

Aiming to Make Better Hunters

Why do 1,600 Montanans volunteer thousands of hours each year to improve hunter safety and ethics?

BY SAM CURTIS ■ PHOTOS BY ADAM VAN ZEE

Eighteen-year-old Rachael Mills stands in the middle of the cafeteria at Belgrade Intermediate School and aims a rifle at the back of the room. This might not seem like the safest place to wield a firearm, but the junior hunter education instructor poses no danger to her fellow students with the unloaded and disabled gun she's holding. In fact, she's helping them learn to avoid accidents with firearms. Lead instructor Ken Mills stands behind his daughter and explains proper shooting positions to a group of 25 mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons. Nearby, in the school band room and library, two similar groups are watching, listening, and practicing as 15 other volunteer instructors teach young hunters, accompanied by their parents, the fine points of safety, responsibility, and ethics. It's hunter education season in Belgrade.

Montana's weeklong hunter education classes run across the state every spring and fall. From Monday through Friday, the volunteer instructors spend two hours each evening working with the mostly 11- and 12-year-old students on demonstrations and drills. On Saturday, during a four-hour field session, the instructors guide students through a final exam, a live firing range, and five stations where the would-be

hunters demonstrate their newly acquired skills as safe and responsible gun handlers.

Each year, across the state, 1,600 Montanans volunteer 35,000 hours to teach 500 classes of bowhunting and basic hunting instruction through the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Hunter Education Program. Roughly 10,000 students become certified hunters each year, taught by volunteers who have donated time and energy—some for more than 40 years.

"Without our volunteer instructors, the Hunter Education Program wouldn't exist," says Thomas Baumeister, FWP's hunter education coordinator. "They're the backbone of the program."

According to social scientists, that backbone should be weakening. In his much-acclaimed book *Bowling Alone*, Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam writes that volunteerism and other types of community involvement nationwide are on the wane. Increasingly, he says, people choose to spend time on their own, not with others.

Yet each year, hundreds of experienced hunters across Montana are willing to give up their evenings and weekends to help kids and others learn how to hunt ethically and handle firearms safely. What accounts for this outpouring of volunteerism? And how does Montana FWP

TEAM TEACHING Before a classroom of middle school students, junior hunter education instructor Rachael Mills demonstrates the correct way to hold a rifle while her father, lead instructor Ken Mills, comments from behind. The Millses are among 1,600 hunter education instructors in Montana who, for a wide range of reasons, donate more than 35,000 hours each year to the program.



balance the desires of experienced hunters to volunteer with the needs of would-be hunters to receive quality instruction?

■ HE'S IN THE WOODS, TOO

Robert Larrison, 75, has been teaching hunter education in St. Ignatius for 47 years, ever since Montana's program began in 1957. His motivation for doing so has never changed.

"We are trying to save lives, prevent accidents, and keep people from dying in the woods from accidental gun shots or from exposure," Larrison says. "I still tell the stu-



dents that one reason I'm teaching is that when they go out in the woods with a gun, I'm going to be in the woods too, along with my family and friends. And we want the woods to be safe."

Instructor Max Witt has been teaching hunter education in Belgrade for six years. During the Saturday field session, he stands on one side of a "stream" that is actually a blue tarp with several rocks strewn on top. The rocks offer the young hunters a tempting opportunity for crossing. Fifty yards downstream, a log stretches from bank to bank. Witt tells the students to imagine

there is a bridge half a mile downstream.

"Where are you going to cross?" he shouts across the stream. A young hunter carrying his rifle yells back, "I'll cross down at the bridge. The rocks might be tippy. The log could be slippery or rotten."

"Good," says Witt, smiling. "Go ahead and cross the bridge, and show me how to carry your rifle when someone's walking in front of you."

Like Larrison, Witt's motivation for teaching is safety. Yet his is even more personal: He was once shot by an unidentified hunter. "I was up by Townsend hunting

elk," he recalls. "I had my horse painted orange, and I had orange overalls on. All of a sudden I felt what was like a bee sting. My horse dropped over dead. When I tried to stand up my leg collapsed. I looked down and blood was pouring out of a bullet wound. I finally hobbled four miles down off the mountain and drove to the hospital. I don't remember another thing for three days. It took six months to get to where I could use my leg. That's one of the reasons I teach. It's my way of trying to make sure one of these young hunters doesn't shoot somebody."

■ TRADITION

Another reason people say they teach hunter education is to give something back to an activity that has provided them with so much. That's the main motivation for George Clement, an instructor since 1998. At Belgrade's Saturday field session, Clement stands next to a pickup bed lined with rifles. He's teaching and testing students on different firearm actions and safeties, how to take rifles in and out of vehicles, and what a bullet can do to a pickup.

Clement hands one young hunter a thick piece of iron punched through by a bullet hole. Many youngsters, he explains, don't understand the immense power of a rifle. "If a bullet will go through this, what else will it go through?" he asks the student, then provides an answer that gets the class thinking: "A truck door?"

The punctured iron is one of Clement's biggest eye-openers. He says it gets the young students thinking more like adults.

"I grew up with firearms," he says. "It's a tradition that was handed down to me. But not all kids get that these days. So that's what I'm doing, passing on the tradition, giving back to the sport."

Passing on a hunting tradition—whether of safety, heritage, or ethics—is a strong motivating factor for many instructors, says Baumeister. "At some point in their hunting lives, many hunters want to give something back," he says. "Because our program capitalizes on this desire by hunters to become involved, we almost never have a problem recruiting enough instructors."

■ RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

John Plenke oversees the Saturday field session, moving among test stations to check on the students' progress. Now retired, Plenke began his career in 1966 as a conservation warden in Wisconsin and eventually became the chief administrator of that state's Hunter Education Program. He has been a volunteer in Montana since 1994.

Over the past 39 years, Plenke has seen

Freelance writer Sam Curtis, of Bozeman, tagged along as his son Will took FWP's hunter education course in 2004.

Freelance photographer Adam Van Zee lives in Bozeman.



great changes in the way hunter education programs are promoted and conducted, particularly in response to public criticism that hunters are irresponsible, unethical, and a threat to wildlife.

"When hunter education started in the 1960s, the emphasis was on safety," Plenke says. "But in the mid-1970s, we also emphasized the importance of hunting responsibly and showing respect to landowners and nonhunters, to wildlife and their habitats, and to rules and regulations."

Plenke believes that hunters need to understand they are ambassadors of their sport, and that safe and ethical behavior is one reason nonhunters continue to tolerate hunting.

Nancy Vautier, who is in charge of shotgun safety during Saturday's field session, is another instructor who wants to protect the future of hunting by instilling in beginners a respect for safe and ethical conduct. In one drill, she uses a football to represent a game bird, throwing it over young hunters and having them decide whether it's "flying" in a place where it would be safe to shoot.

"I so strongly believe in hunting that I'm happy to be an instructor," Vautier says. "I want to keep hunting going, bring new people into it. It's worth a little time out of my life to do that."

■ YOUTH TEACHING YOUTH

Though older hunter education instructors may have decades of experience and wisdom, students often relate better to junior instructors, who look and talk like they do. Junior instructors Jason Mills and B.J. Clement stand before five students at the Saturday field session, holding up antlers and horns and asking if anyone can identify the specimens. Though still teenagers, Mills and Clement talk knowledgeably and authoritatively about the animals. The students listen attentively.

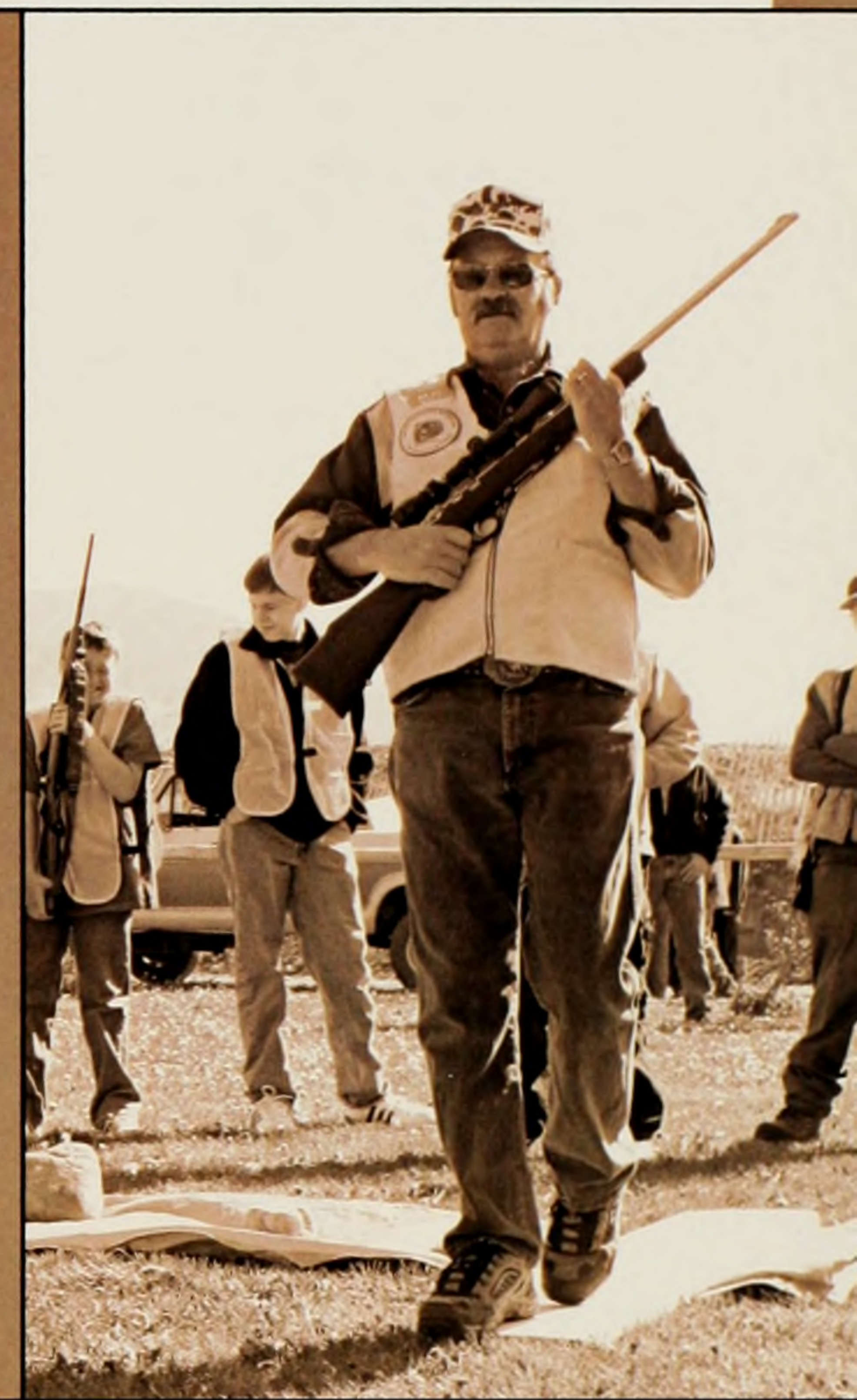
"Our older instructors have come to realize it's often better for young hunters to be taught by their peers," says Baumeister. "The student response is pretty positive when a 14- or 16-year-old junior instructor talks seriously about safe firearm handling and other aspects of hunting."

Some junior instructors got involved with hunter education because other family members were instructors. "I started doing it because Dad was involved," says Jason Mills. "My little sister, Rachael, is gung-ho about hunting, so she started teaching. Then Mom started because she wanted to see us during the week we conducted the course. Now we all teach classes, and when we get home, we talk about what happened."

B.J. Clement has been helping out with Belgrade's Hunter Education Program for



EARNING EXTRA CREDIT Far left: Instructor Diana Salvia explains how to safely handle a firearm. Left: Instructor Rob Miller congratulates a student for hitting the bull's eye at a firing range. Right: Instructor Max Witt leads students in an exercise on safely crossing a "stream" while carrying a firearm. Many hunter education instructors say that creating safe, ethical hunters and passing on the hunting tradition are their main motivations for volunteering year after year.



two years; his brother, Buddy, has been assisting for four years; and his father has been an instructor for six.

"It makes it a little more special to be teaching hunter education with my boys," says George Clement.

■ REWARDS

Although instructors donate considerable time and energy to Montana's Hunter Education Program, most will say the benefits are well worth the effort. "It has been rewarding," says Larrison, who jokes that he's just too lazy to quit after teaching so long. "I've had young students come to me and say, 'You taught my grandfather.' And I've had many former students sit in on the course when their children or grandchildren were taking it."

Another factor keeping instructors glued to the program is the positive and eager attitude of the highly motivated students. "These young adults take the hunter education course because they want to, because they're interested," says Howard Pippin, who has been an instructor in the little Hi-Line town of Saco for 38 years.

Another reward is having former students tell about their hunting experiences. "Sometimes, a former student will see me and talk, with a big smile, about his hunt," says Plenke. "The other day, I ran into a

fellow at the mall who said, 'I was one of your students. It's still the best course I ever took.'"

In addition, says Baumeister, hunter education instructors attain a high level of respect in their community. "Social status and recognition are attached to being the local hunter education instructor," he says. "In a different time or different culture, that same person would be the chief hunter who provides for the sustenance of the clan."

Baumeister says the tribal, ritualistic aspect of hunter education applies to the students, too. Many young participants in hunter education classes see the course as a rite of passage into adulthood.

"That attitude is becoming increasingly rare across the country," Baumeister says, "but not in Montana. In many parts of this state, when young people turn 11, they take the hunter education class. There's no question about it."

Just as the reasons for becoming a hunter education instructor are varied, so are the ways instructors teach their classes. Baumeister notes that FWP allows a great deal of flexibility in how instructors get their messages across. But he adds that the department maintains strict standards for accepting instructors, and it checks instructor applicants for criminal records and hunting and fishing violations. FWP also

requires that screened applicants apprentice for a year under the guidance of experienced instructors. In addition, the department develops educational materials and provides instructors with the basic objectives the students need to learn.

According to Baumeister, the citizen-agency partnership between FWP and volunteer instructors has broad public support.

"People like it because it's an extremely effective way to get things done," he says. "FWP devotes less than two full-time positions to run and coordinate the entire program. But thanks to our citizen instructors, we certify about 10,000 students each year."

He adds that while FWP continues to look for ways to improve the program, the conservation agency remains committed to using volunteers.

"Our challenge," Baumeister says, "is to find better ways to meet the interests and needs of young hunters without sacrificing the core element of one-on-one instruction that has been so successful." 🐾

Find nearby hunter education classes on the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov). Click on "Education," then "Hunter Education," then "Hunter and Bowhunter Course Schedule." The site lists cities, dates, class locations, and contact people and their phone numbers. Or call FWP at (406) 444-3188.