

BOB LAMB

A deer hunt to remember

Hunters and their assistants enjoy a special three-day season on Holmen-area farm



Bob Lamb photo

TIME FOR A BREAK: Bernie Mickschl, left, Tom Pralle and Dick Elsinger, right, take a lunch break.



Jerry Davis photo

WATCHING FOR GAME: Mike Derpinghaus of Holmen waits for a shot during last weekend's hunt on the Holmen-area farm owned by Tom Pralle.



Bob Lamb / Tribune outdoors editor

HOLMEN, Wis. — They came from all works of life. A psychologist, a baker, a hunting guide, a drug and alcohol counselor, a locksmith, a physician, a Trane Co. retiree, a high school student and an electrician apprentice to name a few.

Some came to hunt. Others to help. The hunters, despite their disabilities, shared one common love — deer hunting. Their helpers also shared a common bond. It was obvious by their willingness to help their less fortunate hunting pals. Last weekend eight men and their assistants participated in a special gun-deer hunt for hunters with disabilities, sponsored by the La Crosse Tribune and Tom Pralle, a Holmen area farmer.

Pralle, opened 310 acres of his best deer hunting land for a three-day hunt governed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Several special hunts are held throughout Wisconsin each year, but according to DNR records this was the first time a news media outlet sponsored such a hunt.

Special deer hunts offer people with physical or visual disabilities the opportunity to hunt deer in the early fall when temperatures are generally mild and mobility in the woods is easier than during the regular gun-deer season in mid-November.

A disabled hunter is allowed to have an assistant, who aids the hunter while in the field.

While all of the hunters were special, so were their assistants.

"I just enjoy getting these guys out here. I think this is neat for all these guys," said Jim Kowal, one of the premier bass fisherman in the La Crosse area, who was an assistant for La Crosse's Wendell Zumach on Friday.

Jim Tarlano, a psychologist at Gundersen-Lutheran in La Crosse, and his assistant, Greg Thompson, a physician at Gundersen Lutheran, also hunted on Friday.

"This is a hidden secret," said Tarlano, of La Crescent, Minn., about his deer stand along an alfalfa and corn field high upon a ridge above the Pralle farm. "If I get a deer, it's a bonus."

Tarlano, like everyone else, said killing a deer was incidental. Getting outdoors, breathing fresh air and being among friends made the hunt special. "The main thing is getting Jim out and giving him this experience," Thompson said.

"It's a good way to learn about each other, too," said Tarlano, a paraplegic. Bernie Mickschl, who guides turkey and deer hunters for a living, assisted Richard Elsinger, a semi-retired locksmith from Woodland, Wis., on Friday. Mickschl returned on Sunday to assist Mike Derpinghaus.

"I've been very fortunate in my hunting career to have a mentor. Why not help someone else," said Mickschl, who sat alongside Derpinghaus all day Sunday, despite heavy rain.

Derpinghaus, a paraplegic, is a drug and alcohol counselor at St. Francis Hospital. Although he was participating in his fourth disabled hunt in as many years, he said he was having the time of his life. "It's not just seeing the animals, but everything. Just looking at the trees changing colors, the leaves, the little birds," said Derpinghaus, who like Mickschl, lives in Holmen. Derpinghaus, moved to the La Crosse area from Milwaukee four years ago.

"Living in Milwaukee, I was no more than 500 feet from people all the time. Here, today, I'm a half mile away from anyone

Hunt helps disabled

Continued from D-1

but my assistant and I love it," said Derpinghaus, who was assisted by Bob Haag, a good friend, on Friday.

"It's the friendship, the companionship," said Haag, a baker by trade. "Besides, Mike's a good guy. I get more out of him than him out of me."

You have to go a long way to find a better show of love than a father and son. Vernon Swoboda, a diabetic and heart patient, was aided by his son, Vernon Swoboda III.

The men left Racine at midnight Saturday to arrive by 6 a.m. They hunted all day, then returned to Racine late Saturday night.

"I learned hunting from Dad and whenever I go hunting, I go with Dad," said 20-year-old Vernon Swoboda III, currently in an electricians apprenticeship program.

Swoboda's father admitted that without his son, he would be sitting at home and not in a chair in the woods hunting for deer.

Dale Newman of La Crosse suffers from severe hip problems but it didn't stop him from hunting on Saturday.

"I like the outdoors. I like to see the stars in the early morning and I like the meat," said Newman, who took home a small nubbin buck. "I've always had a flair for hunting. People fought for our rights to be able to do this and we should."

Rich Branhagen, a paraplegic from Onalaska, said he enjoyed

hearing all the different sounds in the woods. He hunted with his father-in-law, Dave Forer of La Crosse, on Friday and Saturday.

"Rich is a good guy to be with and I just like being out in the woods myself," Forer said.

Duane Klawitter of La Crosse hunted Sunday morning despite rain.

"This was great. I just wish it wasn't raining," he said.

Elsinger, 61, shot a huge doe on Saturday. Despite suffering from cancer and severe ankle problems, he field dressed his

own deer and helped drag it.

Elsinger suffered third degree burns over 53 percent of his torso in an industrial accident in 1989. He lives

near Horicon, Wis., but said it was the Coulee Region's hills and valleys that lured him to the special hunt.

"Isn't this country beautiful? It reminds me of the Smoky Mountains. I'm having the time of my life. I'm just glad to be living," he said, with a big smile on his face.

Elsinger wasn't the only one smiling. So was Pralle and his daughter, Nicole, who also helped with the special hunt.

"I think everyone had a good time. The guys shot a couple of deer, missed a couple others. But just about everyone saw deer.

"I'd consider it a success, wouldn't you?" asked Pralle.

Yup. It was something special.



Bob Lamb is the Tribune's outdoors editor. Call him at (608) 791-8228.

I'm having the time of my life. I'm just glad to be living. — disabled hunter