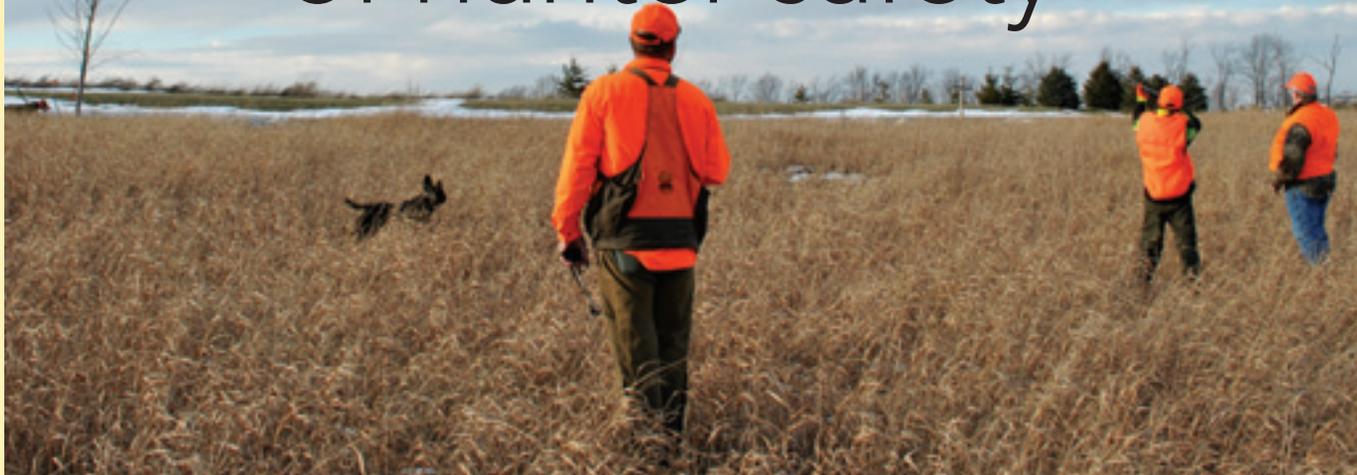


# FIFTY YEARS of hunter safety



BRENDA VONRUEDEN

WISCONSIN'S EMPHASIS ON EDUCATION DATES BACK FIVE DECADES, EVOLVING WITH THE TIMES TO KEEP THE SPORT SAFER.

*Brenda VonRueden and John Motoviloff*

Given Wisconsin's strong conservation history, it should come as little surprise that it also has been a pioneer in the field of hunter safety. Following a dramatic increase in hunting accidents in Wisconsin in the 1950s and '60s, the Wisconsin Legislature enacted the state's first hunter safety program in 1967.

Assembly Bill 872 was signed into law by Gov. Warren P. Knowles and the story of hunter safety in Wisconsin unfolded in the 50 years that followed. While tools have changed over the years, the focus remains the same: to teach safe, responsible and ethical hunting. Come along on the journey and help celebrate this milestone.

### **The plaid years**

Hunter safety history was made on the evening of Aug. 24, 1967, under the state's first Hunter Education Administrator Dale "Swede" Erlandson. Two girls and eight boys ranging in age from 12 to 14 received their embroidered emblems as graduates of the first Wisconsin hunter safety course.

It's interesting to note that the course content then was very similar to what it is now. Using various visual aids, volunteer instructors taught students to clean, store, safely carry, transport and handle firearms in all conditions and situations. Ammunition information, general sportsmanship, etiquette, landowner relations and discussion of rules and regulations also were included.

The effects of this new program soon were felt. In the decade before hunter education began, the 10-year average incident rate was 30 per 100,000 licensed hunters, while in the first 10 years after the start of hunter education, the incident rate fell to an average of 22 per 100,000 licensed hunters. As a further sign of the accomplishments of volunteer hunter education instructors over the past 50 years, the incident rate dropped in 2016 to a 10-year average of 3.6 per 100,000 licensed hunters.

The dedication of volunteer instructors was — and continues to be — the major

factor in preventing hunting incidents. The other cornerstone of the education program is its funding from the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937, which generates conservation monies via an excise tax on sporting arms, ammunition and certain archery equipment.

In 1973, the state saw two more firsts: The position of recreational safety specialist was created by the Department of Natural Resources and Wisconsin completed a fatality-free deer season for the first time in its hunting history.

Six new recreational safety specialists were hired to help administer the DNR's safety education programs, including hunter education. These specialists — who remain today — were conservation wardens who served as law-enforcement safety specialists responsible for coordinating a recreational safety, educational and enforcement program within their assigned area, along with recruiting, training and monitoring the services of volunteer safety program instructors.

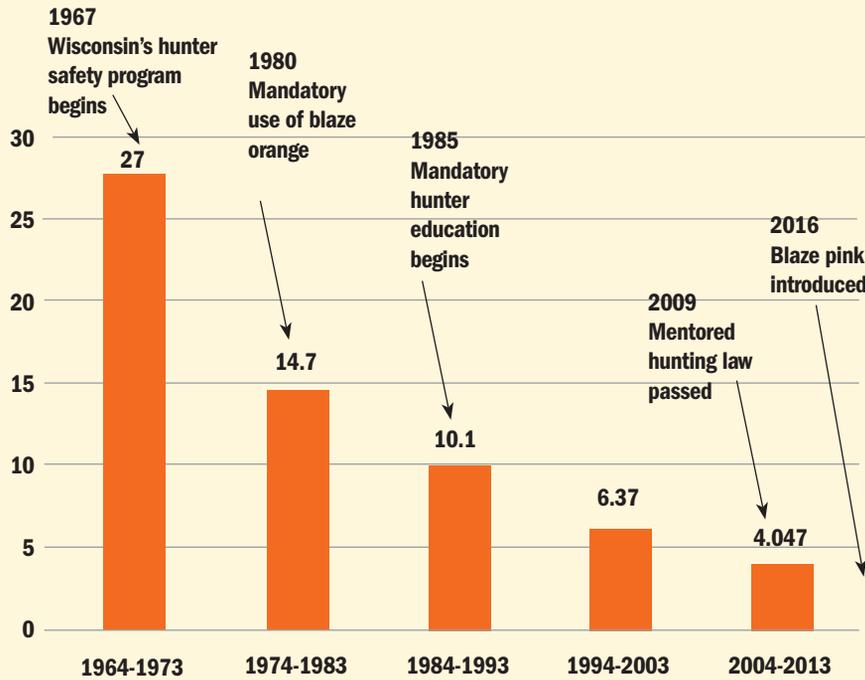
### **The blaze orange years**

While hunters continued to pursue deer in traditional haunts, things were changing in the hunting world. In 1976, John Plenke Sr. was appointed to the role of hunter education administrator. Formal training workshops for volunteer instructors, which had been held only as time allowed, now were offered on an annual basis under Plenke's leadership.

"Realizing the goal of our program was to reduce accidents, it was time to



## HUNTING INCIDENTS SINCE 1964 (RATES PER 100,000 HUNTERS)



PENNY KANABLE

**Hands-on learning has been emphasized in hunter education in recent years, including this 2015 class at McMiller Sport Center in Eagle. These students also were taking advantage of newer online options, completing their training as part of the Waukesha County Hunter Education Association's Internet Field Day.**

step up our efforts to better equip the volunteer instructors with the necessary training aids to adequately teach our new hunters," Plenke said recently in recalling early hunter education efforts. "With the help of the district recreational safety specialists, more instructor workshops were formally held to address this need. With our guidance and training, the volunteer instructor corps grew in numbers and the program grew in terms of credibility."

In 1980, red-and-black plaid was replaced by blaze orange as the color Wisconsin law required hunters to wear while afield during the deer season. Studies have shown this simple change became the second most important factor, behind mandatory hunter education, in preventing hunting deaths and incidental shootings.

Mandatory hunter education came in

1985. Those born after Jan. 1, 1973, were required to attend and successfully complete a hunter education course. It was the first safety education certification program offered by DNR, and the importance of the requirement cannot be overemphasized.

Passage of this law led to a long-term decline in hunting incidents. In the following decade, incident rates per 100,000 licensed hunters steadily decreased — from 10.6 in 1985 to 4.8 in 1995.

### The electronic age

Hunter education saw its share of changes in the 1990s, mostly related to the course materials used. In 1992, a new manual with redesigned graphics was published. In 1993, the acronym TAB was introduced to replace the previous "10 commandments" of firearm safety.

TAB reminded hunters to: T, treat every firearm as if it were loaded; A, always point the muzzle in a safe direction; and B, be certain of your target and what's beyond. The letter K was later added to the acronym, standing for keep your finger out of the trigger guard until ready to shoot.

The Junior Instructor Program also began in the early 1990s, allowing graduates of the program from ages 12 to 17 to assist adult instructors. The hunter education program took an exciting step into the electronic age in 1996, when Hunter Education Administrator Timothy Lawhern and Recreational Safety Warden John Plenke Jr. led the first CD/ROM hunter education course and field day.

Plenke Jr., who was closely involved in hunter education like his father before him, recruited 12 veteran hunter education instructors from Waukesha and Milwaukee counties to assist with the course, held at the Oconomowoc Sportsmen's Club. Students completed the classroom portion of the course on their own time, borrowing computer CDs from DNR service centers, before being tested on the content and completing hands-on exercises at the club.

Interestingly, this effort seemed to foreshadow later developments in both its pioneering format and the makeup of attendees, who were adults from 18 to 55. Both of those themes — alternative format of materials and adult attendees — would continue in the hunter education world in years to come. To this day, instructors note they are seeing many adults trying hunting for the first time.

Plenke Jr., a safety warden for more than 18 years and a proponent of the computer-based program format, credits volunteer instructors with being the bedrock of Wisconsin's hunter education efforts.

"It became apparent that the success of the program would rest on the shoulders of the volunteer instructors who were tasked with teaching it," Plenke Jr. said recently. "Basically, the program would not survive without the invaluable service, dedication and sacrifice of these men and women. To this day, the fact remains that the volunteer instructor is a critical piece of the overall program."

The instructor corps has worked in all 72 Wisconsin counties, offering some 1,200 courses a year, Plenke Jr. added. Between 1967 and 1997, for example, more than 600,000 students received their hunter education certification.

Lawhern, the DNR's longest-serving hunter education administrator, began his tenure in 1994 and spent 16 years in

the position, with notable accomplishments. Lawhern brought the CD/ROM-based course to the International Hunter Education Association (IHEA), which turned it into the first online hunter education course. He twice served as president of the IHEA and also was inducted into the organization's hall of fame.

"It was about what we got done in the program. This job was the perfect match for me and my talents, which worked best for both me and the state," Lawhern recalled. "I was fortunate enough to share a corner of my life with such quality people in the hunter education program and in the DNR. I was fortunate to be a partner with everyone involved."

### Hands-on learning

In 1999, the hunter education program began to deliver a new method of instruction, drawn from multiple teaching styles and hands-on learning. The style is known as EDOC: E, educate or tell students what you want them to know; D, demonstrate the proper skill so students know the preferred way of doing things; O, observe each student as they verbally explain and physically demonstrate what has been taught; and C, con-



Red-and-black plaid was the look of choice for hunters before blaze orange became required attire in 1980.



Certified volunteer instructors such as Joseph Petryk were instrumental in getting Wisconsin's hunter safety efforts off the ground. Petryk is shown here with students Brenda Biggart, left, and Deborah Sykora at the state's first hunter education class in August 1967.

gratulate every student as they perform the lesson properly.

The following year saw the first-ever Instructor Training Academy, held at the Wisconsin State Patrol Academy, with 40 instructors in attendance. According to Plenke Jr., now retired from his recreational safety warden duties: "The amount of initial skepticism I observed with volunteer instructors attending those training sessions to show them a better way to teach was amazing. However, when they left the training, many returned to their courses and implemented more hands-on and less lecture."

In 2004, 986 basic hunter education courses and 146 archery courses were offered in the state, certifying slightly more than 33,000 students. Of these, 91 percent were male. From 2004 to the present, the program holds the record for the largest volunteer instructor corps in the United States.

### Changes come quickly

Rapid-fire change has been the rule for hunter education policies and procedures since the beginning of the 2000s. In 2007, the hunter education program held its first Hmong Vietnam Veteran instructor academy at the MacKenzie Center in Poynette. The next year, mandatory instructor recertification was put into place to keep credentials current, and the "Instructor Corner" on the DNR's website — [dnr.wi.gov/volunteer/instructor-corner/](http://dnr.wi.gov/volunteer/instructor-corner/) — became a central place for volunteers to find resources to manage their classes.

In 2009, the "mentored" hunting bill was passed. This authorized a licensed hunter age 18 or older to introduce hunting to anyone at least 10 years old. Approximately 12,000 new hunters participated during the pilot year, and mentored hunting license sales have continued to grow.

The year 2009 ended with 18 reported hunting incidents, shattering the previous record low of 31 incidents in 2007. A year later, 2010 became the first fatality-free gun deer season since 1973; 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2016 followed suit.

### A million milestone, and more

In 2011, the hunter education program

reached a major milestone when it certified its one-millionth graduate. The passage of 2011's Wisconsin Act 168 — which tasked the DNR hunter education program with developing an alternative way for adults to earn certification — prompted the advent of an online hunter education test-out option. New online course materials were introduced, allowing adult students to complete hunter education on their own time before attending an in-person test-out session.

In 2012, Jon King was named the DNR's seventh hunter education admin-



Young hunters learn the proper way to cross a fence with a firearm under the watchful eye of their adult instructor during hunter safety training in Washington County in 1969.

istrator and continues to hold the position at the writing of this article.

Over the last five decades, hunters, volunteer instructors, the conservation warden service and other DNR staff have adapted to change and have grown the field of hunter education in Wisconsin. No doubt in the next 50 years the efforts will continue to evolve to meet the demands of the public, while maintaining the high standards the program has always followed.

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