



SAVING LIVES, BUILDING ETHICS

For 60 years, Montana's volunteer Hunter Education Program instructors have been molding safe, responsible hunters. For 30 years, bowhunter instructors have done the same. *By Tom Kuglin. Photos by Thom Bridge.*



David Lemmon stands at the bottom of a hill during a recent Hunter Education class in Helena. Above the volunteer instructor is a cow elk decoy silhouetted against the sky. A line of students clutching unloaded shotguns and rifles approaches.

"Would you take this shot?" Lemmon asks.

A resounding "No!" comes from the students.

When he asks why not, a mix of, "Because it's skylined" and "If you miss, the bullet will keep going," draws Lemmon's affirmative nods.

Many things can change over six decades, but the core safety values taught to Montana's next crop of hunters today remain the same as in 1957. That was the year the Montana Legislature, alarmed by reports of increasing hunting accidents in eastern states, instituted mandatory hunter safety education. The goal: require young hunters to learn how to safely handle firearms. Over the next 60 years, completion of Montana's "Hunter Ed" course became an

early rite of passage for many boys and girls, joining later milestones like earning a driver's license and graduating from high school. Shaking the instructor's hand and receiving that Hunter Ed card means no longer just tagging along on a hunting trip but becoming part of Montana's hunting future.

Instruction is built on the foundation of safety and ethics. While technology evolves and laws change, the program's four key messages remain unchanged: Always point the muzzle in a safe direction; always treat every gun as if it were loaded; always be sure of your target and beyond; and always keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to fire. "When you have a teaching method that works this well, you don't want to mess around with it too much," says Wayne Cooperider, Outdoor Skills and Safety Program supervisor for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Tragic origins

Montana's first Hunter Ed instructor, Pat McVay of Kalispell, recalls a grim 1956 hunting season in northwestern Montana when



"SHELLS GO IN HERE" Craig Putschat, left, manager of Spring Meadow State Park and a volunteer Hunter Ed instructor, shows students the mechanism of a shotgun. Gun safety has been the Hunter Ed Program's top priority since the Montana Legislature created it in 1957. Above: Students decide whether it's okay to shoot at an elk silhouetted against the skyline.



LEARNING THE RIGHT WAY Left: Students practice safely carrying and handing off practice firearms. Right: FWP Hunter and Bowhunter Education Program assistant Sara Smith explains to students why it's important to always treat every gun as if it were loaded.

FIELD EDUCATION Left: Hunter Ed students practice marksmanship and shooting positions at an air rifle range. Right: Volunteer instructor Dwain Hoover teaches the art of following a blood trail.

four people were injured in hunting accidents. "I very much believed they could've been prevented," he says.

At the time, McVay was teaching shooting skills to Flathead Valley youth through the National Rifle Association's (NRA) Junior Rifle Program. Realizing the importance of training young shooters to handle firearms safely, he and others called and met with legislators to request making safety instruction a requirement for all hunters under age 18. In January 1957, McVay got a phone call from Mel Ruder, editor of *Hungry Horse News* and a hunter-safety advocate. "Mel told me the legislature had passed

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mandatory Hunter Ed, and three days later I got to file my paperwork to become an instructor," he says.

More volunteer instructors followed. Many were World War II and Korean War veterans. In civilian life they maintained an interest in firearms and enjoyed sharing their knowledge with youngsters eager to learn. Others were avid hunters hoping to pass on Montana's heritage. Some instructors were game wardens or biologists with what was then the Montana Fish and Game Department. And some simply loved to teach and recognized the importance of promoting safety.

Whatever the instructors' backgrounds, they brought a passion that McVay continues to exemplify. Now in his 90s, the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame inductee still enjoys

hosting Hunter Ed classes at his property near Kalispell. "I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world," he says.

Evolution of a program

The Hunter Ed Program has undergone a number of changes over the past six decades. At first, it was run by FWP's Enforcement Division, but in the early 1990s it became part of the Communication and Education Division. Students continued to learn about different types of firearms and actions and how to safely shoot, cross fences, and remove a firearm from a vehicle. But instruction also now included survival techniques, bear awareness, landowner relations, first aid, and outdoor skills.

More changes came during the 1990s and 2000s. The Montana Legislature made

“**You need to recognize that you're out there with a piece of paper that allows you to take an animal's life, and that's a very serious thing.**”

Hunter Ed mandatory for all new hunters born after January 1, 1985, and added a separate Bowhunter Education course for archers. Responding to requests from older hunters with busy schedules, in 2009 FWP began offering an online course. Though the

course included a mandatory in-person field day for those over age 18, some instructors balked at the change. "There was and still is a tremendous amount of pushback from instructors who maintain there's no replacing in-person training for something as important as firearms safety," Cooperider says. "We definitely understand their concerns, but online education has been very successful, and we still provide plenty of hands-on instruction with the field day."

Online education allows FWP to set up a wider range of options, from traditional weeknight classes to compressed weekend courses. "Public demand for more class offerings, times, and formats has forced us to change and adapt our program," says Vivica Crowser, FWP Regional Information and Education Program manager in

Missoula. "Montana hunter numbers remain steady, but they are dropping in many other states. The last thing we want to do is turn away potential hunters by not offering convenient safety education."

The main focus of Hunter Ed is safety, but instructors also stress ethics. Students receive copies of *Beyond Fair Chase* by retired FWP biologist and communicator Jim Posewitz and discuss the scenarios and choices they must make in the field. As Posewitz writes in his book, "Fundamental to ethical hunting is the idea of fair chase. This concept addresses the balance between the hunter and the hunted. It is a balance that allows hunters to occasionally succeed while animals generally avoid being taken."

Cooperider says respect and responsibility are key to the Hunter Ed ethics instruction.

Too Young to Hunt?



Hunting groups were divided during the 2015 Montana Legislature over a bill that has reshaped youth hunting in the state. Brought by Senator Mark Blasdel, Kalispell, the legislation created the Apprentice Hunter Program. Rules would allow apprentices as young as 10 to hunt with a designated mentor for a handful of game species.

At the time, young people could not legally hunt in Montana unless they were at least 12

years old and had taken Hunter Ed.

Supporters said the bill offered younger hunters a great way to get into the outdoors under direct supervision of a parent, relative, or other mentor.

Opponents, including many Hunter Ed instructors, argued that kids age 10 and 11 are too young to grasp the concepts of safety and responsibility, and too small to safely handle heavy firearms. Another source of heartburn: The bill did not require apprentices to complete Hunter Ed.

In the end, the legislature passed the bill,

and Governor Steve Bullock signed it.

Recognizing that the new apprentice program could mean big changes, FWP and the volunteer instructors wanted to give 10- and 11-year-old apprentices the chance to take Hunter Ed if they and their parents chose. "We're trying to view the apprentice program not as a barrier, but as a year or two head start," says Vivica Crowser, FWP Regional Information and Education Program manager in Missoula.

In 2015, Montana held its first apprentice

season. The program has proved popular, attracting nearly 6,800 apprentices in the past two years. Though most apprentices (80 percent) have forgone Hunter Ed for now, the rest have enrolled in the course while also apprenticing. "I have not heard complaints from our instructors about the 10- and 11-year-olds who have enrolled," says FWP Outdoor Skills and Safety Program supervisor Wayne Cooperider. "The same goes for FWP game wardens. They are reporting positive interactions in the field with the apprentice hunters they run into."

Whether apprentices with their two years complete will enroll in Hunter Ed and continue hunting is the big question as the 2017 hunting season approaches. "We won't know until the end of the season, but we're hopeful that the apprentice program will in fact increase hunter participation, which really is the whole point of the apprentice hunter concept," Cooperider says.

For more information on the FWP Hunter Apprentice Program, visit the department's website at fwp.mt.gov.



BONING UP FWP regional supervisor and Hunter Ed instructor Gary Bertelloti explains the difference between mule deer and white-tailed deer antlers.

"I tell students that respect means respect for each other, respect for nonhunters, respect for the land, and, biggest of all, respect for that animal. You need to recognize that you're out there with a piece of paper that allows you to take an animal's life, and that's a very serious thing."

Because the stakes are so high, passing Hunter Ed is far from guaranteed. Instructors fail students who can't demonstrate safe

firearm handling. "What I tell our instructors is to ask themselves, 'Would you hunt with that student?'" Cooperider says. "If the answer is 'No,' then the student is invited to participate in a future class."

Instructor involvement

Among those taking the class in Helena today are instructor David Lemmon's children Walter, 12, and Isabelle, 11. Last year

both kids hunted as apprentices (see sidebar, page 18), and each harvested a deer. Walter is looking forward to hunting elk for the first time this year. Though Isabelle is less than excited about watching the field-dressing video, she enjoys the experience of being outside and appreciates the benefits of hunting. "I like to see wildlife, and I like to hike," she says.

Lemmon loves to hunt and hopes to



COMMENCEMENT Above and right: Instructors congratulate graduates and hand out jacket patches and Hunter Ed cards that certify course completion.

instill in his kids values like helping to manage wildlife populations and putting meat on the table. "I want my kids and my kids' kids to be able to see wildlife, so it's important to do our part," he says.

Helping out at another station is 14-year-old junior instructor Emma Hoover. She joins her father and brothers in taking participants through a series of hunting safety exercises. During class, Hoover eyes the muzzles of the students' rifles to make sure they are always pointed away from people. "I like having the chance to tell them how to be safe," she says.

The field course is only half of graduation day for these students. Inside the classroom, instructors go over the written test. One question asks whether to fire at a deer in a particular scenario. The answers are split. Instructor Gary Bertelloti, an FWP regional supervisor, says indecision should always set off a warning light in a hunter's head. "If you're not sure whether to shoot, then the correct answer is always, 'Don't shoot,'" he tells the class.

30 years, 60 years, and beyond

Montana's Hunter and Bowhunter Ed instructors have always displayed rare dedication. "In my mind, it's more about our volunteers than it is the programs, because without them we wouldn't have the programs," Cooperider replies when asked about the programs' respective 60th and 30th anniversaries.

“These anniversaries are testament to the instructors’ personal and collective dedication to our hunting heritage.”

"These anniversaries are testament to the instructors' personal and collective dedication to teaching the safety, responsibility, and ethics of our hunting heritage."

Montana's 1,300 instructors teach 7,500 Hunter Ed and 3,000 Bowhunter Ed students each year. Many instructors have 20, 30, and 40 years of service. A handful have been teaching for half a century or more.

Becoming an instructor requires certification and taking time away from family, all in the interest of shaping future hunters. "Every year, we seem to ask more and more of our instructors, but with so much experience among them it always seems to run smoothly," Crowser says.

Cooperider is confident about the programs' future. Enrollment remains steady, with female students becoming an ever-increasing part of the program. Once comprising only a small percentage, in 2015 girls and women accounted for nearly 41 percent of Hunter Ed participants and more than a quarter of Bowhunter Ed students. "Nationally there's a big concern about hunter numbers dropping off, but in Montana we're staying pretty steady. I don't see that changing," Cooperider says. "We've got a great state to recreate in, and our education programs are solid."



Hunter education instructors in the early 1960s

To learn more about FWP Hunter and Bowhunter Education Programs, visit the department's website at fwp.mt.gov.