

US Army veteran Dave Berscheit (left) and US Navy veteran Hank Ebert proudly display the turkeys they took during the 2014 Veterans Turkey Hunt at Camp Ripley, Minnesota.

Minnesota Disabled Veterans



TURKEY HUNT

ON MAY 6, 2014, thirty-six hunters, all of whom were disabled veterans, and thirty-six guides crowded into the VFW post in Little Falls, Minnesota, and prepared for a Veterans Administration-sponsored two-day turkey hunt for disabled veterans. They were at the VFW post for lunch, but they were also there for a briefing from the hunt's organizers, who included members of the Minnesota Elks Association, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans for Veterans Foundation. One of the disabled veterans, US Army veteran Jon Price, who is a Gulf War veteran, was understandably

excited. Although he was already an avid deer hunter, this was his first turkey hunt.

Two Decades of Outdoor Events

The two-day VA-sponsored turkey hunt is one of several annual hunting and fishing events held in Minnesota each year for veterans, and according to VA Voluntary Services Specialist Dennis Erie, these events wouldn't happen without the support of groups like the BPO Elks. "The Minnesota National Guard doesn't have the resources or funding to provide programs such as this," he says, "and neither does the St. Cloud VA Medical Center."



(Top) VA Voluntary Services Specialist Dennis Erie. (Top right) Minnesota Elks Veterans Service Commission Chairman Thomas Kramin at left reviews a map with veteran Herbert Willner. (Center) St. Cloud Lodge member Thomas Holt-haus volunteers at the hunts held at Camp Ripley. (Above) Minnesota National Guard veteran Pam Schwegel is an enthusiastic participant in the Minnesota outdoor activities.

The tradition of providing outdoor activities for disabled veterans in Minnesota began in 1992, when a deer hunt was held at Minnesota National Guard Camp Ripley. Thomas Holthaus, who is a member of the St. Cloud Lodge and was a volunteer during this year's turkey hunt, was director of the St. Cloud VA Medical Center in 1992. According to him, a special act of the Minnesota legislature was required to allow the first hunt to take place in October, which is a month before the state's hunting season begins. The earlier hunting season helped to ensure that the weather was just a little bit warmer for veterans with disabilities.

During the course of the many disabled veterans deer hunting events that followed, organizers began to observe an increase in the wild turkey population, and Erie says that this led some of the organizers to consider starting a veterans turkey hunt, the first of which was held in May 2004. Other outdoor events for veterans in Minnesota have included fishing opportunities. This year's fishing events consisted of a veterans fishing trip that was held in the town of Ely, which is located in northeastern Minnesota, and an event called Trolling for Troops, which pairs veterans with active-duty armed forces personnel for several days of fishing. The Minnesota Elks pitched in for these events as well, providing \$1,500 worth of support to the deer hunt, \$500 to the Ely fishing trip, and \$1,500 to Trolling for Troops. For this year's turkey hunt, the Minnesota Elks Association provided \$1,000, an amount that included the cost of several portable blinds, twelve Minnesota Vikings caps signed by former Vikings head coach Bud Grant, and a number of other door prizes. Additionally, two Elks from the Willmar Lodge volunteered as guides this year, while state Veterans Service Commission Chairman Thomas Kramin helped to provide background support, and several other Elks assisted with the event in their capacities as VA employees or members of veterans service organizations.

The disabled hunters who were participating in the turkey hunt this year were primarily male, but there were female veterans, like Pam Schwegel, who is a veteran of the Minnesota National Guard, participating as well. Some of the hunters were there by themselves, but most of them were accompanied on the hunt by family members or friends who registered as their guides. The hunters who came by themselves were assigned volunteer guides who helped them with any accommodations needed for their physical limitations. Some of the veterans were in wheelchairs; others used walkers or had other disabilities, and for many of the hunters, like Jon Price, it was their first time hunting wild turkeys.



(Top) WW II veteran and former Minnesota Vikings head coach Bud Grant spoke to the participating veterans about the difference between heroes and stars. (Center) Willmar Lodge PER Eugene Hippe, an experienced turkey hunter, volunteered as a guide. (Above) Although he did not succeed in bringing home a turkey this year, US Army veteran Jon Price says he looks forward to participating in future hunts.

Because of this, their guides were expected to show them the best ways to lure a turkey within range of their shotguns.

Off to Camp Ripley

Following the pre-hunt briefing that was held at the VFW post, the thirty-six hunters, guides, and other event staff members traveled to Minnesota National Guard Camp Ripley, where the hunt was to take place, and made use of one of the camp's many shooting ranges. Camp Ripley is a 53,000-acre training facility located 120 miles northwest of Minneapolis. While its acreage is dotted with training grounds, administrative buildings, and firing ranges, the majority of the area is covered by unspoiled forests, lakes, and meadows—an ideal spot for a turkey hunt in central Minnesota.

At the firing range, event organizers made certain that the participating hunters were physically capable of safely and accurately firing their weapons and that they would be able to bring down a turkey if presented with the opportunity. The hunters and guides then went out to survey their designated hunting zones. Once there, each team surveyed the area, found a promising spot for their blind, and set up their blind and decoys. With their spaces prepared, the hunters and guides then returned to the main area of the base and attended a banquet.

At the banquet, the participating hunters were welcomed to Camp Ripley by Col. Scott St. Sauver, the camp's commander. Colonel St. Sauver encouraged them to enjoy their time in what he called "his backyard." The highlight of the banquet was a speech given by World War II veteran and former Minnesota Vikings head coach Bud Grant, who spoke about the difference between stars and heroes. "I have known a lot of stars and a few heroes," Grant told the assembled veterans. "Stars shine brightly at night, but they're gone the next day. That's not true of heroes." He went on to tell the stories of several people who had risked, and in some cases lost, their lives in the service of their country during World War II. He then spent the rest of the evening talking with the veterans.

Hunting at Daybreak

On each of the two mornings of the hunt, the hunters arose at 4 a.m. This allowed them to get to their blinds by the official start of the hunting day, which is half an hour before dawn. Hidden in their blinds, with only small windows open to the outside world, the hunters prepared for their vigil. The goal was to lure a male turkey into range by imitating the calls of a female turkey, which is also known as a hen. Most of the time in the blind, however, was spent waiting, watching, and listening. Herbert Willner, a US Army veteran who served during the Vietnam War, described it as "Just like hunting deer—hurry up and wait."

Following the first day of hunting, the thirty-six hunters enjoyed a second banquet, during which they traded stories of days spent trying to bag a turkey. The lucky hunters relived their moments of triumph, while the others compared notes concerning what they had seen and heard. During the banquet, three shotguns and a number of other pieces of hunting gear, clothing, and memorabilia were given out as door prizes.

Unfortunately, over the course of the two days of hunting, only a handful of veterans saw their patience in the hunting blinds rewarded, with five hunters taking a bird on the first day and no one taking a turkey on the second day. According to Eugene Hippe, who served as a guide during the hunt and is a Willmar Lodge PER and a US Navy veteran, this 14 percent success rate is a record low for the annual turkey hunt, which is now in its eleventh year. "Last year we had eighteen inches of snow and the hunters got thirteen birds," Hippe said. "The turkeys just weren't out there this year." Despite the fact that most of the participants in this year's hunt went home without a trophy, the veterans were upbeat about the experience.

When asked if he would do it again, Jon Price's answer was unequivocal. "Absolutely, no doubt," he said. ■