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With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Young Guns

Hands on shooting takes education one step further

By Dick Ellis



A view from the Rice Lake Rod & Gun Club shows young graduates of Hunters Education programs honing their skills on the trap line during the 2009 NRA Shooting Sports Camp and Outdoor Field Day in Barron County. (Dick Ellis)

Griffin, Conservation Warden Chris Spaight's tenaciously focused German wirehaired pointer, lets a sudden silence do his talking for him. With Matt Hyde, 14, of Chetek in close pursuit, Griffin had roamed the property of Rice Lake Farmer David Antczak in search of pheasant scent, the rhythmic clanking of the bell around his neck sending a constant telegram that the search was still a work in progress.

A new and contrasting quiet, though, tells another story, and Hyde, a graduate of Hunters Safety and one of many participants is the 2009 Na-

tional Rifle Association Shooting Sports Camp and Outdoor Field Day, hurries forward to locate Griffin and the bird that he is surely locked in on. With Warden Jesse Ashton of Luck offering quiet reminders of safety rules first learned in the classroom, Hyde moves toward the rooster's hiding place revealed only by the steadfast point of Griffin.

In a tense and climatic blur, the bird flushes and one shot from Hyde's 12 gauge knocks it down again. Griffin and Hyde both have another reward for lessons well learned. The real reward though, might belong to

the scores of men and women devoting time and expertise to ensure that not only is hunters education reinforced, but that their own local contribution is being made to help ensure America's shooting heritage is protected for decades to come. Even as Griffin retrieves the rooster and returns the bird to Hyde, distant echoes of firearms reports rising from the Rice Lake Rod & Gun Club also serve as a reminder that a collective voice will be required for hunting and shooting rights to be protected into tomorrow.

"I started this program as a reward for recent hunters education graduates, and to reinforce safe firearms handling that they just learned in class by giving them more exposure to supervised shooting before the fall hunting seasons get underway," said Conservation Warden Russ Fell. "I noticed a large drop-off of Hunters Ed graduates who quit hunting for whatever reason and didn't have the opportunity to enjoy the shooting sports. I knew that I could not personally get all of these kids into the field to

enjoy hunting but that I could provide them with the opportunity to safely enjoy shooting, and at least a chance to take part in a pheasant hunt over well trained dogs. Perhaps by keeping these kids practicing safe firearms handling and enjoying the shooting sports, even for one day a year, as these kids grow into adults they will continue to enjoy the sport of hunting and pass that on to their own family or another young person."

Fell ran with the idea four years ago and with the help of major sponsors built the National Rifle Association Shooting Sports Camp and Field Day into a highly anticipated event that approximately 200 young people participate in. The 2009 event October 4 hosted by co-sponsor Rice Lake Rod & Gun Club in Barron County



Bree Smith, 13, of Bloomer takes her turn on the muzzle-loader line under the close scrutiny of a Hunters Education instructor at the Rice Lake Gun & Rod Club during the NRA Shooting Sports Camp and Outdoor Field Day in Barron County October 4 (Dick Ellis)



Youths too young to have completed a Hunters Education Program still received close instruction at shooting sports including archery. Here Hunter Ed instructor Jodi Hyde of Chetek helps Chris Jones, 12, of Rice Lake. (Dick Ellis)

was also sponsored by Safari Club International-Lake Superior Chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation-Red Cedar Chapter, Mathews Archery, Rice Lake Men's Club, Jacobson Optometry, Pheasants Forever-Red Cedar Chapter, Wisconsin Conservations Wardens Association, Wild Bill's Sport Shop, Walleyes for Tomorrow-Indianhead Chapter, Glock Firearms-North America, 4H Shooting Sports Program, Oak Grove Gamebirds, Yellow River Game Farm, and the Wisconsin State Game Farm at Poynette.

At no cost to participants, hands-on lessons in proper use of numerous firearms, including the live pheasant hunt, are open to all youths under age 18 who have completed a Hunters Education program, and their families. Youth under age 12 are restricted to archery, air rifles and "big hit" games like breath-powered guns with marshmallow ammunition. Sponsors provide all firearms, bows, ammunition and targets. Shooters may elect to shoot trap, a 3-D archery range, muzzleloaders, small and big bore pistols or rifle and more.

By the 10:00 am Sunday morning starting time on Sunday, October 4 according to Teresa Phillips and Joan Chapel of the Rice Lake Rod & Gun Club, who are handling administrative duties on site, already 100 youths have pre-enrolled. Despite the cold, rainy day, steady enrollment continues on site as the morning wears on and other Sunday morning duties like church begin to conclude.



Wisconsin Conservation Warden Russ Fell, who was instrumental four years ago in founding the annual Shooting Sports Camp and Outdoor Field Day in Barron County for young graduates of Hunters Education Programs, instructs Jacey Raatz, 14 of Rice Lake on the handgun line October 4. (Dick Ellis)

Near the enrollment desk, already food and drink concessions are in demand as participants escape the wind and weather. Bill Turner, Owner of co-sponsor Wild Bill's Outpost in Cameron, serves up burgers and brats and big portion of enthusiasm for the shooting sports and this wild region of Wisconsin. The Board Director of the Rod & Gun Club and Hunters Education Instructor is a Michigan transplant and says he has hunted and fished more in the northwest in the last decade than he had in the previous 30 in Michigan.

"Four years ago the DNR called and asked what they could do to help with these kids and firearms," said Turner. "We had about 40 kids enroll the first year and we're already reaching our limit of 200. Any good cause like this that involves kids, we're here to help too. We put a gun in their hands and see them get hooked on hunting. I'll have kids come up and say, 'hey, I got my deer this year... I was in your Hunters Education class. Every spring we have about 60 new kids in Hunters Ed and every fall, 80 or 90.'"

Approximately 40 percent are young women. From the clubhouse porch, shooters can be seen taking their turn on the trap line as an umbrella of parents and friends gather around the line to watch. Some clay pigeons shatter with a shotgun report. Most fall untouched to the ground, missed again by a young shooter finding that it is indeed practice that makes closer to perfect. No one is concerned with the misses anyway. This is pure fun. To the left, new archers still too young to participate in Hunters Education, are learning how to shoot a bow and send arrows toward balloons set as targets 20 feet away.

Further down the line, a cloud of gunpowder envelopes 13 year old Bree Smith of Bloomer

under the watchful eyes of a Hunters Ed instructor as the thud of slug on metal announces a direct hit from the muzzleloader. In-line and traditional black powder is available. Further still, under the supervision of a 4H member and Hunters Ed instructor, another half-dozen shooters settle into the prone position, cock their respective air rifles and fire away, one pellet at a time, at scores of targets they helped re-set after the last group of shooters finished. Despite the one-by-one procedure of loading and firing the air guns, last year 3,500 pellets were shot during the six-hour event.

4H shooting sports are extremely popular in Barron County. The 4H Archery program, for example is held at the Rice Lake Armory with shoots held indoors from February through April. On any given night, 100 shooters might participate. By volunteering their time and equipment at the air rifle station Sunday, the 4Hers attract more participants to their own programs that they also coach and mentor.

A casual walk by an observer continues, with the young men and women lining up for an opportunity to shoot one of many other firearms under the close supervision of law enforcement officers. .22 rifle, center fire rifle (.223 model M-16 A1, and Savage bolt action .308), .22 pistol and center fire pistol (.9mm) are each available, with Barron County Deputies and a Swat Team Leader, Rice Lake police officers, Hunters Safety Instructors, and six wardens representing Washburn, Polk, Burnett and Barron Counties ensuring that is definitely safety first and pure fun second in Rice Lake.

The day concludes with an ATV ride up a long winding trail on a wooded hill to more grassy, sloping fields. Here, more than a half-mile from the pheasant field where Griffin and Hyde had learned to work as a team, more dogs, more young hunters, and more mentors are hard at...fun...learning just how to find another hiding rooster. From just an idea four years ago, it's a sight to behold for Warden Russ Fell.

"Today's young shooters and hunters are tomorrow's legislatures, mayors, congressmen, business leaders and community leaders," he said. "We need to keep these young people plugged into the natural world, the hunting heritage and the traditions and values of safe, responsible, ethical hunting and shooting. These are the people who will eventually be making decisions on environmental issues and hunting laws. It is our responsibility to make sure that when it comes to make these decisions, this generation has some background and knowledge to make them wisely." *Wo*

For more information on starting a Shooting Sports Camp and Outdoor Field Day in your region of Wisconsin, or to inquire about participating in the Barron County activities, contact Wild Bill's Sport Shop in Cameron at 715-458-2734. Contact Conservation Warden Russ Fell at russ.fell@wisconsin.gov.