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Photos Courtesy of Author

# MICHIGAN'S LEARN TO HUNT DEER PROGRAM

For several decades, hunting recruitment programs nationwide have focused their efforts largely on youth. At the same time, hunter numbers have continued to decline across the country. Recently, a national hunting recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) discourse has sought to expand the demographic groups that hunting programs target. A pilot program designed to attract new adult audiences to crossbow deer hunting was launched in Michigan in fall 2015. The Learn to Hunt Program provided participants with an opportunity to learn in a hands-on, safe environment the skills necessary to hunt deer in Michigan. Participants were exposed to concepts such as how hunting contributes to conservation, deer biology, hunter ethics and responsibilities, and safe crossbow handling. One young woman, aided by her mentor, harvested her first deer.

Students learned about hunter ethics and responsibilities, proper equipment needed to hunt deer, and basic deer biology and management. Two Michigan DNR conservation officers joined the class for lunch and discussed hunting rules and regulations.





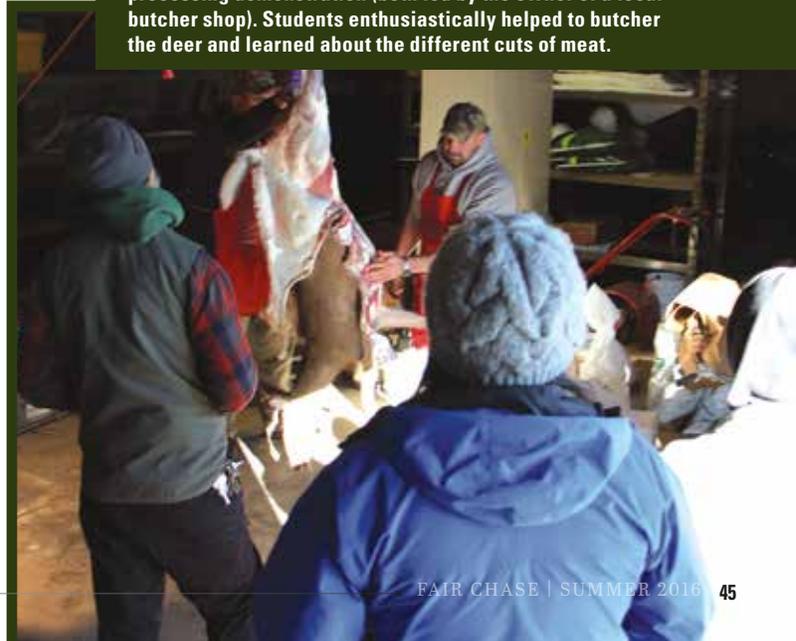
Hunter safety instructors covered basic principles related to conservation and hunting, safe handling of a firearm and crossbow, purchasing a hunting license, and provided participants with range time for with both .22s and crossbows.

Traditionally, hunters have been recruited to hunting by family members, but the changing population demographics of the nation, urbanization, and other time commitments are leading to fewer hunters being recruited in this way. Reaching new audiences of adults interested in learning to hunt can be challenging. Many have grown up in urban areas or may have been exposed to negative perceptions of hunters. Some may have been interested in hunting but did not have a hunting mentor available to teach them. There are now growing interests in healthy, sustainable wild proteins among adults, and taking up hunting can be a logical link. The Michigan Learn to Hunt program was developed for these audiences and modeled after other efforts targeting new adult hunters, such as Minnesota's and Wisconsin's Learn to Hunt for Food programs and Kentucky's Hunter's Legacy program. In addition to covering the fundamentals of deer hunting, the Learn to Hunt curriculum was designed to teach participants about conservation, how hunting contributes to the economy, and how ethics and responsibility relate to hunting. Participants became certified in hunter and bowhunter safety and participated in a mentored deer hunt on the final evening of the session. Three men and seven women participated in the program, ranging in age from 18-34. While seven of the participants had previously participated in target shooting, only three had ever hunted (less than three times as an adult).

The first day of the session was held on a Friday evening at the Demmer Shooting Sports, Education and Training Center on the Michigan State University campus. Hunter safety instructors covered basic principles related to conservation and hunting, safe handling of a firearm and crossbow, purchasing a hunting license, and provided participants with range time with both .22s and crossbows. The second program session was held the following Saturday at a Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) field office and adjacent shooting range. Students learned about hunter ethics and responsibilities, proper equipment needed to hunt deer, and basic deer



Participants were able to watch a field dressing of a previously harvested doe and then engaged in a hands-on processing demonstration (both led by the owner of a local butcher shop). Students enthusiastically helped to butcher the deer and learned about the different cuts of meat.





**Samantha Loscalzo (right) became certified in hunter and bowhunter safety and participated in a mentored deer hunt on the final evening of the session. Sam came to hunting as an adult with attitudes and values in place. Learning technical skills is one thing; handling attitudes and values quite another.**

biology and management. Two Michigan DNR conservation officers joined the class for lunch and discussed hunting rules and regulations. After, participants transitioned to the shooting range with the hunter safety instructors and received instruction on sighting in and safely shooting their crossbows. They were also introduced to firearm handling and safe methods of field carries. The last session was held at Michigan State University's Kellogg Biological Station in southwest Michigan. Participants were able to watch a field dressing of a previously harvested doe and then engaged in a hands-on processing demonstration (both led by the owner of a local butcher shop). Students enthusiastically helped to butcher the deer and learned about the different cuts of meat. Program

participants met their mentors and conversed over lunch, which included a wonderful array of wild game dishes prepared by the program instructors and mentors. After a demonstration in the field of deer scouting and tracking, mentors and mentees dressed in camo and headed out to pre-assigned hunting blinds with their crossbows.

Coming into the program, the majority of the participants felt they knew "a little" or "nothing at all" about hunting ethics, how hunting contributes to conservation funding, deer population and management, the state agency that manages hunting, and how to safely prepare game for consumption. After the class, all of the students felt they knew either a moderate amount or a great deal about all of the aforementioned

topics. Before the program started, participants filled out a survey and perceived the most important benefits of learning to hunt were to (1) take a more direct role in obtaining the meat I eat, (2) learn about nature, (3) to feel closer to the land, (4) to know where my meat comes from, (5) find solitude, (6) get away from a usual routine, and (7) to feel self-sufficient. After the program, participants also stated the added virtues of teaching others about nature, feeling good doing a traditional activity, and testing their outdoor skills. Lastly, coming into the course, students felt they knew the least about (1) operating a crossbow safely, (2) hunting safely, (3) selecting the proper equipment for deer hunting, (4) finding a suitable place to hunt deer, (5) using the Michigan DNR Mi-Hunt

website to find a hunting spot, and (6) processing a deer myself. After the program, the majority expressed increased confidence in all areas (either moderately or extremely confident).

As a result of the knowledge and confidence gained during the program, two program participants were able to successfully harvest their first deer. The hunting experience of one young woman who harvested her first doe with the help of her mentor is detailed in the following article. This Learn to Hunt Program demonstrated the desire of adults from non-hunting backgrounds to learn how to hunt, their acceptance of new concepts, and their ability to apply program knowledge to positive hunting experiences. ■

# LEARNING TO HUNT

BY ALFRED J. GEMRICH

LEARN TO HUNT PROGRAM MENTOR

**Samantha Loscalzo—call her Sam for short—is a remarkable young woman. She has a degree in ecology and natural resources from Rutgers and is working on a master’s in community sustainability at Michigan State University (MSU). She is an athlete, scholar, lover of animals and all things outdoors, a Korean orphan adopted by wonderful parents from the Bronx, NY; hence, her Italian last name. She’s roamed the Rockies, traveled the Americas and Southeast Asia and wintered above the Arctic Circle, refueling helicopters, snowshoeing, dogsledding, and watching the aurora borealis. But she had never hunted.**

Reading about hunting in Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* and Wendell Berry’s works on sustainable agriculture, Sam saw a connection between hunting and sustainability. But she knew no hunters. With her equally curious and adventurous roommate Alana Rosen, a second-year doctoral performance music major from New York, Sam signed up for a Learn to Hunt course, a collaboration between three prestigious institutions: Michigan State University (MSU), Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Boone and Crocket Club. The intensive, three-day course was the brainchild of Jordan Burroughs, MSU’s wildlife outreach specialist, and grad-assistant Johanna Dart. Enrollment was limited to 10 persons. Seventy percent who enrolled were women. Graduates got a hunting safety certificate, a Michigan deer license and a crossbow hunt on MSU’s 1,500-acre Lux Arbor

Reserve, located 65 miles from MSU’s East Lansing campus. Mark Williams, MSU’s Kellogg Biological Station’s Physical Plant Manager, and Reserve Manager Mark Manuszak recruited hunter mentors for each participant.

Hunting is far more than mastery of equipment. It’s the ultimate experiential education that can challenge one’s worldview. In two earlier outings Sam resolved her doubts about proficiency with a crossbow with a “mixture of disappointment, relief, and gratitude” – disappointment at not getting a deer, but relief and gratitude for not having to do something for which she was not sufficiently mentally prepared. Sam came to hunting as an adult with attitudes and values in place. Learning technical skills is one thing; handling attitudes and values quite another.

Initially, Sam thought she’d have no hesitancy shooting an animal given the opportunity. But she

discovered the truth of the biblical wisdom, “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also” (Mathew 6:2, NIV). Hunting was simple and complex. Simple because a hunter confronts fundamental issues of life and death; complex because the heart has reasons the mind knows not of. The mind is unable to understand the heart’s reasons for they speak different languages. Sam had to find her treasure and her heart.

Sam loves animals. How could she kill what she loves? Her parents were city types and friends vegetarians. She’d considered giving up meat. How could she explain her actions to them? She was studying sustainability. How could she justify hunting when other adequate sources of protein were available? Was hunting her ultimate hypocrisy?

But hunting on agricultural lands to control animal damage helps farmers. Avoiding meat was largely her reaction to the environmental

impacts and unethical practices associated with the meat industry. By hunting, she controlled her meat source. License fees support conservation. Hunting was wholesome adventure, contact with nature, an exercise in independence and self-reliance, and providing one’s own food is an honorable tradition—all values she believed in. Maybe she could straddle the fence like one of her hunter safety instructors and pay for permits to support conservation and hunting, but refrain from actually killing an animal.

Mid-December in Michigan is not for the faint of heart. When I first met Sam at Lux Arbor, the sky was slate grey, temperature 34 degrees, winds barreling out of the northwest, and the wind chill down around our boottops. I knew nothing of her turmoil and little more than her first name. We had a “blind date”—I was mentor while the two of us sat in a deer blind warmed by the

The Learn To Hunt Program students and mentors.



## LEARNING TO HUNT

hope Sam might fill a deer damage permit. Anticipating a long, cold sit, I was dressed for a high-plains blizzard.

Sam was young, athletic, attractive and stylish, but weighing less than her quarry and looking more like a model on an L. L. Bean outdoor apparel catalog than one prepared for a bone-chilling four-hour sit in a wooden variation of a wind tunnel. She wore a lightweight camo jacket—a “\$3 drugstore find.” As the only hunter in the course who never saw a deer on the first outing and the only one to return for a third try, she obviously had determination and grit.

Sam hunkered down as the wind laid siege to the blind; cold hours passed. Just as darkness was about to devour the remaining light, four mature does and a yearling appeared. Waiting for the right shot and grateful there was no pressure to shoot—but still conflicted—Sam, with a hammering heart, committed herself, took aim, pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. In the excitement she’d forgotten to release the safety. She concentrated once again.

Now came responsibility for her decision and an emotional rollercoaster ride. At her shot, deer ran in every direction. In the pandemonium of venison on the hoof Sam experienced a typical case of hunter’s amnesia—she couldn’t recall just what happened. Excitement gave way to uncertainty. Finding a bloody arrow brought relief, hope, and a growing sense of pride. It was fully dark when Mark Manuszak arrived with Janet Hsiao, a master’s student at MSU in the Fisheries and Wildlife Department and fellow Learn to Hunt graduate. Mark’s floodlight took us down a blood trail to Sam’s prize. On

knees in reverential grace, Sam touched the deer. How warm it felt. Her emotions were her own, known only to her as hunter. Sam replayed the event many times in her mind in the coming days until her internal reality caught up with the external reality. Though not a “picture person,” photos were taken—not to glorify the act, but to honor the animal and document the experience and occasion.

Her next lesson: The fun stops when the buck drops. Mark went for the John Deere gator, Janet held the flashlight and with remarkably little coaching, Sam field dressed the deer, great teamwork in the finest tradition of the hunt.

As the first person in the new program to harvest a deer, Sam made modest history, demonstrating the merit and success of the Learn to Hunt program. A Michigan DNR deer hunter patch, beat-up arrow, photos and venison are tangible evidence of her accomplishment. She proved an experiment in sustainability is possible and practical. There are intangible benefits yet to harvest; a new tradition is in the making. She’d like to continue hunting and pass it along to children that may come someday. In the process, Sam may have found her treasure and where her heart is. ■

**Al Gemrich** earned a BA in economics from Kalamazoo College and magna cum laude, JD Yale Law School, along with a MA in Communications Arts and Sciences with honors Western Michigan University. As a lawyer he was designated “Super Lawyer in MI” before retirement. He has been a traditional bowhunter for more than 60 years. He is a member of P&Y and Professional Bowhunters Association.



**ABOVE:** As the first person in the new program to harvest a deer, Sam made modest history, demonstrating the merit and success of the Learn to Hunt program. **BELOW:** With remarkably little coaching, Sam field dressed the deer, great teamwork in the finest tradition of the hunt.

