

Making the Most of Mentoring

Effort-intensive youth-mentoring programs recruit next generation of PF members



Minnesota mentor Jeff Johnstad, Rice County PF Chapter president, helps Erik Wicklund with gun safety and hunting training. Youth want to join the ranks of hunter-conservationists. In many cases, they just need a caring adult to show them the way.

Mike Kurre's phone and email kept him über-busy this past July and August.

Within days of issuing a press release announcing the second-ever Minnesota DNR-Pheasants Forever youth mentor hunt, Kurre found himself happily buried in the details of organizing the massive event.

As mentoring program coordinator for the Minnesota DNR, Kurre watched the inaugural event in 2008 become a model for 2009 and beyond. PF chapters nationwide are monitoring the success of mentored youth

hunts in states like Minnesota as well as Nebraska and Kansas.

Eran Sandquist, northern Minnesota regional wildlife biologist, recalls Kurre reaching out to PF last summer with the youth-mentor hunt proposal. Kurre, whose position with Minnesota DNR is unique among state natural resources departments, has coordinated several youth hunts since taking the job in April 2008.

"We liked the idea. We wanted to get youth out pheasant hunting, and we're finding a lot of people with an interest who just needed a chance," Sandquist said.

The concept behind youth-mentor hunts addresses two major problems facing the future of hunting. First, a growing percentage of children lack an adult role model with the experience and passion to teach the hunting tradition. Second, even among those kids who possess such role models, many families need access to quality hunting land.

So what is the goal behind the first-ever Minnesota DNR-Pheasants Forever youth mentor hunt? Simply provide Minnesota youth, and a parent or guardian, with a good first pheasant-hunting experience. The only require-

ments were that participating youth must be 12 to 17 years old and possess a valid firearms safety certificate.

"We didn't set out to guarantee that every youth would bag a pheasant, but we wanted to create an environment where they could learn hands-on skills from experienced hunters who enjoy passing their knowledge on to the next generation," Kurre said.

In a twist that should surprise no reader of this publication, the event was ridiculously successful.

While Kurre found and organized youth, PF's Sandquist and fellow state biologist Scott Roemhildt located landowners willing to host the young hunters. From the start, organizers wanted to emphasize developing relationships with landowners and understanding conservation practices on private lands. Sandquist and Roemhildt would eventually find enough volunteers to fulfill the pheasant hunting wishes of all 200 applicants.

"For a while there, we thought we might need a lottery for all the interested kids!" Sandquist recalls. "But then the chapters really stepped up and we got all the kids into an event."

Youth were paired with guide-mentor volunteers from among 35 participating Minnesota PF chapters. Kurre attended one of the hunts last October with Ken Fruth, of PF's Stearns County Chapter. For the 14 kids and their mentors, the day started with a continental breakfast, continued with a discussion of outdoor topics like firearms safety and dog handling. Eventually everyone hit the field.

"We went from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., and the kids had a blast," Kurre recalled. "There weren't a lot of birds shot, but we had enough for an impromptu field-dressing seminar at the end. Everyone got their hands dirty dressing pheasants!"

The event helped establish a long-term interest in hunting, plus it forged relationships among youth and adults,



West Metro Conservation Officer Adam Block addressing youth and parents about hunter safety, sportsmanship, pheasant hunting, his role as a conservation officer and his involvement with the SCPF — Scott County PF Chapter — prior to the October 24, 2008 hunt at Caribou Gun Club in Le Sueur, MN

and mentors and parents alike.

"It's great watching kids' faces light up at an event like this," said Sandquist, who attended the Wright County youth hunt, "but there's also no doubt that parents and guardians and mentors get as much out of it as the kids."

Stacy Dvorak, who wears many hats for Minnesota's Scott County Chapter, commended organizers for finding volunteers for the event last October. Her chapter's event hosted 12 kids who not only hunted, but shot trap, spoke with a local conservation officer and helped clean birds.

"Afterwards, we had the kids write up a paragraph about their day," Dvorak said. "They did a good job, and it was very well received by everyone involved."

Nebraska Pheasants Forever was the Model

Before launching the Minnesota

mentor hunt, organizers spent time speaking with PF chapters and officers in Nebraska, which has hosted a huge youth pheasant-hunting event since 1996.

Last year, 64 Nebraska PF chapters and 1,000 boys and girls participated in the state's Youth Mentor Hunt Program. Participants spent the day learning about all facets of hunting, and then headed afield for the afternoon with hunting mentors.

"It's a sizable commitment from our volunteers because we find that — between hunting, food and events throughout the day — it takes about two adults for every youth participant, said Pete Berthelsen, PF Nebraska senior field coordinator. "It's been enormously popular, and we're seeing interest from South Dakota and Iowa in doing something similar."

Berthelsen said the 13 years of organized mentor hunts has produced a sizable database of past participants.

In conjunction with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, he plans to survey those youth and compare their current participation rates

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— Pete Berthelsen, PF senior field coordinator, Nebraska

against those who completed firearms safety, but didn’t attend a Youth Mentor Hunt Program event.

“I’m confident that we’ll be able to prove that, yes, mentoring programs like this build lifelong hunters,” he said.

In Kansas, Pheasants Forever has partnered with the rapidly expanding national Pass It On program. Mike Christensen, a former employee of Big Brothers, Big Sisters in Wichita, has molded Pass It On around the BB/BS model, but with an emphasis on hunting and fishing activities. He has challenged all Kansas-based PF and Quail Forever chapters to participate in three youth mentoring events: a wingshooting clinic in the summer, a dove hunt in September and an upland bird hunt later in the fall. So far, he’s worked with a dozen PF and QF chapters, mostly in the Wichita area.

The nonprofit Pass It On works with many conservation groups, and Christensen estimates that between 1,200 and 1,500 kids participated in the Kansas events last year, plus another 1,000 around the country. Pass It

On has begun developing chapters in Rapid City, S.D., Indianapolis and Dallas-Ft. Worth.

“We’re expanding and excited to work with Pheasants Forever on new events anywhere in the country,” he said.

Back in Minnesota: within a week of announcing the 2009 second annual hunt, Sandquist already had 54 youth opportunities with many more to come. Organizers fully expect to top last year’s tally, and he and Kurre hope to accommodate 300-plus youth.

For more information about the Minnesota youth hunts, visit: <http://mndnr.gov/youthhunts>. For information on the Pass It On program, check out www.outdoormentors.org.

Rob Drieslein is the managing editor of Minneapolis-based Outdoor News. For more information, visit: www.outdoornews.com

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