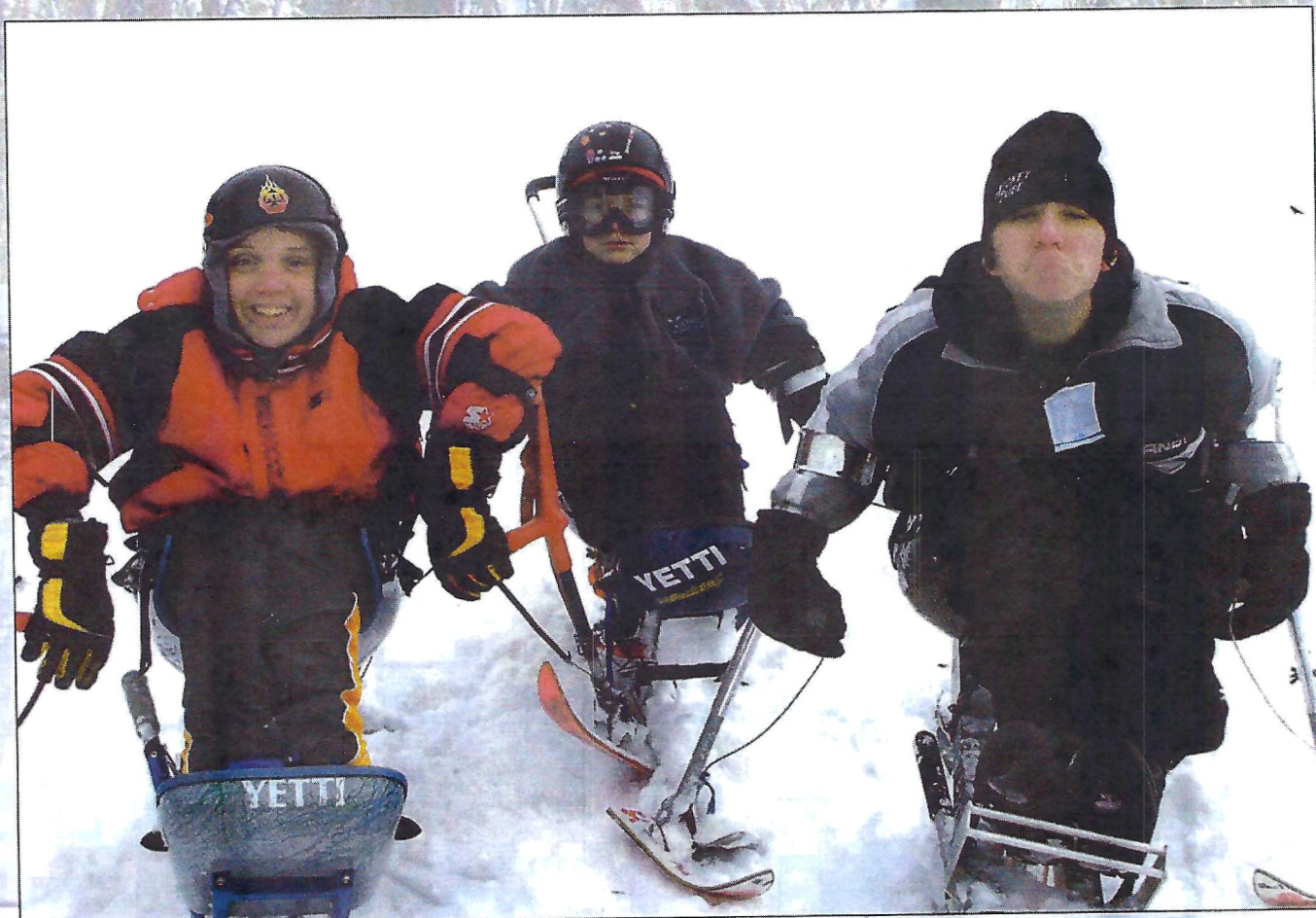


# Outdoor Dreams Come True

## *Volunteers Turn Challenges into Opportunities*

*By Ryan Johnson*



*Teen skiboarders enjoy a day on the slopes. (NASA)*

The chill of crisp autumn air blankets the bottomlands of the Black River, and a light frost covers the forest floor. Well-seasoned hunting clothing and a touch of buck fever is the only thing keeping two hunters warm as they hide silently in a windfall awaiting their opportunity to put some meat in the freezer.

The man holding the .270 Remington rifle is Steve Johnson, legally blind but fully tuned into the surroundings. He is assisted by his hunting mentor, Ed Mattie. Before long, twigs begin to snap in the distance and the dry autumn leaves rustle. Suddenly a whitetail deer appears in their shooting lane 20 yards

NASA formed in 2003 as a nonprofit organization to provide opportunities for physically and mentally challenged people, as well as the young and the elderly, to enjoy the outdoors.

from the windfall. Ed taps on Steve's thigh four times, the signal for a four-point buck. Steve's ears guide his rifle toward the target. Hearts are pounding. Ed watches a tiny green laser dot down range as he quietly scratches signals on Steve's thigh to guide the dot into the kill zone. Finally he signals Steve to shoot and a loud CRACK echoes through the cold air. A clean shot right to the heart.

The two hunters soon emerge from the windfall and begin following the blood trail. At first the trail is faint but it quickly leads to a thick stream of blood. Before long the two hunters find their prey lying dead only 40 yards from the shot. They exchange praise before attending to the business at hand. This is Steve's first buck.

Though Steve has been legally blind since he was 22 years old, he has continued his passion for the outdoors, and he has also helped other physically and mentally challenged people enjoy the outdoors with his involvement in



Fisherman Mike Schultz shows his catch. (NASA)



George Wilson (blind, in sunglasses) gets pointers from his hunting mentor, Jim McDowell. (Ryan Johnson)

the North American Squirrel Association (NASA). Though the "North American" part of the southwest Wisconsin organization's name is a bit of an exaggeration, its activities have grown well beyond squirrel hunting. Squirrel hunting sparked the start of the organization, so a squirrel remains its cute, furry mascot. NASA formed in 2003 as a nonprofit organization to provide opportunities for physically

and mentally challenged people, as well as the young and the elderly, to enjoy the outdoors. Organized activities range from fishing, downhill skiing, biking, golf and both large- and small-game hunting. And thanks to generous contributions, all activities for disabled participants are provided for free. Elected officers and committee chairs organize logistics, and an army of eager volunteers makes outdoor dreams come



Hunter Randy Hansen catches a ride with mentor Brad Ames. (Ryan Johnson)

true for thousands of folks every year.

With the help of NASA and recently revised hunting regulations, opportunities like Steve's are becoming more common for many physically challenged hunters in our region. In 2003, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources began allowing visually impaired hunters to use laser scopes. Not only did this open the opportunity for impaired hunters, it increased accuracy, minimizing the chance of wounding game. Other new regulations and licensing classes have opened doors to more physically challenged hunters each year. Whether the hunter's

impairment is visual or physical, NASA makes certain a qualified assistant, or mentor, is assigned to each participant, so they can work as a team to make dreams come true. If no suitable equipment exists to meet a hunter's needs, NASA has taken on the task of designing suitable equipment. For hunting upland birds, volunteers have modified a Kubota 4x4 with a 5-point racing seat mounted to the rear that safely supports quadriplegics and gives them a chance to bring down some birds.

Generous landowners have invited NASA to bring participants to their land to hunt. Hunting the same lands



The NASA group maintains an ice fishing shack on Lake Onalaska.

season after season allows volunteers to build and maintain deer stands suitable for different disabilities. Though the organization has had conversations about expanding its domain, it has decided to focus on its home in southwest Wisconsin, but members would welcome the chance to help new groups get established elsewhere.

### Fishing

May 1 through October 1, NASA operates its pontoon boat, the S.S. *Squirrel*, on Lake Onalaska to take thousands of anglers to fish and enjoy the water. These excursions can prove to be every bit as touching and rewarding as the story of Steve's first buck. For instance, an elderly gentleman in his 90s was out on the boat, when the captain noticed tears running down his cheeks. Concerned for his comfort, the captain asked if he was all right. The gentleman informed him that when he retired to a nursing home, one of the few possessions he brought with him was his fishing rod, which hung on his wall for many years. He thought he would never use it again, now the joy of being out on the water and using his prized possession moved him to tears.

A man in the late stages of cancer was helped by his nurse and medical staff, who arranged to get him out fishing one last time. Though he was too weak to reel in the fish by himself and had to be given medications on the boat, just being out on the water and holding a fishing pole granted one of his last wishes in life.

For those who prefer trout, a private pond near Arcadia, Wis., provides a wonderful setting where participants can cast a line and pull out a variety of browns, rainbows and brookies. Though NASA claims to offer help catching, cleaning, cooking and eating, nobody seems to need help with that last task. A typical summer at the pond hosts an event for upwards of 60 anglers with Down syndrome, followed

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by two more events that can attract more than 100 residents from area nursing homes.

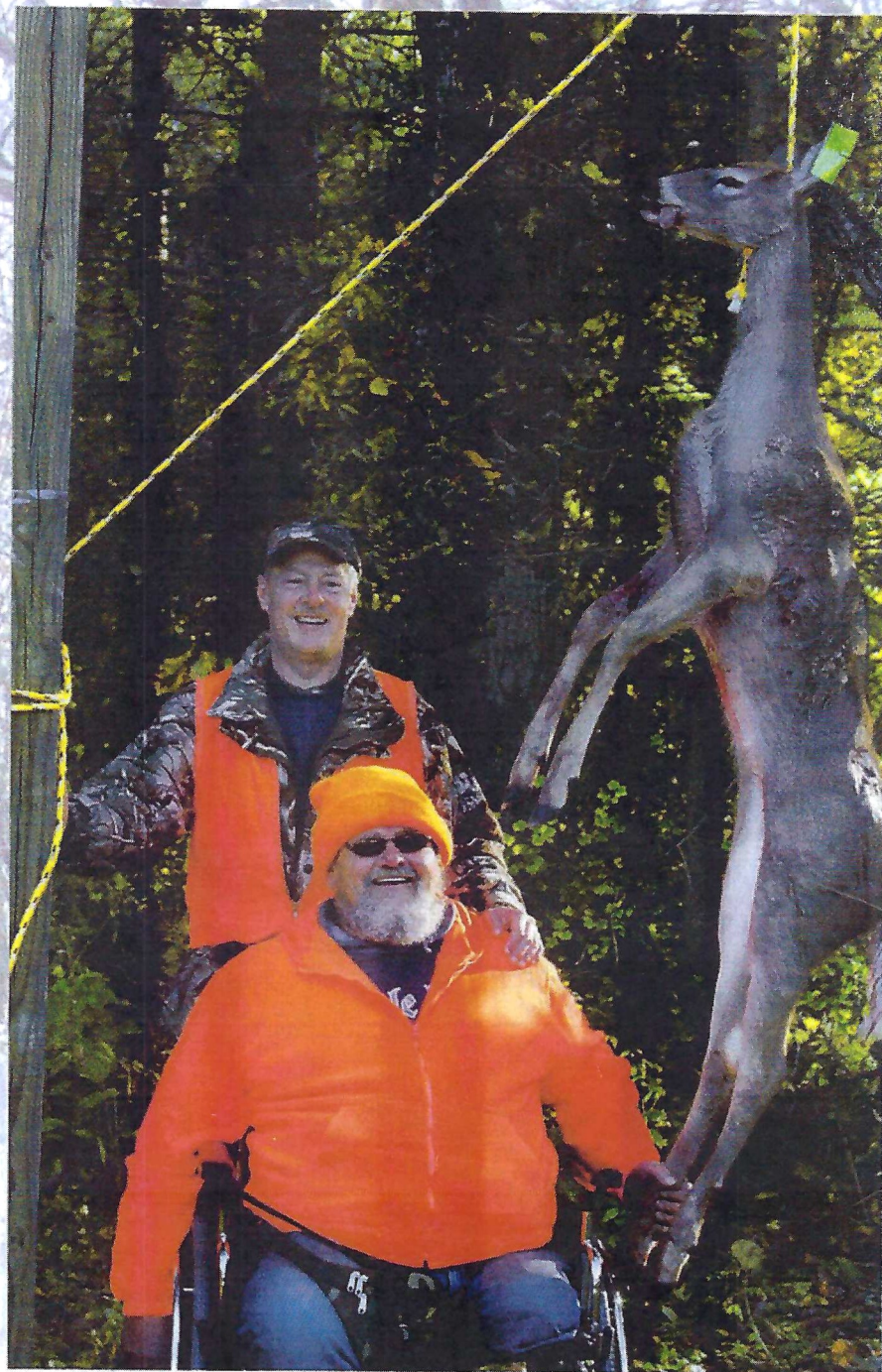
Cold winters don't stop the fishing fun. Once the ice sets firmly on Lake Onalaska, NASA pulls out its ice-fishing shack and opens the door to anyone with a desire to pull fish through a hole in the ice. The cold weather tends to keep all but the hardest from heading to the lake, so volunteers have done their best to minimize the effects of the elements. This year the well-insulated shanty will be located very close to the dock and should keep anglers warm and cozy.

### Getting Involved

The volunteers are all enthusiastic about NASA's mission and often mention the reward of seeing the smiles on participants' faces.

Vice president Jerry Denboer pointed out, "Every volunteer is just one mishap away from becoming disabled themselves. If that were to happen, they would want an organization like this in place."

If you or someone you know wishes to get out and enjoy the outdoors but feels that there are too many obstacles to overcome due to physical disabilities



Donald Krajewski poses proudly next to his doe after not hunting for nearly 10 years after his amputation. Mentor Jerry Denboer backs him up. (Ryan Johnson)

or age, contact NASA. Check out its website for upcoming activities, and if you have any questions make a call or send an email.

If you want to volunteer time or services, NASA is always looking for motivated people to help out with anything from hunting mentors, driving the pontoon or helping to cook. You will come away from the experience with

new friends and great stories. ☰ 📧

Ryan Johnson lives in Winona, Minn., and works as a kayak guide for Driftless Adventure Co. His last story for Big River was "Marketing Carp, Piece by Piece," September-October 2014.