

Reprint of an article written by Joe Knight and published by the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram 1/30/04

Branching Out

A group of disabled Wisconsin hunters, unhappy with the leadership and accountability of the Minnesota-based United Foundation for Disabled Archers, have split to form their own group: Adaptive Sportsmen of Wisconsin.

They can be found at both 23B at the Northern Wisconsin Deer Classic and Sports Show, which will be held Feb. 6-8 at the Ramada Inn Convention Center in downtown Eau Claire.

They plan to expand from just bow hunting to encouraging disabled to participate in a variety of disabled hunts, said Dick Fischer of Merrillan, a member of the group's founding board of directors.

About 40 or 50 Wisconsin hunters have transferred from UFDA to Adaptive Sportsmen of Wisconsin, but this is really their first year, Fischer said. They are looking for more members. "Anybody who knows a handicapped person in their life, pick up a form and have them try it out," he said. One of the members who signs up in 2004 will be drawn for a donated elk hunt on a Wisconsin hunting preserve, he said.

To participate in handicapped hunts the hunter must have a Class A, B, or C handicapped permit from the Department of Natural Resources. A doctor's referral is required for the permit.

Adaptive Hunters is also looking for landowners who are willing to have a handicapped hunt on their land, and for people who will help out as guides during handicapped hunts, Fischer said.

Adaptive Sportsmen will be raffling off hunting equipment donated by sports stores and businesses. The funds will support their activities which include two handicapped bow hunts scheduled for October, one at the former Badger Ammunitions plant near Baraboo and one at a Boy Scout Camp near Rhinelander.

Wisconsin also has a special handicapped gun deer hunt in October on private land with cooperating landowners. A handicapped deer hunt in Clark County organized by Dale Petkovsek of Willard has grown to include 43 cooperating landowners. Petkovsek is expected to be at the Adaptive Sportsmen booth Sunday afternoon during the Deer Classic.

Handicapped hunters in western Wisconsin are fortunate to have conservation groups and shooting preserves that sponsor handicapped pheasant hunts. These include the Big Rock Hunting Preserve near Gilman and Whispering Emerald Ridge near Menomonie, he said.

Fischer, who has diabetes, became legally blind in 1971 and went totally blind in 1975. But with determination, slightly modified equipment, and help from friends and family, he has continued to hunt.

Last fall he shot four deer with the help of friends who looked over his shoulder and told him when to shoot. Two of those deer he shot with a rifle during handicapped hunt the first week of October near Willard.

The third deer Fischer shot with a bow near Hixton while hunting with his longtime hunting companion and former student Jim Johnson of Hixton. They were hunting on land that was being managed for Quality Deer Management so they passed on a number of smaller deer before shooting an eight-point buck. The fourth deer he got during a T-Zone hunt with a muzzleloader. The hunt with the muzzleloader was especially memorable because his grandson was along in the blind and they had a buck working on a scrape just 15 yards from the blind, he said.

"God's blessed me with a wonderful year of hunting. It isn't always that easy," he said.

Over the years 29 or 30 different friends and members have family members have hunted with him since he lost his vision. They have taken numerous animals with a bow, including three bear and three antelope. Of the antelope, two were Pope & Young trophies.

"I've really had the opportunity to share the stand with a lot of people. They're giving their time. They're giving their eyes. The funny thing is, when we kill an animal, they get more excited than I am."

Getting a wild turkey with a bow has been more challenging. He shot one with a shotgun and decided that was too easy and has tried for the past four or five years to get one with a bow. More recently he has started hunting pheasants with a shotgun at handicapped pheasant hunts. After a dog points the pheasant, he prepares to shoot with the aid of his son Paul, who places a

hand on each elbow. As he swings the shotgun Paul says "fire". If he misses, they keep swinging and Paul says "fire" again. The sound of the flushing bird helps him zero-in on where it is, he said. They have practiced together on a trap range. They hit 13 out of 25 one night, then Paul shot by himself and hit 8 out of 25, so maybe they shoot better together, he said.

It was an emotional moment when he and his son killed a pheasant on the wing, he said. "It was something I hadn't done in 31 years," he said.

Fischer said many hunters in the group have overcome more serious disabilities than his to get into the field. About 80 percent of the hunters in the group are in wheel chairs. One quadriplegic hunter is able to hunt with a crossbow by moving the stock with his chin and triggering it by blowing through a tube.

"I'm totally amazed at the Adaptive Sportsmen people. I don't even feel handicapped. I'm only blind," he said. "They've got heart, and if you've got heart, nothing stops you."

Whispering Emerald Ridge hunting preserve near Menomonie began a spring hunt for handicapped hunters, in conjunction with the women's Red Cedar chapter of Pheasants Forever, then picked up a fall hunt that was discontinued by another hunting preserve, said Bruce Olson, co-owner of Whispering Emerald Ridge. Jim Forster of the Dunn County Conservation Department coordinates the fall hunt.

Volunteers, including many members of the hunting preserve, donate money for the pheasants, and donate the use of their hunting dogs, four-wheelers, and time as helpers and dog handlers, Olson said. The satisfaction of the disabled hunters makes it worth the effort, he said.

"When you see the smiles on their faces, it's all worth it," he said.

Fischer said members of Adaptive Sportsmen are still considering designs for a logo. The one he prefers has a background of the state of Wisconsin with some pine trees with light shining through them and a big buck in the foreground with the words: "You can do it in Wisconsin. Adaptive Sportsmen."