



Everything Michigan

Photos: Hunters paralyzed in accidents get another shot at deer

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Darren Breen | The Grand Rapids Press

Disabled hunter Matt Clements releases the tension from his crossbow before taking a break during the hunt at the Blandford Nature Center Saturday.

Men with disabilities hunt at Blandford Nature Center gallery (9 photos)

WALKER -- In the cozy confines of the **Blandford Nature Center** Saturday, a group of men dressed in camouflage sat at lunchtime telling stories.

They swapped tales about the deer they saw or didn't see, about the rabbits that came up to visit while they sat out waiting that morning. They told stories about cold hands and/or feet they didn't feel, about the right way to dress if you are paralyzed and hunting from a wheelchair.

The men were all part of a unique fraternity - able-bodied men that had become disabled. Each retained a passion for hunting they wanted to continue to pursue.

Several were members of the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association, which recently received a \$13,320 grant to develop a disabled archery program. The money came from the Easton Sports Development Foundation affiliated with the arrow manufacturer Easton Archery.

Saturday's hunt was the GRWSA first organized event and the first day of a special weekend hunt being held on the nature center's Walker property. The group had volunteered to help BNC thin its burgeoning deer herd.

"I saw a squirrel. Just one," said, David Briggs, of Grand Rapids, drawing a laugh from the group. Briggs, 41, was hurt in a motorcycle accident 10 years ago after hitting a stump that sent him flying over the handle bars. He broke his back and neck. His wife was 7.5 months

pregnant.

Today Briggs is a union steward working United Parcel Service. He plays on the GRWSA traveling wheelchair tennis team and road race team. The bowhunt at Blandford is a special opportunity, he said,

"I'd love to say I'm going to shoot a big one," said Briggs. "But I have the feeling that it will be a big rest in the woods and well-deserved nap,"

Not for a lack of deer, according to BNC director, Annoeskja Steinman, who said studies of the deer using the property estimate the local herd is more than 100 strong. Those deer are overbrowsing the wildflowers and other flora on the property along with neighbor's bushes and shrubs.

"The deer were feeding on our tomato plants until we put a fence up," said Mark Rankin, the caretaker for the nature center property. "They would take one bite out of each plant and go right down the row."

Approximately 20 whitetail deer were seen Saturday morning by hunters and volunteers from a local chapter of the Quality Deer Management Association. The volunteers had come out to help the handicapped hunters and patrol the property so hikers and dog walkers might be informed that the grounds were closed for the weekend because of the hunt.

"We saw 14 or 15 deer as we walked the property boundary," said Michael Doyne with QDMA. "We watched them cross out of a neighborhood. It's amazing how close they can be to the normal traffic."

Doyne spoke of seeing a second group of 5 bedded down in the snow amid the structures by the nature center, an area where hunting was not allowed because it is within the Grand Rapids City limit and a local ordinance prohibits hunting.

"I couldn't believe it," said Doyne, "They just got up and walked around the building when I got close."

Steinman said the hunt began without any problems. Most of the neighbors have been supportive of the endeavor.

"We've had very little pushback," Steinman said. "Three neighbors and one was anonymous. We've gotten a thumbs up from most. The most pushback we've gotten is from other hunters who would like access to the hunt."

Steinman, who came to the nature center late in 2009, said she wasn't sure what to expect going into the hunt. Staff had urged doing something about the deer problems. **The center had attempted to hold a hunt in 2008** which never came off.

"The center tried to have a hunt and bring in a couple of professional bowhunters," Steinman said. "But there was such and outcry by the neighbors that the hunters never showed up. They didn't want to be a part of it and the hunt never happened."

Steinman said she received one anonymous call threatening a large group protest. Walker City Police were on alert, she said, as well as Department of Natural Resources and Environment conservation officers. Officers from both agencies made appearances on site Saturday morning.

Dave Rogers, a state conservation officers said he actively works the area around nature center, whether for poaching or baiting violations.

"People know there are a lot of deer over here," Rodgers said.

Bryan Wilkinson almost got a shot at one, but it ran through his shooting lane too quickly to respond. The 29 year old hunter, now living in Howell, drove over to see his old GRWS friends. He is paralyzed from the chest down but has taken a deer every year somewhere. He has a special state permit to hunt from his truck.

Wilkinson said his story is a lot like Briggs': a dirt bike accident sent him to Mary Free Bed Hospital in 2000. He and his wife, Bre, are now expecting to have a baby next year.

"Every day is a new challenge," said Wilkinson, who plays wheelchair tennis and coaches the GRWS hand-cycling team. He switched to a cross-bow after his accident, finding it easier to handle than a vertical bow. He misses the days of being able to get out and stalk deer on foot. Hunts like the one at Blandford are good, he said.

"For me its now about being able to get together with guys like myself and enjoying hunting. It's a privilege to be there and its opportunity to to create awareness in the community that there are people out there with disabilities that hunt."

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