

Squirrel association wins state hunter ethics award

By Jerry Davis
Correspondent

La Crosse, Wis. — The North American Squirrel Association is this year's winner of the Wisconsin Hunter Ethics Award, sponsored by the *La Crosse Tribune* and Wisconsin DNR.

As a non-profit group, NASA grew out of a desire to provide outdoors opportunities for physically challenged and elderly people in western Wisconsin and beyond. Providing hunting opportunities is part of NASA's goal, but so is assisting individuals in any outdoors activity, such as skiing, fishing, golfing, and more.

Only once before in the nine-year history of the award has an

group been honored. In 2001, the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association was selected by a three-member panel.

"We wrote our bylaws using money from the first profit we made from our squirrel derby," said Tony Christnovich, one of NASA's founders. "There are no members, only volunteers. If we had formal memberships, we'd have to have a quorum and vote on everything we do. This way, if a need or opportunity comes up, we can do it to help someone enjoy the outdoors."

This year's squirrel derby was held Jan. 28, and a fund-raising banquet is April 5 in Onalaska. More than 100 hunters participated in the squirrel derby hunt.

Volunteers who help NASA provide opportunities, and individuals who have benefitted from NASA's help commend the organization's efforts.

"About four years ago I got involved," said Mike Derpinghaus, who is wheelchair-bound. "Now I'm working with the group and see all the smiling faces on people who get to participate in our duck hunt, our deer camp, and everything else we do."

Those in need of help can also use NASA's ice-fishing shelter on Lake Onalaska and its pon-

toon boat during the summer.

When Derpinghaus moved to western Wisconsin, he had never hunted from his wheelchair. He's glad there are groups like NASA to help.

"It's groups like this that got me up and outdoors," he said. "Our purpose is to provide opportunities for people to get outdoors instead of falling into that sedentary lifestyle."

Derpinghaus explained that while it is possible for some physically challenged people to shoot deer from a vehicle, NASA provides more.

"We had an actual deer camp at Zachary Klaus' property north of La Crosse and everyone was sitting around a campfire. It's one thing to hunt deer, but quite another to participate in a deer camp. That's something I could only dream of doing until now."

It's providing these opportunities that caught DNR conservation warden Steve Dewald's attention during the selection process in January.

"They have opened doors for people with special challenges," Dewald said. "The more people who have an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors, the more we have to help preserve outdoors

opportunities. The key to these people is the experience, not whether they catch a fish and kill a deer, pheasant, or duck."

Dewald said NASA was an obvious choice this year, because of the work it is doing and how nicely its goals fit with the award statement, which is "hunters doing something for someone else; hunters doing something for hunting, rather than doing something for personal gain."

This spring NASA is purchasing a tractor and mounting a front platform to hold a wheelchair.

"We hope to be able to take physically challenged pheasant hunters out in the field," Christnovich said. "We've had lots of pheasants donated, and we'll use pointing dogs, drive the hunter to the dog on point, and he or she can shoot from the wheelchair on the platform."

It may be more than coincidental that a small mammal, a squirrel, was selected as the symbol for NASA. But that choice has all worked out to help hunters who wouldn't normally be able to participate in outdoors activities.

"It's been a great draw when we're at sport shows," Derpinghaus said. "People will see our squirrel logo and come over and ask why squirrels need help from conservation groups."

David Kroch, of Whitehall, and Donald Graves, of Galesville, were recognized as finalists for their cooperative spirit. These deer hunters stopped their own hunt and helped Jessica Deken find a wounded deer she shot during her first hunt.

After finding the deer, Kroch, Graves, and Jessica's father,



Tony Christnovich
The North American Squirrel Association is this year's winner of the Wisconsin Hunter Ethics Award.
Photo by Jerry Davis

Wisc. Ethic Award Winners: 1997-2005

Adult Division

- 2005:
North American Squirrel Association.
- 2004:
Dale Petkovsek, Willard, Wis.
- 2003:
Zachary Klaus, Rochester, Minn.
- 2002:
Gerald Meyer, Waterford, and
James Swentik, Delafield.
- 2001:
Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association.
- 2000:
Ronald Fehlen, Osceola.
- 1999:
Gregory G. Highstrom, Cedarburg.
- 1998:
Michael Rogers, Sauk City.
- 1997:
Jim Olson and Mike Kasten, Onalaska.

Youth Division

- 2005:
None.
- 2004:

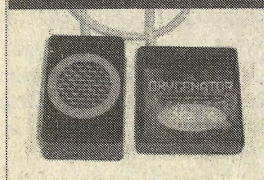


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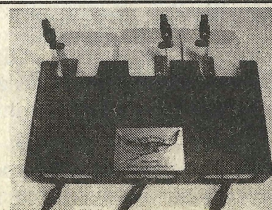
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None.

2004:

Matt Wee, West Salem.

2003:

None.

2002:

Max Hedrington, Rib Lake.

2001:

Adam Malin, Stoddard,
and Megan Larson, Marshfield.

2000:

Caron Sedlmayr, Stoddard,
and Shane McGinn, Shawano.

Jerry Deken, carried the deer out of the woods for Jessica before resuming their own hunt.

Kim Meier and three of his children, Jessica, Jeremy and Jennifer, were finalists, too, because twice they stopped their own deer hunts to help another hunter pull two deer out of a deep ravine. The hunter would not have been able to get the deer out without help from the Meiers. The Meiers are from Alaska and were hunting on a relative's farm in Iowa County, adjacent to where the man shot his two deer. The Meiers also were able to kill several deer themselves and take the venison back to Alaska.

"We have to start looking at what we as a society are willing to accept and tolerate in terms of hunters' and landowners' behavior," Dewald said.

To learn more about NASA, go to www.nasasquirrel.org, e-mail nasasquirrel@yahoo.com or call (608) 781-3100.

To learn more about the ethics award or to nominate a person or group for the adult or youth division in 2006, contact Steve Dewald at dewals@dnr.state.wi.us, Bob Lamb at blamb@lacrossetribune.com or Jerry Davis at sivadjam@mhtc.net.

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Deer Framework

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the entire hunting community," Toso said. "In effect, his vote was anti-hunting, in direct opposition to the rights he claimed he wanted to protect."

Meyer said he fears major conflicts between snowmobilers and hunters.

"It doesn't take a lot of landowners to shut down a whole county," Meyer said.

"I'm not going to encourage that, but if the Legislature trumps the DNR and the NRB, maybe it takes a two-by-four to wake people up."

Meyer said the original rule was biologically sound and designed for safety.

"The committees' answer did not make sense at all," Meyer said. "This was not going to work. I think there should be a law saying the only way the Legislature can change a rule is for biological or safety reasons. This was purely political."

Todd Zeuske, legislative liaison for the Wisconsin Bowhunters Association, said it's not often the DNR, NRB, and Conservation Congress are all on the same page, only to get shot down by non-hunters.

"I think (the snowmobilers group) should have accepted the trial version," Zeuske said. "I think they're going to be more hurt by rejecting this than if they allowed it to go through."

Gunderson said he didn't like that two major user groups were pitting themselves against each other, and was frustrated by both groups digging in their heels.

"But right now this whole rule hinges on seven days," Gunderson said. "I thought we had put together a good compromise."

Gunderson said he believes the two seasons – muzzleloader and herd-control antlerless – could coexist.

“I guess I trust hunters that they’re going to do the right thing,” Gunderson said. “Could people break the law and do people break the law? Yes, we know that. But quite frankly, there aren’t going to be that many guys hunting north of Hwy. 8 for a December season.”

Conservation Congress chairman Steve Oestreicher believes the AWSC’s refusal to compromise will backfire as talk of landowner protest closures of trails increases.

“We were talking four days here,” Oestreicher said. “They talk about the economic impact of snowmobilers. Most winters in the past decade there hasn’t even been enough snow for grooming the trails the second week of December. But replace those sleds with deer hunters and you’d see plenty of money being spent.”

Oestreicher said the state’s Deer 2000 and Beyond public input process involved more than a dozen interest groups and more than 30,000 people in the three-plus-year effort at coming to a consensus on the best way to manage the state’s deer herd, but the snowmobile association was not among them.

It was only after final recommendations were released and the NRB approved a permanent December antlerless-only hunt that the AWSC objected, and eventually won when the Joint Committee for Legislative Review ruled that the hunt would interfere with snowmobiling north of Hwy. 8 and that it should be eliminated.

Safety doesn’t appear to be an

issue, some officials point out. More snowmobilers typically die in snowmobile accidents in one Wisconsin winter than state hunters have from shooting accidents in the past decade.

The AWSC has in the past said that December hunts, instead, force landowners and government employees to keep trails closed.

Oestreicher said the group did produce the name of a govern-

ment agency in Vilas County that wouldn't open trails during any gun deer season, but the DNR was going to rectify that situation.

"This is nothing more than a perceived problem by the AWSC," Oestreicher said.

Morris Nelson of Edgerton, the chairman of the AWSC's legislative committee, said 99 percent of snowmobilers don't worry about hunters in the woods. The real issue, he said, is if someone owns the property and they want to keep snowmobilers out because either they or someone else will be

hunting it.

"We honor that," Nelson said. "But one closure can disturb a length of trail."

Nelson said he's heard of two or three individuals who say there will be massive trail closures (to protest the snowmobile association's position).

Nelson said anyone who doesn't believe there's been enough snow in recent winters or that trail grooming work ongoing in December need only look on the DNR web site.

"Check out the snow reports over the last five years," Nelson said. "There's been substantial snow in the north. And the segregated fund records show we've groomed thousands of miles of trails before Dec. 15. It's documented."

"I'll tell you, more snowmobile clubs would just as soon see the whole state closed to deer hunting in December, but we put up with the muzzleloader season statewide and the CWD hunts well into January in the south."