closed-cell insulation in both blinds at no cost to us. This is important because people with paralyzed extremities are susceptible to frostbite and it cut the noise factor down to almost nothing."

The JCFP crew set up the blinds in two areas known to be frequented by deer, allowing the deer to get used to the blinds before the hunters headed out.

"We were all set except for qualifying veterans," explained Darrell. "Seems like this COVID crap pretty much shut down the Veterans Administrations and many other veterans that were at home didn't want to risk it. And, I wasn't sure myself. Then my volunteer base was cut in half for the same concerns. USSA had already adopted its own strict screening procedures set in place by the board of directors - more paperwork; just what I signed up for."

After six cancellations, Darrell had two veterans signed up and ready to go hunting - Mike Mills and Dennis Saegen hunted Tuesday. Doug Maeder joined Mike and Dennis later in the week.

On Oct. 5, Mike and Dennis met at USSA headquarters in Pray to shoot and see if they qualified for the hunt. There was paperwork to check, as well as temperatures to be taken.

USSA provides guns and scopes. "This year, we have a new toy," explained Darrell. "It is a scope that will record audio and video of the shot. This was recommended, installed and zeroed in by Nick from Marshfield Drones. "Both

veterans were cutting a one-inch bulls-eye at 70 yards. On Oct. 6, we met at Wazee for the hunt. Dennis would take the track chair into the south blind with mentor Scott Roepke. Someone remained posted at the parking lot so no one entered the posted area. Mike and I went to the north blind and settled in for the hunt."

Mike, from Freeport, MN, learned of the veterans hunt from a friend. "I am an avid outdoorsman and have hunted my whole life," shared Mike.

In 2005, Mike was severely burned while serving in Iraq. "My skin grafts have a tendency to contract," he explained, "but, I love to hunt. I was in the hospital for three months after it happened. I was in a burn center for a year after that and did physical therapy twice a week for five years. I still do physical therapy; I just do it on my own."

"At about 4:30, I received a text that a shot had been taken by Dennis, but no word on the results" recalled Darrell. "About this time a doe and fawn came out at the far end of the field. They fed into another field and soon there were several deer there. Then a six-pointer walked our way. It took forever to get in range - about two minutes. He turned broadside and Mike made a great shot. A few final jumps and it was down."

"Mike also had a doe tag, so we waited for the opportunity to shoot a doe that didn't have a fawn with it," said Darrell. "Of course, three other bucks had to come out



Contributed photo

Mike Mills (center) had a really good day on the veterans hunt, bringing down a six-point buck and good-sized doe. Helping Mike get the animals to the truck and dressed were Jackson County Forestry technicians Chris Repking and Don Houser.

and walk by while we waited. At 6:15, the doe we were waiting for gave Mike the shot and it was game over."

"Being able to get two deer is unique," shared Mike of the hunt's outcome. "Every hunt I'm on is unique."

The crew had retrieved the deer and were headed for the truck by the time Mike and Darrell got out of the blind. "Pictures were taken, deer were field-dressed and

put into the truck and taken to the locker plant for processing," said Darrell.

Doug put his deer hunting skills to the test Friday of that week. "We sat for two hours before we saw our first deer," said Darrell. "We were waiting for one of those big bucks to show themselves, but as hunting goes, the wind switched and the does smelled us. It was now or never and Doug made a great shot on a large doe. Again, those young studs from the parks department were on hand and had the deer dressed and packed with ice in minutes.

As the crew headed around the lake, they found Dennis had shot his deer. "That night, we sat around, shot some bull and went over plans for the next day's pheasant hunt.

Mike, Dennis and Doug went pheasant hunting Wednesday morning; the crew met at Woods and Meadows Hunting Preserve in Warrens. Woods and Meadow had granted Mike, Dennis and Doug a five-bird hunt. After temperatures were taken, the hunters met with NASA (North American Squirrel Association) representatives. The NASA assists and the

physically challenged enjoy the outdoors and all that comes with it.

NASA provided a side-by-side with a chair mounted on the front, which allows a person that can't walk through the fields the chance to hunt birds. "They have dedicated volunteers to drive the vehicle, work the dog and assist the hunters," explained Darrell. "Dennis and Doug took turns in the chair while Mike walked the mowed paths. Mike Wipfl, another volunteer, and I walked between to help flush the birds. We hunted until noon with several opportunities for the veterans to shoot birds."

"I didn't get as many pheasants as I'd have liked," said Mike. "I'd certainly recommend the hunt to other people," said Mike. "It was really nice out there."

With the help of many folks working together to make the veterans' hunt possible, three veterans were able to get out in the field and enjoy the hunt. In addition to Zahasky, Schweitzer, Roepke, forest technicians Chris Repking and Don Houser and Lyle Dobson also helped with the hunt.



Contributed photo

Doug Maeder was all set to head out pheasant hunting with his partner and fellow veteran Darrel Kauth.



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Veterans Dennis Saegen (l) and Mike Mills (r) with help from DNR wildlife biologist Scott Roepke, who helped with the veterans hunt in October, had successful outings. Dennis shot a doe and Mike shot a six-point buck and a doe.

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