

WBH President Message • *Spring 2017*

We just had a great convention in the Dells. Some were concerned about a letdown after our big 75th Anniversary event last year, but it didn't happen. Tom Miranda was excellent, the seminars were informative and well attended, and the exhibitor hall was busy all day Saturday. If you missed it, plan to attend next year when we will be meeting at the Holiday Inn and Convention Center in Stevens Point on March 2, 3 & 4, 2018. It's not too early to make your reservations.

We recently received a letter from a member who now hunts with a crossbow, cancelling his membership because he felt that I and/or WBH have been "bashing" crossbows. And although WBH has pointed out for some time that crossbows are a different and superior weapon that should be regulated separately from archery equipment, those who use them, like us, are HUNTERS. And I have absolutely no interest or intention of disparaging any other hunters. We are all in this together and no matter what legal method a hunter chooses to pursue, and we all need to respect each other.

However, there is really no reason someone shouldn't belong to WBH just because they also hunt with another weapon. I do. Like most of our members, I also hunt deer with a firearm during that season. Because we are a bowhunting organization, our awards program only recognizes archery achievements; however, most of what we do benefits all hunters. We have many members that haven't hunted in years who still support WBH because they want to see what they've enjoyed endure for future generations.

As arguably the largest deer hunting advocacy group in Wisconsin, our positions regarding all hunting issues are considered carefully, and we take that responsibility very seriously. PETA does very well in states without a strong pro-hunting organization.

Wisconsin deer hunting is at a critical point. Over the last three years Wisconsin has been losing deer hunters at a rate not seen since CWD was discovered here. That has left some in the DNR and legislators scratching their heads because they were assured that crossbows would bring in many new hunters and deer hunter numbers would swell. And perhaps that could have happened if the crossbow season was set to provide an equitable opportunity to that of bowhunters and gun hunters. The reality, and almost everyone that hunts knows it, is that crossbows are far superior to archery equipment, and their use in a season as long as the archery season affords their users a substantial advantage, not only over archers, but also over firearms hunters in their shorter season. Crossbow manufacturers are now proudly advertising accuracy superior to a shotgun with slugs at 100 yards, with more than enough kinetic energy at that range to humanely dispatch a deer.

Unfortunately, the consequence of this disparity is that while many archery and gun hunters have switched to crossbows, many others are just quitting deer hunting out of frustration. And while crossbows have attracted a few new hunters, it not nearly offsets those that are leaving.

Please don't misunderstand this as "bashing" crossbows or the folks who use them. We as hunters are known for going to great length to be successful, whether it's scouting more, sitting longer or trying the latest gadget. So for many, switching to a crossbow has been a no-brainer. It's not their fault the "game is rigged"; they are just taking advantage of the situation as it is. And frankly, if we need or want to tag a buck in less time and/or with less effort, for whatever reason, the crossbow is probably the way to go. But consider carefully what you give up. I have met very few people that bowhunt because it's the fastest and easiest way to get a deer. On the contrary, most of us are out there because it's not easy. We are "forced", sometimes for weeks on end, to endure all the magic sights, sounds, smells and experiences that we are blessed with while waiting quietly for the right shot at a deer. And if, or when it comes, and all our practice and patience pay off, the reward is much more than some venison or antlers.

All that being said, for some there are physical, logistical or other reasons why a crossbow is their best, if not only, alternative. And as I've said, anyone that chooses to legally hunt with any weapon has my support and respect.

Fortunately, there is a rather simple solution that has the potential to balance the opportunity among users that would help stop, and hopefully reverse the loss of disenfranchised deer hunters. Because crossbows have proven to be more effective than archery equipment, but less effective than firearms (although Will Brantley, the Hunting Editor of Field & Stream magazine and a crossbow proponent, says he would choose a crossbow over an open-sighted percussion muzzleloader "any day") the length of their season should also be somewhere in between. Other states have recognized this. Kentucky, for example has a crossbow season that is substantially longer than the gun season, including the first two weeks of October when the weather is nicer, then through the second half of November, and all of December. Their archers start in September, earlier than their crossbow hunters, continue through the rut, gun season and December, and continue slightly longer into January. Kentucky also allows additional crossbow season length for their elderly and handicapped. Mr. Brantley, a Kentucky resident and strong supporter of crossbow hunting, described their season structure as "nearly perfect" in his column in Field & Stream last September.

If Wisconsin were to adopt a similar season structure, it would go a long way in restoring the balance that gave an equal chance to all hunters regardless of weapon, and help protect some bucks from rifle-type weapons during the peak of the rut. It would also help spread out the hunting pressure, particularly just before the gun season, and almost certainly stop or reverse the dramatic loss of bowhunters in Wisconsin over the last three years. It is likely that many crossbow hunters that weren't successful early may happily pick up their bows again in order to also hunt the peak of the rut. We also believe, that like Kentucky, Wisconsin should restore the longer season to the handicapped and elderly that was effectively wiped out when crossbows were allowed for everyone.

It is our intention to pursue this type of season structure through the DNR which should be managing our seasons, or through the legislature if the Department doesn't follow through on the implied direction of the original crossbow bill. But make no mistake, there are plenty of folks that love the situation just as it is, and will fight vehemently not to give up their advantage. So we will need your support; perhaps at the spring hearings or perhaps at legislative hearings in Madison, but stay posted because getting this right is truly important to the future of bowhunting in Wisconsin.

Okay, enough about crossbows. It seems I discuss them in almost every issue of The Bowhunter, and it would be great to get on to other topics. But the reality is that in the last three years, Wisconsin has lost ONE-THIRD of our licensed bowhunters, and while our membership hasn't shrunk accordingly, it's sad to think that in the state that was the birthplace of modern bowhunting seasons, bowhunter numbers could dwindle so rapidly; and just because another season isn't set correctly.

We recently had a question from a member, which has come up before. He was aware of Act 71 that clarified the law confirming that local municipalities don't have the authority to prohibit, license or otherwise regulate hunting. That authority only belongs to the state. (Because what's being hunted belongs to the state.) However in checking with his local government, he was told that bowhunting was prohibited even on private land throughout his municipality.

This is an issue that is still all too common across Wisconsin. Many local governments, usually out of ignorance of the law, have ordinances regarding hunting. Some even sell their own additional hunting licenses. Although Act 71 defines some specific exceptions, in many, if not most cases, these ordinances are technically not legal. HOWEVER, and this is a big however, it's not nearly as simple as ignoring an ordinance because it's not legally valid. The reality is that local law enforcement can cite you for a violation, and unless you want to then try to legally challenge and overturn the ordinance, you will have to pay the citation.

But there is a better way that usually works out in everyone's best interest. As these situations are pointed out, usually by hunters, the Legal Services folks at the DNR in Madison can contact the municipality and gently show them the error of their ways. Gently, because although municipalities cannot prohibit hunting with some exceptions as noted in Act 71, they do have the authority to regulate the discharge of weapons within their borders, so if they don't allow the discharge of guns or bows, the hunting question becomes somewhat moot. In some cases, ordinances prohibit the discharge of firearms but don't mention bows. I was involved in one case where a city tried to also prohibit the discharge of bows, and concerned residents defeated it by noting that it prohibited archers from even practicing safely on their own property and would have also prohibited the NASP program in their school. The DNR is also quick to point out to municipalities that have suitable habitat, that hunters are their best and most cost-effective means of controlling the often bigger problem of overpopulation of deer.

So if you find yourself in this situation, get help from DNR Legal Services if necessary, but even more importantly, "tread lightly". Try to get support from other hunters/landowners and work it out amicably with the unit of government well before the season. It can not only open some new hunting ground for you, but do the same for other hunters in your area, both now and for years to come.

All indications are that with our relatively mild winter, turkey and deer populations should do well, at least where they aren't hampered by a strong predator population. Turkey hunting is coming up quick, so if you plan to try taking one with a bow, you better start practicing. If you haven't tried bowhunting turkeys, this might be the year to give it a shot. With the advancement of pop-up blinds, better calls and decoys, and a better understanding of what it takes to get them in close and where to aim, your chances are

better than ever. And with all the leftover tags available for later seasons, you can hunt for several weeks and have the opportunity to shoot multiple birds – if you shoot straight. Try it, I think you'll like it – and they are delicious.

Some bowhunters point out that with the improved bows and other equipment, we don't have to practice as much or go to shoots as often to be proficient in the fall. And while that may be true to some extent, I think it misses the point. If the tens of thousands of kids who shoot NASP have shown us anything that we may have forgotten, it's that shooting archery is FUN. I really believe that constant practice is still important to do your best, but attending shoots isn't just about practice for hunting or getting a good score - it's FUN. You meet great people, share stories, perhaps enjoy a cool one, and you have fun shooting your bow. What's not to like? Wisconsin has some of the finest archery ranges in the country, most of them built and maintained by bowhunters like you. This issue is chock-full of ads they run for great shoots going on every weekend from now until September. Pick out a few, call your hunting buddies, and get out and shoot. Not because you have to – but because it's FUN!

And if you happen to run into someone who's not a member of WBH, you may want to ask them: Why not?

Mike Brust