

BLUE RIDGE Buzz

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Jim Corbett assists Bill Knight in setting up his shotgun on Friday afternoon at the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center's hunt event. Knight's wheelchair and gun are specially modified to absorb or disperse any recoil from his weapon due to his physical impairments from brittle bone disease.

Deer hunters

WWRC provides accessibility for the disabled

BY GINA FARTHING
The News Virginian

Most "able-bodied" folks take everyday movements for granted. They get out of bed every morning, put their clothes on, brush their teeth, eat breakfast and get going for the day. They go to work and after work they may participate in recreational sports or activities such as exercise, martial arts, bowling, dance or a variety of other choices.

And they do it all unaided. They don't even have to think much about how to do something, they just do it.

Not so for the disabled.

All sorts of options must be considered before even the simplest task can be performed. For example, a wheelchair either has to be tall enough for its passenger to reach a kitchen cabinet, or the chair must be modified to perform the activity.

And that's just to plate a meal. Cooking it might require other modifications in the kitchen.

Recreational activities provide additional obstacles to overcome in order for people with disabilities to participate. Members from a group of organizations – Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, the National Wild Turkey Federation and Wheelin' Sportsmen of Virginia (an outreach program of NWTF) – decided to provide an accessible hunting opportunity for people who might not otherwise have the chance.

About 10 hunters with mobility impairments, assisted by walkers, wheelchairs or scooters, joined the 5 a.m. hunt. Along with 20-30 hunting assistants,

they were chauffeured to 17 "blinds" throughout the 223 wooded acres of the WWRC campus in Fishersville on Friday morning to bag a buck or two. The temperature measured 21 degrees.

WWRC's Keith Burt said the event came about due to the overpopulation of deer on the center's campus.

"We had a couple of options. We could call the state to remove them. Or because our mission is to be a rehab center, [it was] suggested to have Wheelin' Sportsmen come in and control them and also provide a recreational opportunity for the disabled," Burt said.

In 2006, the first hunt, a bow hunt, was scheduled. Due to its success, Burt said that the next year, a Thanksgiving shotgun hunt was scheduled. Prior to this weekend's shotgun hunt, the center had already had its bow hunt.

At Friday's catered lunch, Bill Knight, 19, said he was enjoying himself. He's been a participant of all three hunts conducted at WWRC, though he's been hunting for five years he said.

Knight's always been in a wheelchair. He has osteogenesis imperfecta – brittle bone disease. His bones are so fragile that when he was born he had 15 fractures.

With the day half gone, Knight still hadn't gotten himself a deer. But since he was going to be hunting both days of the event, he hoped he'd have his chance.

"It means a lot ... to be able to go and hunt," said Knight who considers himself an experienced hunter. Even his wheelchair, fitted with special gun butt

and muzzle grips, was decked out in camouflage.

Longtime friend Jim Corbett, who hunts with Knight regularly in Buffalo Gap, says Knight is a good shot.

"He shoots a 20-gauge. It's really been worked to reduce its recoil. And his chair has been fitted for a gun, to catch whatever couldn't be worked out. Billy really can't stand any recoil because of his bones," Corbett said.

Knight, who plays the mandolin at his church, said that he will continue to hunt in the future. He likes to hunt deer, turkey and squirrel and says more people should come out and try it.

Knight has 12 kills under his belt in five years. The biggest deer was a 9-pointer, that Corbett said Knight shot with his rifle at 335 yards.

Donald Propst, of Churchville and a member of NWTF, looked over the deer brought in from the morning hunt.

"We got four of them this morning," Propst said. "We will weigh the deer and then we gut them. That's how we do it for the contest."

Propst has been helping out at the event all three years.

"I'm retired from UPS and I do carpentry on the side now. But I like helping out. I've even gone down to Louisiana after Katrina, to Long Beach and Gulfport on church missions," Propst said.

Jeff Smith, another NWTF member said, "It's just as much fun as hunting ... to help someone who needs help."

Editor's note: The total number of deer culled from the WWRC herd was 12 for the two days. The most obtained at previous events was three. A group of local landowners also participated in the hunt, but their total was unavailable at presstime.

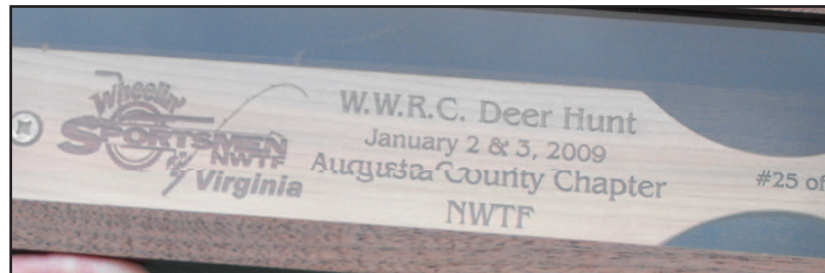
On the Web

- National Wild Turkey Federation, www.nwtf.org
- NWTF Virginia, www.vanwtf.com
- Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, www.wwrc.virginia.gov



GINA FARTHING/STAFF

Donald Propst, a hunting assistant, displays one of four deer that were shot and harvested Friday from the herd located at the Woodrow Wilson Rehab Center.



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A turkey caller, courtesy of the National Wild Turkey Federation, was to be presented to each hunt participant at the completion of the WWRC event.