Program delivers great adventure to turkey hunters

Mentors offer tips to beginners, help improve skills

By Grace Kirchner
Post-Crescent correspondent

MARION – Forty-eight young people, ages 12 to 17, and five women went turkey hunting for the first time on Saturday, thanks to the Little Wolf Turkey Gobblers.

The group included six special needs youths from the United Special Sportsman Alliance.

Each had an experience they might never have had if it weren't for some members of the Little Wolf Turkey Gobblers, who volunteered to be their mentor or an assistant mentor.

"It was awesome. It was a great adventure," said John Brachaykop, 13, of Lapeer, Mich., a first-time hunter who bagged a 22-pound turkey.

The kids were invited to hunt free of charge under the Learn to Hunt program; however, for $5, they then join the Junior Turkey Federation and receive the Youth Turkey Federation magazine.

Each participant was required to have completed the Hunter Safety Course under the direction of the state Department of Natural Resources.

Tom Mijal of Appleton, a state director of the Wisconsin Turkey Federation, organized the event.

"Tom is worse than a kid on Christmas morning with all he puts into getting this organized. This is no walk in the park. All of the food for today has been donated, and we really appreciate the community for its support," said Jim Heling, Bear Creek, president of the Little Wolf Turkey Gobblers.

Heling said there are always plenty of members willing to volunteer their time as mentors.

"This is the fifth year we have sponsored the Learn to Hunt program and each year it keeps growing, thanks to 150 landowners who support it," said Mijal.

"This is the first year that we included the USSA. These are kids that are terminally ill, are disabled, disadvantaged, or have learning disabilities."

A lunch was served to about 175 people at the Dupont Hall, County S, Marion, including the children, mentors, assistant mentors, and members of the Little Wolf Turkey Gobblers committees who were involved in the Learn to Hunt program.

Heather Wanta, an eighth-grader from Clintonville, was one of the successful youth hunters.

"With a single shot to the head and neck, she got her bird," said Kord Persha, her mentor from Clintonville, who says he has been hunting for more than 30 years.

Wanta's turkey weighed 24 pounds, had a 9½-inch beard, and 1-inch spurs. She plans to have a tail mount made.

"I always wanted to go hunting," said Wanta. She admitted she got a little excited when she shot the turkey. She plans to go bow hunting and deer hunting, too.

Julian Brunz, a Rotary Exchange student from Germany staying in Clintonville, said the Learn to Hunt program was great. He hunted with his mentor, Kyle Kaczorowski.

"This is a great program. The future of hunting is in our youth," said Todd Wipperman, a DNR warden. "When the Little Wolf Gobblers came to us five years ago about this, we gave them our support. There are plenty of turkeys out there. The winter was not hard on them."

The Little Wolf Turkey Gobblers is one of four chapters in the state to sponsor the Learn to Hunt mentor program.

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Photo for The Post-Crescent by Grace Kirchner

JOHN BRACHAYKOP, 13, of Lapeer, Mich., shot this 22-pound turkey during a special hunt Saturday near Marion. With him is Tom Mijal of Appleton, a state director of the Wisconsin Turkey Federation, who organized the event.