

Crossbows and Bowhunting in Wisconsin

Crossbows continue to threaten Wisconsin's archery deer hunting seasons.

Although they are allowed as archery equipment in a growing number of states, we have been successful so far in retaining Wisconsin's archery season for archery equipment, except in cases where crossbows are allowed in the archery season for the handicapped and elderly.

Combating this threat to archery seasons has been a unique challenge because there isn't a large user-group of crossbow owners requesting a crossbow hunting opportunity. Those promoting crossbows, specifically the crossbow manufacturers and "our own" Archery Trade Association, have spent millions of dollars over the last several years trying to convince the public that crossbows are effective hunting tools and hunters deserve an opportunity to use them. That wouldn't have been a big problem for most hunters, except that from the start, this group's objective has been to force them into archery seasons as archery equipment because that's where they could sell the most crossbows and where the most money could be made. There has never been much concern about what that would do to bowhunting as we know it.

When bowhunters have objected, the crossbow folks have become pretty effective in then portraying us as selfish elitists and "anti's", against additional hunting opportunity and equipment.

Unfortunately, these marketing campaigns have been paying off, and even in Wisconsin there is a growing attitude that crossbows are extremely effective hunting tools and hunters should be able to use them. However, most of the Wisconsin hunters that share that attitude also understand what crossbows would do to our archery season and don't really want to see that either.

One reason the ATA, crossbow manufacturers and the magazine/organization they subsidize have been successful is that they have been patient and relentless in analyzing each state's weakness and ways to take that state's bowhunters out of the discussions. They have signed "Memorandums of Understanding" with several state DNR's (not Wisconsin) where they, not the state bowhunting groups, become the official point of reference on bowhunting issues. In return they facilitate "grants" and other money. In some states they go directly to the Natural Resources Commissions, and in others they find a politician that tries to sneak it through the legislature. In Wisconsin they have found an opportunity with turkey and bear hunting. Because turkeys and bears can be hunted with bows, muzzleloaders or modern firearms at the same time and places, there is considerable public sentiment building that it's "only fair" that crossbows should also be allowed for those that want to use them instead of one of the other weapons. If bowhunters object, so much the better for the crossbow promoters, because they can again have us dismissed as selfish and unreasonable, trying to prevent hunters from using crossbows when they could have used a gun instead.

Fortunately in Wisconsin our hunting and conservation groups are well informed, communicate, and understand the big picture. The Wisconsin Bear Hunters and the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation have been directed by their members to pursue this additional opportunity, but many of their members are also bowhunters. And these members and the leadership of these and other state organizations are also very concerned about doing anything that would "screw up" Wisconsin's archery deer seasons.

Wisconsin Bowhunters Association has worked with the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association, the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and others to craft a solution that satisfies the wishes of their memberships, while at the same time strengthens our united position against the expanded use of crossbow for deer hunting in the archery deer seasons, which is our objective.

While there are critical components to it, the concept has generally been referred to as the “lesser weapon” approach.

In a nutshell it says: First and foremost, that crossbows be recognized as a distinctly different and superior weapon to archery equipment, and that, based on that classification, crossbow use be allowed in all seasons where a superior weapon such as a muzzleloader, rifle/pistol and shotguns are allowed. As a superior weapon crossbow use would be specifically prohibited for deer hunting in archery seasons except as now permitted for the handicapped and elderly.

This approach would accomplish several important things:

- It legally defines crossbows in Wisconsin as a different and superior weapon to archery equipment.
- It builds a statewide, cross-discipline coalition of hunting and conservation organizations that are on record against any expanded use of crossbows for deer hunting in Wisconsin’s archery deer seasons.
- It resolves the issue our fellow hunting organizations, (the Wisconsin Bear Hunters and the Turkey Federation) are facing over allowing crossbow use for bear and turkey hunting that their members have requested, while still supporting and protecting bowhunting.
- It provides literally months of hunting opportunity during bear seasons, turkey seasons and deer firearms seasons for those that want to hunt with crossbows, while protecting the deer-archery seasons for archers.
- It expands bowhunting opportunities into superior weapons seasons; in some cases where it has not been available in the past.
- It shows that bowhunters aren’t against hunting opportunity or effective hunting equipment – just changes that would significantly alter the archery-deer hunting seasons. If the crossbow lobby says they don’t want this (which is very possible) because they want the deer-archery season instead, it will finally expose who is really selfish here.
- Finally, it buys time. The crossbow situation is changing. Crossbow performance has been downplayed for years in order to maintain a resemblance to archery equipment, in order to get them into archery seasons. However now that more people are buying and using modern crossbows, these folks are discovering, and talking about, crossbows amazing accuracy and long-range capabilities. And because more crossbows are being sold across the country, competitive forces are starting to kick in. Because new crossbows are drawn with a winch and braced across a high-strength stock, the technology already exists to build 500 lb. or even 1,000 lb. hand-held crossbows with performance characteristics that are hard to even imagine. The new Bowtech Stryker is

an example of where crossbows are heading. In a few years, once crossbows start doing to "archery" seasons what in-line rifles so quickly did to primitive muzzleloader seasons, I'm sure many states will be regretting that they were so quick to change their archery seasons into crossbow seasons.

It's significant to note that this proposal doesn't preclude crossbow hunters from working to develop a separate crossbow season in the future, just as muzzleloader hunters and even archers did in the past. But instead of a national marketing campaign, it would be based on a valid user group in Wisconsin working in good faith with all the other user groups that are already established, and it would be for a distinctly different and superior weapon to archery equipment. In order to define actual crossbow use and harvest, part of this proposal also requests that the DNR establish a weapon designation on all gun-deer, bear and turkey registration stubs, and that all handicapped and elderly hunters that qualify to use a crossbow throughout the archery seasons be issued a special crossbow permit and registration stub instead of an archery license.

In 2005 Wisconsin defeated a proposal to allow crossbows for bowhunting in the archery hunting seasons, thanks in large part to the many WBH members that actively participated in the process and helped to correctly define the issues to the public. Our position at that time was to oppose all expanded crossbow use by anyone even if it didn't apply to the archery season. It was a clear position that was probably right for the time, since then those promoting crossbows had learned how to turn that type of position around and use it against us.

So, in order to be able to support the lesser weapon approach and further strengthen the position against crossbow use as archery equipment in the bowhunting seasons, the Board of Directors has voted to revise the position from 2005 to further strengthen our objective: keeping expanded crossbow use for deer hunting out of the archery deer seasons.

We will continue to work with other hunting and conservation organizations over the next several months to build a widespread base of support for a lesser weapon proposal that enhances protection of Wisconsin's archery-deer seasons from expanded crossbow use.