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A Different Kind of EDUCATION

College classmates teach each other how to hunt

By Kevin Kelly

THE SKY OVER the farm field brightened to a warm glow slowly, as if controlled by a steady hand on a dimmer switch.

A rooster loosed a shrill crow in the distance and crows uncorked raspy squawks in the treetops. Squirrels rustled the leaf litter beneath oaks laden with gumball-sized acorns.

Settled into position ensconced in a

ground blind were Murray State University students Brent Eugley and Brittany Smith.

“I enjoy watching the world come alive,” Eugley whispered to the first-time deer hunter.

Safely inside legal shooting hours, a blast from another farm interrupted the serenity. And then another, within a minute of the first.

“That’s a good sign,” Eugley said in a hushed voice. “That’s a really good sign.”

Hopes soared as they watched, listened and waited for a deer to reveal itself.

Eugley and Smith are at the forefront of a new hunting mentor program sponsored by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. Initially, the program is targeting students interested in wildlife management and teaching them how to hunt. Eventually, the program could expand

to any college student interested in learning about hunting.

On this morning, mentors and their fellow students had taken up positions in the Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge and elsewhere; watching, listening and waiting the same as Eugley and Smith on the plot of private land in Marshall County they were hunting.

The Clarks River, named for the pioneer George Rogers Clark, flows through the Jackson Purchase region of Kentucky. The Murray State students out on the first morning of Kentucky’s early muzzleloader deer season could be considered pioneers in their own right.

Looking to college campuses is a fresh approach to recruiting and retaining new hunters.

Conservation educators from the department helped organize hunts during the past two seasons for Murray State and Eastern Kentucky University students by coordinating with the student chapters of The Wildlife Society at both schools. Students from Morehead State University also participated in a mentored hunt in 2014.

The weekend excursions – tailored to students with little to no hunting experience and an interest in developing the skills and putting them into practice – blend aspects of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife’s mentoring program and Explore Bowhunting.

“We’re just putting puzzle pieces together to figure out what’s the best way we can offer a program that incorporates people



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that have hunted and people that haven't to build this college community," said Katie Haymes, Explore Bowhunting's state coordinator for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "We started with crossbows and incorporated Explore Bowhunting; not only the equipment but some of the activities that help them learn what they need to know to hunt. It's more or less turned into a weekend camping trip and that's worked really well. The students get to know each other better, build that social network and they get multiple chances to go afield."

Success isn't measured by what's harvested. "Giving people more confidence, getting them out in the field in the hopes they become hunters in the future, that's

Mentor hunts for students from Murray State (pictured), Eastern Kentucky and Morehead State universities drew 30 participants in 2014.

what this is all about," said Jamie Cook, Hunter's Legacy program coordinator with Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.

The Murray State group used Camp John Currie on Kentucky Lake as its base for two nights. The students were responsible for their own hunter safety card, statewide hunting license and deer permit.

A show of hands revealed a half dozen novice hunters among the contingent.

"Everyone is excited to learn," said Ryan Johnson, a new hunter from Louisville. "It's an all-around fun time having your friends teaching you something new."

Like a reality show cast assembling, the students and their hunting advisors trickled into camp starting Friday afternoon and continuing into the evening.

"If you care about the sport, this is the future," said Eugley, a senior who was teaching a hunter for the second year. "Every per-

Brittany Smith didn't harvest a deer while hunting under the watchful eye of Brent Eugley in October, but she was successful during November's modern gun deer season.

son here is a missed generation of hunters."

The experienced student hunters had scouted potential spots ahead of time. That evening, they discussed potential setup locations while examining maps in the dining hall kitchen.

After a supper of hamburgers, pasta salad and potato chips, the group listened as Cook covered the rules for the weekend and stressed the importance of safe and ethical hunting.

"Mentors, set the example," he said. "Don't just walk in and walk out and leave them in the dust. Teach."

The experienced hunters cleaned and readied muzzleloaders on cafeteria tables. Some of the novices watched while others participated.

Murray State senior Rob Lewis serves as president of the school's student chapter of The Wildlife Society. The Maryland native doesn't come from a family of hunters, but he became an avid hunter after being introduced to it by his sixth grade social studies teacher.

"He took me under his wing and took me hunting and served that mentor role for me," said Lewis. "I hope that we can kind of duplicate that but on more of a level setting: peers teaching peers."



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Informally, there is a sense of competition between schools.

“What did Eastern end up doing?” one hunter asked Cook at the tail-end of his remarks to the group. A spike buck, he was told.

“Everybody come back tomorrow with two apiece,” someone else volleyed in jest.

Optimism for a successful hunt was high at the meeting. “If you shoot something, text,” Lewis told the group.

The student hunters congregated in the dining hall early the next morning and grazed on fruit, muffins, granola bars, Pop-Tarts and more before leaving camp.

Graduate work kept Olivia Harmsen from participating previously. The Lawrenceburg resident made it this time, and was paired with Murray State junior Nathan Tillotson of Paducah.

Tillotson, whose father introduced him to hunting, took his first deer at age 7. It was a buck.

“I was playing a Game Boy in the blind when my dad let me know there was a deer coming,” he recalled. “I look up and a little 7-point buck walks out. Of course, I was super excited. It was the first thing we’d seen all day and it was a buck and I might be able to shoot it. I got a shot off on it and that was that. He actually walked straight up to us, walked behind our blind, lay down and died five steps from the blind.”

Tillotson filled the role of adviser during this morning as Harmsen spotted a group of three deer. “I was trying to coach her through how to get on it right,” he said. “But she knew what she was doing.”

Harmsen was nervous. The feeling intensified once she could see a spike buck’s shoulder as it stepped out from behind a tree.

“I thought to myself, ‘This is going to happen,’” she said. “My heart was racing pretty good.”

Her shot hit the deer, and as hard as it was to resist the temptation to trail it immediately, the two waited before embarking on the recovery effort.



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— KATIE HAYMES,
Explore Bowhunting State Coordinator

OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

experience. It teaches them that it’s not just people killing an animal. It’s management. It’s harvesting meat. It’s so many different things.”

That evening, the hunters reconvened in the camp dining hall. Tired and hungry, they swapped stories about their day over bowls of venison chili and cups of sweetened iced tea. There wasn’t a Smartphone in sight, or a television or radio in earshot.

Ryan Johnson walked in the dining hall sporting a gash on his forehead. He didn’t have a chance to practice with his loaner rifle before the weekend. When he finally did try firing the gun, its recoil drove the scope into his face.

“Unfortunately, you see what happened during range practice,” he said.

Johnson’s hunt occurred on a farm in Fulton County. He had two chances to take a doe but missed.

“Just unreal. Almost peaceful,” he said, describing the moments before squeezing the trigger. “It started off calm and then the closer you got to pulling the trigger the more your

heart started to race and the harder the shot got.”

Once found, they loaded the buck and took it back to camp. Lewis and Cook coached Harmsen through the field dressing process. Now bearing a smudge of blood on each cheek from her first deer, Harmsen shared the news with her mother and father.

“OMG. How did you do that?” her mother texted in response.

Standing out of the way was a proud mentor.

“It’s definitely an awesome program,” Tillotson said. “Being able to introduce people to the hunting lifestyle is a great

heart started to race and the harder the shot got.”

Growing up in Louisville, Johnson said he didn’t have anyone to show him the ropes. Justin Baldwin served as his mentor for the hunt.

“He taught me a lot about what was going on while we were just kind of sitting there,” Johnson said. “We went scouting during the middle of the day. He showed me things to look for and areas to check.”

Katelyn Beckemeyer has been hunting since she was young.

Hunting provided a bond with her brothers. Now, it also provides experience that helps the sophomore wildlife biology major prepare for a career. Beckemeyer aspires to become a wildlife refuge manager.

“You see what your work can produce,” she said. “You see all the deer and all the other wildlife.”

Beckemeyer participated in the first Murray State mentor hunt in 2013. She returned in October. While Beckemeyer paired up with mentor Jacob Whitehall on the first day, she opted to go solo the second. It was a big step – the first time she has hunted deer by herself – and showed the confidence she had in her abilities.

“I found my way, eventually,” Beckemeyer said. “Back home, my brother’s within range of me. This was completely by myself. Hearing all the owls and the crows and the ducks, it’s what life’s supposed to be like.”

Seeing another hunter’s deer intensified Brittany Smith’s desire to get back in a ground blind.

She and Eugley spent more than four hours scanning the field through zip-down windows. A cold front pushed through around mid-morning, bringing biting winds that buffeted the blind. At one point, Smith quietly reached into her backpack and removed a small stack of papers. It was her zoology homework.

Eugley didn’t mind. “I tried to instill in her that it’s something to enjoy,” he ex-

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— JAMIE COOK,
Hunter’s Legacy Program Coordinator



DAVE BAKER PHOTO

plained. “Some people I’ve been with in the past are just dead serious. There’s no movement. No speaking. No coughing. It can be a little more relaxed. It is a hobby.”

That afternoon, Smith accompanied Lewis for a hunt on Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge.

They set up a ground blind on a flat overlooking a floodplain. Sunlight filtered into the valley through towering bald cypress. The scenery alone was worth the visit. Mentor Jason Matthews and Alissa Sommerfeldt had spent the entire day in an area over the ridge and well out of range.

Lewis pointed out potential shooting lanes, answered questions about hypothetical scenarios, shared stories of his hunting experiences and identified the forest noises.

He attempted to attract a deer with a series of doe bleats and startled Smith in the process.

A deer did appear, but it was on the move and quickly out of sight. They kept watch another 15 minutes – until the end of legal shooting hours – then packed up and hiked back to meet Matthews and Sommerfeldt in the dark.

“I’m getting a deer tomorrow,” Smith declared from the backseat of Lewis’ Toyota truck. “I’m getting one.”

As he navigated a two-lane road in the dark, the radio broadcast of Murray State’s football game against Austin Peay playing in the background, Lewis asked what she had learned from her first deer hunt.

“I learned I want to be comfortable when I make a shot,” she said. “And I learned to be aware that somebody’s going to blow a deer thing and almost give me a heart attack.”

Clearly, her enthusiasm wasn’t stifled.

“What time are we going out in the morning,” she asked. “Can we go early?”

By the time the truck turned into the camp’s entrance, Smith was fast asleep.



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Some of the new hunters returned to the field for modern gun season. Sommerfeldt took her first deer. Smith took a button buck with a .243 rifle. Johnson, who had the scope incident at camp, wound up taking two deer during the season.

“At another mentored hunt, two guys who were in The Wildlife Society brought

After receiving instruction from Nathan Tillotson the night before, Olivia Harmsen took her first deer on opening morning of Kentucky’s 2014 early muzzleloader deer season.

their girlfriends,” Haymes said. “They had a good time and one of them has gone out since and tagged out, two deer already this season. They’re going. They’re doing it.”

Not every college or university has a student chapter of The Wildlife Society. But that’s not a hindrance for this recruitment effort. Organizers simply need to make a connection with somebody at a school – be it a science club, an agriculture club or a person who wants to start it – to get the ball rolling.

The concept is now drawing interest from outside of Kentucky.

Haymes knows things may change once students graduate and start careers and families. But they’ll always have the knowledge gained from their experience.

“They were introduced to it,” she said. “They’ve got friends now that do it, and they won’t be as intimidated to pick it back up down the road.” ■