

A photograph of a man and a young boy standing next to a truck at night. The man, on the left, is wearing a headlamp and an orange jacket. The boy, on the right, is wearing glasses and a dark jacket. They are both smiling and looking at a mounted deer head with large antlers on the back of the truck. The background shows a dark landscape with a sunset or sunrise glow on the horizon.

GETTING ANOTHER SHOT

Innovative equipment, able-bodied partners, and sheer grit combine to bring hunters with disabilities back into the field each fall.

BY SCOTT McMILLION
PHOTOS BY ERIK PETERSEN

NICE WHITETAIL Hunter Brandon Renkin and his dad with the buck the teenager shot in the Shields Valley.

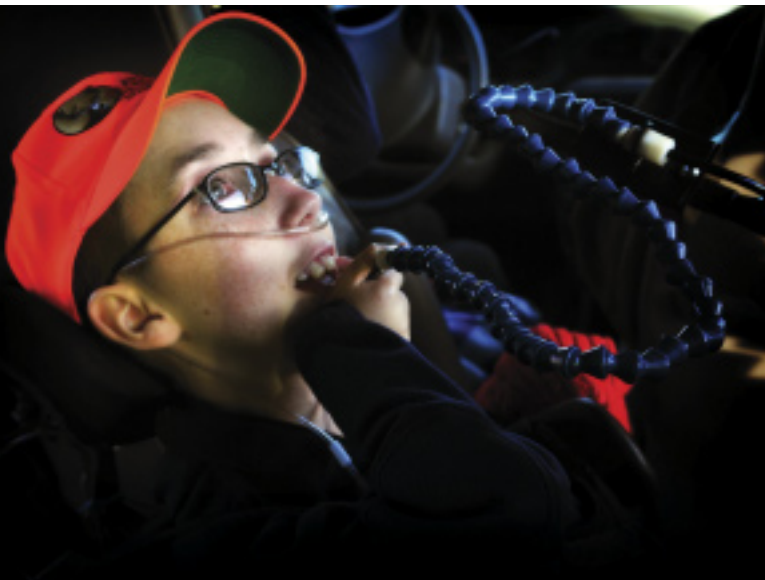
Brandon Renkin isn't very big. Though he's 15 years old, he weighs just 38 pounds.

It's almost all heart. The rest of it is brain and spunk, wrapped in a layer of patience. These are things that make a hunter.

Born with muscular dystrophy, Brandon has never been able to walk. Not a single step. He can't raise a gun or even lift his finger to a trigger. It's difficult for him just to sit up. Yet, in his first three hunting seasons, the Montana teenager has killed two elk, a trophy whitetail buck, several other deer, and an antelope. Most able-bodied adult hunters would envy his record.

His path to becoming a hunter started like that of many other young people, especially in a hunting-crazy town like Gardiner, where Brandon has lived all his life. He'd heard many hunting stories and wanted to try it for himself. "I just decided one day I wanted to take hunter's safety, because I wanted to kill a bull elk," he says.

"I wanted to have some stories like my friends have."



Yellowstone National Park. "Some of them are people we've never known, but their

Scott McMillion, of Livingston, is a freelance writer and a senior editor for Montana Quarterly. Erik Petersen is a photographer for the Bozeman Chronicle.

kindness and generosity are overwhelming."

I've known Roy for some time, but I first met his son on the opening day of Montana's 2008 big game rifle season. Brandon was in a wheelchair in the back of his dad's van, and they were picking me up for an afternoon whitetail hunt at the ranch of a friend of mine in the Shields Valley. The day was perfect: Leaves still clung to the cottonwoods, there wasn't a breath of wind, and the temperature was mild. Wispy clouds edged a brilliant sky. Roy and I had scouted the property earlier, so we knew that every evening the deer gathered to crop the grass of a hay field. We picked a spot, parked the van, and waited.

Three hours later, a big 5x5 buck lay in the back of the pickup Brandon's mother had driven to the ranch. Brandon's grin stretched from ear to ear, but he was calmer than the rest of us. I was talking way too much, and though it was opening day, I felt like anything I bagged that season would be pure gravy after what I'd just experienced. Photographer Erik Petersen was grinning too, hopping around, taking pictures. The landowner, normally a laconic fellow, had grown so excited watching the hunt through binoculars that his wife finally sent him inside the house to pour himself a drink. Brandon's buck, he told us, was the biggest ever taken on his property.

Brandon endured all this adult foolishness. He wanted to head home to Gardiner before his buddies went to bed. He had some smack to talk and a trophy head to back it up.

It was one of the best hunts of my life, and I never fired a shot.

ABLE TO HUNT

Leonard Livingston knows how I felt that day. For 20 years, he's been helping bring disabled hunters to the field, making it possible for them to bag their own game. He's built hunting blinds, bought vehicles, and constructed a wheelchair-accessible bunkhouse on his ranch near Ekalaka, all so people with disabilities can take to the field and do some shooting. He reckons he's spent about \$100,000 on the project over the years. "It's the greatest feeling in the world, just to see their faces," he says of the people

he helps. "It's all about camaraderie and friendship, just having a good time. You grow a bond with these folks. You never forget them."

Livingston knows firsthand about hunting with a disability. He has multiple sclerosis and spent five years in a wheelchair and another decade on crutches. In 1987, he learned a lesson about ability, as opposed to disability, while in a Wyoming hospital. A group that calls itself Helluva Hunt took him out and showed him he could bag an antelope, something he never thought he'd do again.

Now Livingston spreads that message. He's guided for Helluva Hunt for 20 years and, in 2001, began a program he calls the Beaver Creek Rendezvous on his property and that of some neighbors, totaling about 100,000 acres. Every year, roughly 100 hunters with disabilities from around the country apply. He draws six names from a bag and invites the hunters to his ranch for the opening weekend of Montana's deer season. All they need to do is show up with a valid deer tag, an able-bodied companion, and a willing attitude. Livingston supplies room and board, vehicles, guides, and even guns and ammunition if necessary. He can also help round up adaptive equipment such as gun mounts for wheelchairs and sophisticated scopes that allow the partners to be the "eyes" for blind hunters.

There's a barbecue, live music, and an auction during the three-day event. Each hunter also receives a gift pack full of useful things like hunting knives, hats, and ear protection. Volunteers work the kitchen and the meat processing room, where as many as 17 deer hung from the rack at one time last year.

"I've got 1,100 acres of hay ground, so we see a lot of deer," Livingston says. During the 2008 season, the success rate ran "right around 150 percent," he says. Every hunter killed a buck and many also filled doe tags.

In spring, he invites hunters with disabilities to shoot turkeys over decoys.

Some hunters have visual impairments, others use wheelchairs, and some walk with crutches. Others, like 69-year-old Barbara Wadsworth, are too disabled by arthritis to walk far. "It was fantastic," she says of her

2008 hunt, in which she bagged two deer. Wadsworth has hunted most of her life near her home in western Washington. Like Montana, that state allows hunters with disabilities to shoot from a vehicle, but it's tough to find game from the road in the brushy landscape where she hunts. You have to get lucky, she says. But in the open spaces of eastern Montana, it's much easier to see deer.

Wadsworth is not sure she'll be able to hunt again, so she's glad Livingston and his crew of volunteers made this hunt possible. It puts a fine finish on decades in the field. "This will probably be my last year of hunting, but at least I went out getting a couple deer," she says. "They really work hard for the hunters."

Brandon Renkin killed his first deer on Livingston's ranch, a muley buck, in 2006. Of all the hunters at Beaver Creek Rendezvous over the years, he probably has overcome the biggest physical obstacles to be successful. Brandon hunts with a rifle his father mounts to his wheelchair with a sophisticated bracket. The teen moves a joystick that directs the firearm up and down and back and forth on a battery-powered screw drive. Because sitting up for any amount of time hurts his back, Brandon can't look through a scope. So Roy has rigged up a video camera that replaces a scope. While reclined in his wheelchair, Brandon sees an image of his prey on a computer screen, which includes crosshairs. When a game animal comes into view, he moves the rifle and scope with his joystick until the crosshairs are on the kill zone, then takes a tiny sip of air on a tube in his mouth. That activates the trigger of his custom .280 rifle. More often than not, his dad says, the animal falls dead. Brandon rarely needs more than one shot, even at distances up to



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300 yards. “He’s pretty confident with that rifle,” says Roy, who adds that his son practices by shooting milk jugs full of water. “He gets to watch them explode on the computer screen.”

An old buddy who grew up with Roy back East built Brandon’s rifle and wouldn’t take any money. Hunting guides and their clients in Paradise Valley donated cash to buy the motorized rifle mount for his wheelchair. Roy obtained the optics when a friend at Montana State University put him in touch with a Georgia man who builds remote video cameras for observing wildlife. Roy asked the man to send a bill. He sent a letter instead, explaining that his church group had paid for the components. For his labors, he wanted a simple payment. “I, as well as a number of good people

here in Georgia, am looking forward to hearing the stories and seeing the pictures” of Brandon’s hunt, he wrote. Brandon and Roy make sure he gets them, along with some homemade jerky.

“I thought I was done hunting.”



A LITTLE HELP

Some hunters with disabilities do fine with standard equipment and a little help from friends. Arnold Huppert, a retired lawyer in Livingston, has been hunting birds and big game most of his 77 years. Like most people with his experience, he can tell stories all day long. Good ones. But 15 years ago, a pair of strokes paralyzed his left side. “I thought I was done hunting,” he says.

Then some buddies put their heads together and built a duck blind with a wheelchair ramp on a ranch with lots of sloughs and springs. There, warmed by a propane heater, Huppert awaits waterfowl, as he and I did last December. Since he only has one good arm, he propped his double-barreled 20-gauge in a metal triangle suspended from the blind’s window frame by a springy hunk of rubber. The simple but effective contraption holds his gun up while providing a wide field of motion.

Under Huppert’s orders, I kept my goose call in my pocket. Under his precise direction, I placed duck decoys. While those were both good ideas, we got skunked anyway. But nobody minded. “No ducks, but it’s a perfect day,” Huppert said.

For deer and antelope, Huppert uses an even simpler setup: a pad duct-taped to his truck’s passenger-side mirror as a rifle rest. As he does most years, he shot an antelope and a deer in 2008. He hunts with friends, sons, and grandsons, remaining part of the

family’s long hunting tradition.

He even fly fishes one-handed. And though casting and setting the hook remain easy, landing a trout takes some effort with one arm. But he gets the job done. “I got three last time I went,” he says. “It was just as exciting as when I used to catch 20.”

GATHERING STORIES

Like Huppert, Brandon Renkin says he hunts for the excitement, the companionship, and the joy of getting outdoors. The straight-A student at Gardiner High School tells me his favorite class is PE, where he likes Nerf dodgeball and plays goalie in gym hockey, where he often gets hit in the head with the ball. Like most kids his age, he enjoys video games, potato chips, and soda pop. He likes to hang with his buddies, but his wheelchair won’t fit through the doors of most homes, so that cuts down on his socializing. “I spend a lot of time in my room,” he says. “I don’t get to go out much.”

But with the help of his father and others, hunting is possible. He wants to shoot more elk, deer, and antelope, but he’s also hoping for a chance at bison, moose, and turkeys. “I want to have some stories like my friends have,” he says.

So he’s gathering them. Last year’s white-tail buck made for a good one: After the buck edged into the field, Brandon had to wait about 40 minutes for the deer to wander into his field of view, which was limited by his

position inside the van. Then his dad had to move the van a few feet, hoping the animal wouldn’t spook. Everyone in the van—Brandon, both parents, photographer Petersen, and I—had to keep silent and still for what seemed like an eternity. Any movement would jiggle the van, wheelchair, and gun, throwing off the shot. It was a team effort, but Brandon was the coolest member of the crew before, during, and after the hunt. He didn’t complain about the long delay. He patiently waited for everything to line up and then made his shot when the time was right.

We talked later about hunting and why he does it. Though he has grown accustomed to rising at 5 a.m., the cold takes a steely grip on his small body. But he still goes out at every opportunity. “The best part is right when you see them,” he says. “You know what’s going to happen next. You really want to pull the trigger, but you have to wait for the right moment.”

Spoken like a true hunter. 🐾



“No ducks, but it’s a perfect day.”

► Helpful regulations, programs, and information for disabled hunters

Montana has special rules, regulations, and even license fees to facilitate hunters with disabilities. For instance, disabled hunters may apply for FWP permits that allow them to shoot from a vehicle or modify their archery and firearm equipment. Some deer, elk, and antelope tags are set aside for hunters with disabilities, and resident conservation and fishing licenses sell for reduced rates. For details, visit fwp.mt.gov/recreation/ctb/licensing.html.

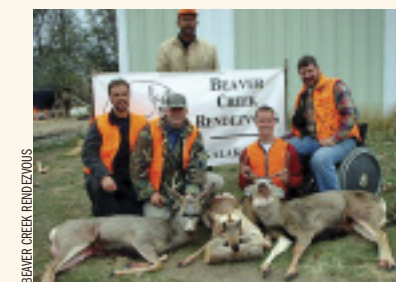
The U.S. Forest Service allows disabled hunters to drive beyond locked gates in some areas. Locations may change from one year to the next, so call the Forest Service office in the area where you’d like to hunt.

The Sapphire Ranch south of Missoula offers waterfowl hunting for those who have a state Permit to Hunt from a Vehicle (PTHFV), and you can find wheelchair-accessible



blinds on the Ninepipe and Freezout Lake wildlife management areas, managed by FWP.

The Montana Access to Outdoor Recreation Program, part of the University of Montana Center for Excellence in Disability Education, Research, and Service, offers free equipment rental, adaptive equipment information, and other services. Visit recreation.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/Mator/index.asp.



For more information on the Beaver Creek Rendezvous, visit beavercreekrendezvous.com or call (406) 775-6276. The Buckmasters American Deer Foundation has information for hunters with disabilities at badf.org/DisabledHunters/tabid/128/Default.aspx. The National Wild Turkey Federation’s Wheelin’ Sportsmen Program for disabled hunters is at wheelinsportsmen.org.