


It's really

Pheasant hunting had long been a source of recreation and relaxation for the retired police detective clad in khaki and blaze orange on a crisp fall day. He was contemplating the scarlet and bronze beauty of the bluffs surrounding the field of weeds and prairie grasses when the well-trained dog flushed a ringneck. It had been years, but the twelve-gauge shotgun instinctively found its home on his shoulder as he dropped the rooster with a single shot. The trusty dog retrieved the bird and brought it directly to the victorious hunter, who, overcome with emotion, sobbed tears of joy and gratitude.

A little melodramatic, you're thinking? Not when you consider that this hunter had been wheelchair-bound for a good many years and never dreamed he'd be able to return to his beloved fields. What allowed him to again pursue his passion was not a medical miracle that gave him his legs back. It was the use of hunting land, a dog belonging to a volunteer companion, and a specially equipped ATV provided by a group of people who are dedicated to creating moments and memories like this for hundreds of area outdoor enthusiasts who need a helping hand. Meet the North American Squirrel Association (yes, NASA).

Unlike the space agency that shares its acronym, this NASA's mission is a little more down-to-earth: to help the elderly and physically challenged enjoy hunting and fishing activities and recreational opportunities throughout the 7 Rivers Region. To differentiate themselves from the folks in Houston (and perhaps to express a little more humility), this group goes by the lower-case "nasa."

The North American Squirrel Association was conceived in 1991 by Mike Derpinghouse and his good friend, Tony Christnovich, who was injured

A photograph showing two men and a dog. One man is sitting on an orange and black ATV, holding a shotgun. He is wearing a camouflage jacket, blue jeans, and a tan cap with 'NASA' on it. The other man is standing next to the ATV, wearing a yellow and tan vest over a dark shirt, white pants, and an orange cap. A white dog is sitting on the ground in front of the ATV.

Upland Game Committee Chair Steven Earp (right) and hunting participant Del Martin.

The compassionate conservationists of NASA help others explore our region's outer spaces.

not about squirrels

Story by Jeff Severson, photography by Bruce Defries & NASA members

in a tree-felling accident. Both men were avid outdoorsmen, and Mike missed Tony's companionship while his friend went through a grueling physical rehabilitation period. They wondered what would have happened had Tony been permanently disabled, and the vision was born. Both men were part of an annual "squirrel derby" involving an informal squirrel hunting contest between friends, so they came up with the tongue-in-cheek moniker.

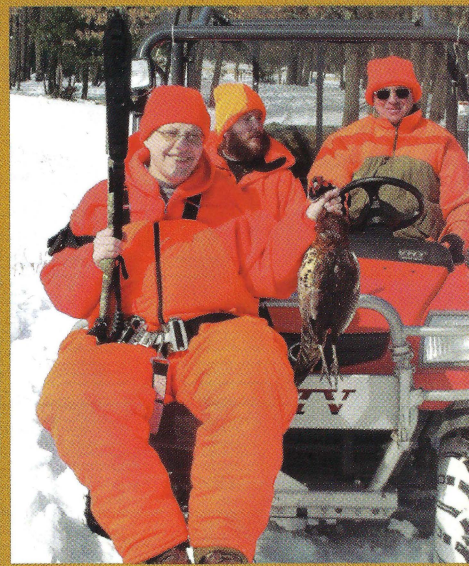
Today the dream of creating and supporting access to the outdoors for seniors and persons with disabilities is a reality because of the efforts of about 25 "very active" members, according to nasa Vice President Pat Lamke. Many other individuals and businesses in the area donate their time, money, equipment, land and other resources to the cause, making it possible for hundreds of people to enjoy the natural beauty of our area in ways they may not have thought possible under their circumstances. And it's not all about hunting and fishing, either; the less camouflage-inclined are able to enjoy skiing, biking and golf through nasa's assistance.

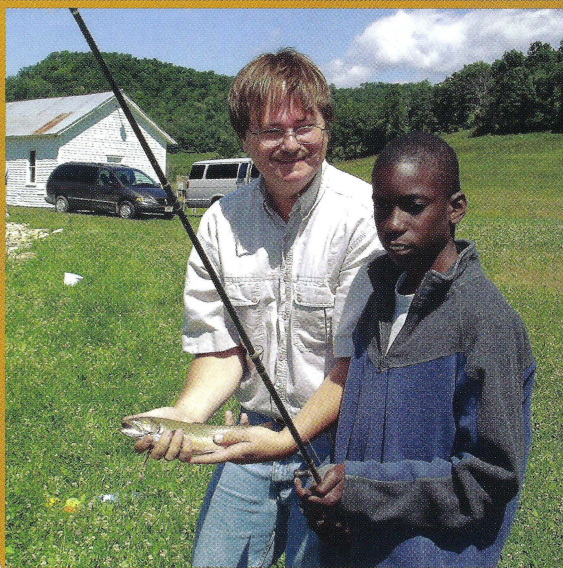
On the hunt

Last year nasa provided two deer hunts for the physically challenged. The first was in October when the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources runs a special nine-day deer hunt. During this special hunt,

nasa provided each physically challenged hunter with an enclosed blind and an able-bodied companion (or "hunting buddy") for safety and success. They also provided lunch, dinner and plenty of camaraderie, including campfires at night for the sharing of hunting stories. Last year's hunt was held at "Camp Klaus," a family farm on over 800 acres of land in Trempealeau County's Black River bottoms. More than 20 hunters participated in the hunt, and eight deer were harvested. This year's hunt is Saturday, October 4 through Sunday, October 12 on the same land.

The second hunt in 2007 was at the DNR's annual two-day Goose Island Park deer hunt for hunters with disabilities, held in the county park south of La Crosse. The 26 registered hunters combined to harvest 28 deer. One hunter, Lester Hanson of West Salem, went on the hunt last year—his first hunt in 25 years. "It was a thrill and a half," said Hanson. Badger Sportsman's Club provided hunting buddies and lunch for all, and Badger Sportsman's Club/nasa volunteers cleaned and wrapped the deer for the successful hunters. This year's hunt is being held Saturday and Sunday, December 13 and 14, with a mandatory pre-hunt meeting the preceding Friday. For more information, call nasa Large Game Committee Chair Randy Hansen at (608) 781-2026 or Randy Moore at (608) 780-7720.





Last year nasa also awarded two special hunts for youths with disabilities: a northern Wisconsin bear hunt and a New Mexico black powder elk hunt. In 2008, one young man traveled with his father for an 11-day South African safari, and another was awarded a trophy elk hunt on the Brush game farm outside Arcadia, Wis. Any youth with disabilities who would like to be considered for one of these special hunts can contact Tony Christnovich or Randy Hansen at (608) 781-3100.

Upland game

For hunters who prefer feathers to fur, nasa offers a pheasant hunting experience at two area game farms: Badgerland Pheasant Farm

near Westby, Wis., and Woods & Meadow Hunting Preserve & Sporting Clays near Warrens, Wis. Hunters with disabilities and who qualify for a Class A permit are able to use a Kubota ATV that is equipped with a special chair in front. The hunter is securely strapped in and can swivel freely to shoot; a nasa volunteer drives the vehicle and acts as a guide. The host club provides the first five birds of the season; additional birds may be purchased from the club. Hunters are encouraged to invite family and friends along for the hunt and to bring a dog of their preference.

Duck hunting opportunities abound, too, as nasa also partners with the Trempealeau Wildlife Refuge and Wisconsin Waterfowl Association to help pair disabled hunters with able-bodied hunters for a special duck hunt on the refuge.

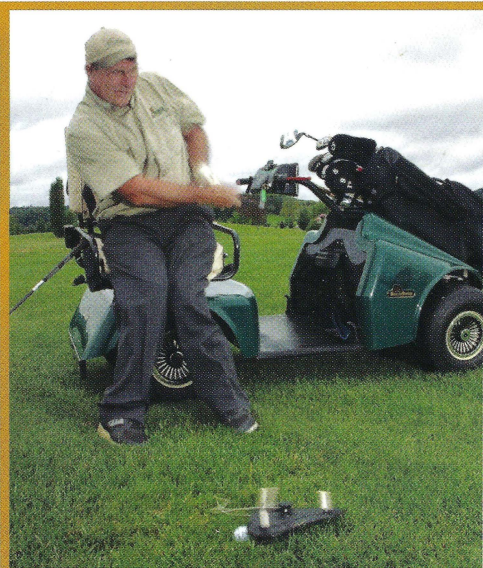
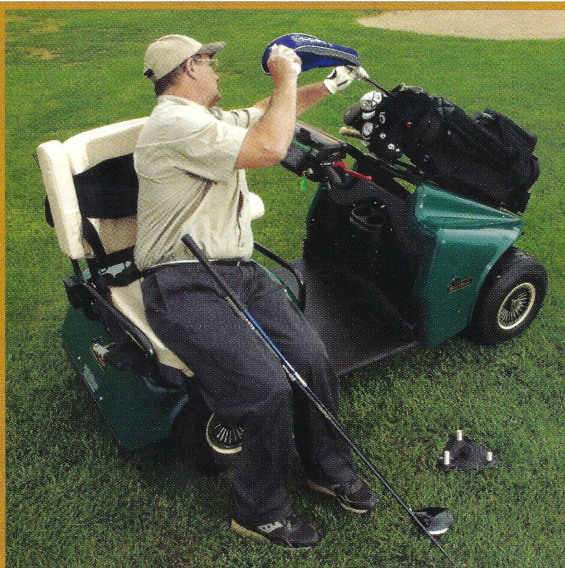
Hook, line, and sinker

People with disabilities who like to fish have several opportunities available through nasa. The S.S. Squirrel is a pontoon boat specially built for wheelchair accessibility and available at no charge to anyone with a disability and their family and friends, veterans, senior citizens over the age of 65, nursing facility groups, adult foster home groups, high school special education groups, youth groups, and other organizations working with the elderly, youth, or persons with disabilities. The boat, which operates on Lake Onalaska, is equipped with a Roll-A-Ramp for easy on-and-off access for all users, a canopy for protection from the elements, and life vests for all passengers. All outings are guided by a trained captain who understands the boat and the lake waters.

In 2004, the pontoon boat served around 150 individuals. In 2005, it served more than 300, and in 2006 and 2007, that number soared to over 1,600. Anyone physically challenged or elderly and his or her guests are invited to use the pontoon boat up to twice per month to enjoy Lake Onalaska.

For those preferring to fish from dry land, nasa has placed wheelchair-accessible fishing piers on Lake Onalaska and Lake Neshonoc through a

Pontoon Captain and Fishing Chair Red Edmunds (left) with NASA founder Tony Christnovich.



partnership with local government agencies and sponsors. Each pier is equipped with benches and pole holders for the easy-access fishing.

If trout fishing is more your style, nasa provides the opportunity to catch trout at a peaceful trout pond in the country. Last year nasa hosted more than 50 residents of five different nursing homes. They supplied a large tent with tables and chairs to provide respite from the sun. Each person caught trout, which nasa volunteers cleaned, cooked, and served on-site, and the nursing homes' staff later reported to nasa that the fishing trip virtually made the residents' year; it was a huge topic of discussion for weeks, and many were already looking forward to this year's trip.

The great outdoors

In addition to hunting and fishing, people with disabilities have plenty of other opportunities to get out and have fun through nasa, thanks to volunteers like David Conklin.

Conklin, who lost the use of his legs in 1981 after a motorcycle accident, enjoys helping others—regardless of age or disability—realize the benefits of physical activity. “Staying active really increases the quality of life,” he says. “And I love to see the light come on in someone’s eyes when they realize they can still play the game.” Not only was Conklin once ranked 49th in the world in wheelchair tennis, but he also represented the U.S. in the Paralympics for 18 years. As part of the U.S. Ice Sledge Hockey Team, Conklin brought home a gold medal from Salt Lake City in 2002 and a bronze

medal from Torino, Italy, in 2006. Today, Conklin enjoys cycling, skiing, hockey, and golf—making him a great fit for nasa.

Nasa’s disabled youth ski program, in partnership with Mount La Crosse and the YWCA, provides equipment, training, and support for physically challenged youth to hit the slopes in specialized ski equipment. Volunteers ski behind the participants to help ensure safety, and it’s a fantastic way to get fresh air and exercise. Todd Strittmater, head of nasa’s marketing committee, has a disability that would normally preclude him from skiing. “I could buy the specialized equipment, but it’s



Outdoor Recreation Co-Chair and golf enthusiast Dave Conklin.

pretty expensive, and I'd use it probably a couple of times a year," said Strittmater. "With the help of nasa, a lot of people like me have opportunities that they would normally never have."

Those opportunities extend long after the snow is gone, as nasa and the YWCA team up to provide a biking program. Specially equipped recumbent bicycles allow most physically challenged people to get on the trails and regain the freedom of feeling the wind in their hair. Conklin, who often volunteers to work in nasa's booth at community events, says it's especially rewarding to watch kids learn about the equipment that is available. "It's amazing to see their enthusiasm and the excitement they feel when they realize that it is possible for them to do the kinds of things that other kids are doing," he says.

Golf? Why not? With the help of nasa's special golf carts, people with disabilities can hit the links in style. The carts are hand-driven and have a special bracket for holding the bag of clubs at a convenient angle, allowing the golfer to play from tee to pin independently. And what's really amazing is that the only thing the golfer has to pay is the greens fee; the special cart is offered free of charge. There are currently three such golf carts in service—at Trempealeau Mountain, Drugan's Castle Mound, and Fox Hollow. The association's goal is to eventually have one of these carts at every course in the La Crosse area. An annual golf scramble helps nasa raise funds, and hole donations are taken.

Lending a hand

It goes without saying that nasa relies on volunteers to keep its programs running and to accommodate as many disabled and elderly people as they can. It also comes as no surprise that many of the volunteers have some sort of disability of their own.

Joan Oertel was working at a Racine, Wis., foundry when a 400-pound casting fell on her, rendering her unable to walk for the rest of

her life. She loved deer hunting, and her doctor, who knew about nasa, introduced her to Strittmater. Soon she was enrolled in the December Goose Island hunt. It was bitterly cold, but not cold enough to turn away someone who hadn't been able to hunt in 30 years. "I never saw a deer, but I had a heck of a lot of fun," said Oertel. Today she has been with nasa for one year and volunteers for "anything and everything," like selling tickets, signing people in at banquets, etc.

Amy Atchison and Steve Johnson were both recruited by Tony Christnovich at a sports show in La Crosse. (Atchison had helped Johnson, who was blinded by juvenile diabetes, harvest his first turkey as a blind hunter.) Johnson was wearing a camouflage jacket and carrying his white cane when Christnovich, amazed at how a blind person could hunt, recruited the two on the spot. Today Johnson is president of nasa, while Atchison helps out wherever she can—mostly in marketing.

"We're always looking for volunteers," said Pat Lamke. "That's one of the three things I always tell people we need. As a volunteer, you don't have to be involved in everything; some people, for example, only help out as deer hunting buddies, and some only have an interest in fishing. It's whatever you have time for. The second thing is donations—land to use, equipment, merchandise from businesses that we can raffle off, that kind of stuff. And the third thing we're always looking for is people to use our services because our equipment doesn't get used nearly enough."

If you'd like access to nasa's equipment and services or would like to volunteer, e-mail nasasquirrel@yahoo.com or visit www.nasasquirrel.org.

Jeff Severson, a freelance writer living in Holmen, has been hunting for 35 years and eating what he harvests. His food column, "In Season," can be found monthly in The Tapestry magazine.

