

Hunter Safety Courses in Lake County

History, ideas, vision, and impact

Page 1: Our training model

Here in Lake County we had not offered any hunter safety courses for many years. Local kids or adults who wanted their certification had to go to Newaygo, Mason, or other counties. In October of 2016 three of us instructors ended that dry spell - we taught a Hunter Safety course which went very well.

There are many ways to teach Hunter Safety courses. Some offer all of the book learning plus the field work, on Friday afternoon/evening plus all weekend. Others do it over 4 or 5 long evenings. Long hours, a big deal to organize, and a bad way to learn. 85% of the time kids sit there bored; words going in one ear and out the other, if they are even paying attention at all. Retention is poor.

Therefore we offer just the field day training experience, for a variety of reasons.

- This is the most effective way to teach this material. Students:
 - Study book material online or in-home. Pace and place are tailored to suit the learner.
 - Are drilled in field work and proper behavior by us. It's not boring; retention is high.
 - Are tested by us. Students recognize us as authority figures and take things seriously.
- It is not too difficult to find instructors who can spare 5 hours, at a time convenient for them.
- The logistics are much easier.

In short, online or home study, then a field day, is superior both pedagogically and organizationally. And we can offer "pop-up" classes: smaller, more often, lightweight logistics, possibly on short notice.

Heavyweight classes may have 50 or 80 students, 12 or so instructors, and 5 to 10 helpers. The work's a grunt; the instructors may be as bored as the students. It's a duty - enthusiasm and fun are low. A cycle can result of fewer courses, with enrollments larger yet; even harder to run, and even less fun.

The pop-up, lightweight classes eliminate those difficulties. Volunteers aren't obligated to set aside a long chunk of time. The smaller classes only require 2 or 3 instructors, plus an optional volunteer. There's more student contact, and it's more personal, more direct, more fun for everyone.

Now that we here in Lake County have proven out the lightweight, pop-up model of Hunter Safety certification, the next step is to replicate this, make it something that we do often, throughout the year.

To accomplish this will require a crew of 20 Hunter Safety Instructors with certifications up-to-date.

Suppose somebody suggests running a course over the 4th of July weekend. Maybe 17 of the 20 instructors are busy, think that this is a dumb idea, or just don't feel like it. Fine - no problem, no pressure, no guilt. The 3 instructors who can do it, are enough. Similarly a class could be offered, and successfully run, on very short notice.

The biggest obstacle I find in recruiting volunteers is lack of time and hesitation to commit to what may become an unpleasant obligation. This is eased when I can say truthfully "If you can't teach a class, no problem! Maybe next time. Even if you teach just one class in a year, good for you and good for us."

And also good for our community: about which, read more on Page 2.

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Page 2: Effects on Lake County

Drawing families to Lake County

Families visiting the area are often eager for things to do; resulting in out-of-state kids in Hunter Safety courses. We experienced a similar draw to Lake County when a family drove up to our course from downstate. Leaving their sons with us, the parents took a drive toward Manistee. On their return they had the dreamy look of people enjoying paradise. They said "it's so beautiful here." If there'd been a realtor on hand, he or she would have gotten a very good lead, maybe even a showing if not a sale.

The value's obvious, of pulling young people and families to Lake County from downstate and out of state, who then view Lake County as an interesting place where they did a neat thing with cool people. Barriers to moving here (employment, cold winters, social aspects of life in a sparsely populated forest area) still exist, but first steps in getting people to move to, visit, vacation, and/or do business here can be 1) get them here and 2) get them to like it here. Our Hunter Safety program can help in this.

Educational value

The stated goal of Hunter Safety instruction is valuable. Most years, the number of in-field firearms fatalities is zero; a few decades ago there were approximately 10 fatal incidents each hunting season.

But beyond that, many students have never had a learning experience that is incontrovertibly "real". They may never have had an art, shop, or other class in which they worked with and mastered tangible physical objects. They get that from us - handling and shooting live firearms is as real as it gets.

Special needs learners

Most students in a Hunter Safety class do not have special needs. But a Hunter Safety course can make the accommodations necessary to include a learner on the autistic spectrum, with ADHD or a reading disorder, or is a low-I.Q. or 2e student. To cite just one example, some (most?) autistic teens can learn and master the rules, procedures, and practice of safe gun handling.

Besides serving a population or segment, this can be noteworthy enough (especially if promoted), to draw attention to Lake County. It is not too hard to imagine the network of Special Education teachers passing the word that in Lake County, Michigan, your child can experience a once-in-a-lifetime, unique educational opportunity. If you have seen the gratitude and happiness on a mom's face as she sees her child, possibly for the first time, doing well, fitting in and accepted in a social environment, you may know how powerfully positive this sort of thing can be.

Also positive: the realization that can dawn on such learners themselves: that this is a way they can participate in and contribute to society and family in an unarguably and valuable way.

Nutrition and the well-being of the public

Teens responded positively to the suggestion of young hunters going out on hunts (mentored in accordance with state law), and, if successful, donating their kill to the local food pantries. Wild game meat is excellent nutritionally, whether donated or eaten by the young hunter's family.

Few teens are able to actually and materially benefit their families and their community. The Hunter Safety program provides a gateway to doing just that.

Integration with other sports and fitness programs

Hunter Safety courses are primarily courses in firearms safety, taught outdoors. As such they may serve as an ideal precursor, introduction and/or conduit to other programs; in particular, the biathlon.