

The Education of a Hunter Ed Instructor

Contributing to a legacy by teaching beginners how to hunt safely and ethically.

By Tom Kuglin



JUST LIKE THIS With a senior instructor looking on, the author (left) demonstrates how to properly hold a rifle when in the seated position. Becoming a certified FWP Hunter Education instructor requires several hours of training and study, passing a written test, and teaching new hunters about safety and ethics. One of the rewards, say participants, is the feeling that they are taking part in a long Montana tradition of helping cultivate safe and appropriate hunter behavior. PHOTO BY THOM BRIDGE

I walk to the front of the class, firmly gripping the inert dummy shotgun as 40 pairs of eyes watch me.

“Does anyone know what type of shotgun this is?” I ask. A dozen hands go up, and I point to a girl in the second row.

“A pump-action,” she answers excitedly. “You’re right,” I reply. “And who plans to hunt with a pump-action shotgun this year?” About half the students raise their hands. “Well, then this is a good firearm to talk about.”

I work the action, point out the location of the safety, ask the class if they knew the purpose of a “plug,” and explain how to change chokes. While surely not the most comfortable public speaker, I’d spent a lifetime learning this subject matter, and, to my surprise, instructing a group of aspiring hunters came naturally. The students’ enthusiasm for the topic helps my confidence. They want to be there and want to hear what I and my fellow orange-vest-clad instructors have to say.

With my shotgun knowledge spent, I head to the side of the room, hearing “Good job” from one of the veteran instructors as I take a spot against the wall. The classroom feels familiar, like the one I sat in nearly three decades ago as a student with hunting aspirations of my own. The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Hunter Education Program course still stresses safety, responsibility, and ethics, along with the joy of seeing wildlife and spending time outdoors. As the next instructor explains how a bolt-action rifle works, I can’t help but hope that these students are beginning a lifelong pursuit, that hunting would become for them, as it is for so many of us, the reason they choose to call Montana home.

I am well on my path to becoming a certified Montana Hunter Ed instructor.

BORN OF TRAGEDY

The Montana Legislature began requiring young aspiring hunters to take a state safety

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class in 1957, after several highly publicized hunting-related accidents the previous fall created public outcry. Similar requirements that began the same time in other states helped reduce hunting accidents and fatalities in Montana and nationwide.

Sixty-seven years later, eager young hunters are still taking classes live or online to learn about firearm types, shooting skills, and how to safely cross a fence while hunting. They also receive instruction on wildlife and habitat management, hunting ethics, landowner relations, and outdoor skills.

Today, volunteers teach and certify roughly 7,000 Hunter Ed, 3,000 Bowhunter Ed, and 200 Trapper Ed students each year.

Francis Reishus, FWP’s Outdoor Skills Program manager, tells Hunter Education instructors they are “the gatekeepers.” It’s through them, he explains, that many young hunters get their first—and often most lasting—impression of the importance of safe firearm handling, cautious shooting, and



HANDLE WITH CARE Hunter Ed students use dummy rifles that can’t shoot to learn the proper way of holding the firearm and keeping the muzzle from pointing toward another person.

ethical behavior. “I’m enthused by the passion that our instructors bring, because they care so much and want this program to be successful,” Reishus says.

Montana’s hunter, bowhunter, and trapper education programs have faced several recent challenges. The COVID pandemic increased the number of people heading outdoors, including those wanting to hunt and trap. Meanwhile, FWP has been working to balance the convenience of its online hunter education classes (begun in 2009 for adults only and expanded to youth during the COVID years) with the demand by many instructors and hunters that at least some of the instruction be in-person. The department now requires that new hunters under 18 pass a one-day in-person field course in addition to their online test.

Though students can still take a mostly online class, interest in in-person classroom courses is outpacing availability. That’s because the volunteer-based programs saw instructor numbers dramatically decline during COVID, from 1,200 in 2019 to only 800 by 2023.

WHAT IT REQUIRES

I grew up traveling to the farthest reaches of Montana while bird hunting with my dad. Over the years, hunting has been central to my friendships, outdoor adventures, and even eventual career as an outdoor writer. Still, I never gave much thought to volun-

teering as an instructor. It always seemed like something taught by retirees with extra time and wisdom, not someone in their early 40s with a young family and more commitments than free time.

But I’ve long felt a responsibility to help the next generation—like my two young sons—enjoy wonderful hunting opportunities like I’ve had. After hearing that the program’s volunteer force had declined so drastically, I decided to help.

My wife supported the idea, and soon I filled out an application. After passing a background check, I received a welcome packet from FWP thanking me for my willingness to volunteer and providing training instructions. I learned the details of Montana’s Hunter Education Program over the next couple of weeks, and then took and passed a quiz. After all, it’s only fair that if we’re going to test the students, we instructors should prove we know the material.

When my orange vest and name tag emblazoned “Instructor #K272” arrived in the mail, I was excited to head to the classroom.

Before I helped teach my first class, I received additional training from senior volunteer instructors on classroom organization, instructional techniques, and learning styles. I also boned up on the history of hunter education and the critical role hunters play as conservation funders and wildlife stewards. I then attended a regional training session, where Reishus spoke enthusiastically of the time and effort volunteers put in and the importance of growing the volunteer ranks to offer classes that certify thousands of students each year.

WHAT IT GIVES

For the past 20 years, Vivaca Crowser, FWP’s regional Communication and Education Program manager in Missoula, has led similar regional training sessions. “I love this part of my job because it’s such a fun community to be part of,” she says. “It’s a dedicated group of people who are willing to work through changing times, changing programs, and the challenge of providing enough classes to serve the demand and pass on something that’s so important to them.”

Instructors volunteer for a variety of reasons, Crowser says. Some sign up after a person they know was in a firearm-related accident. Others want to give back to a heritage they believe in. Others come from a family legacy of instructors and want to carry on the tradition.

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FWP regional Communication and Education Program manager Vivaca Crowser congratulates a Hunter Ed instructor for his 20 years of volunteering.



Raised in Great Falls, Caleb Toth grew up with a father and older brother who were instructors. When he passed the Hunter Education course at age 12, Toth became a junior instructor. Seventeen years later, Toth continues to teach from Helena.

“When I started out as a junior instructor, it was really something exciting to do at that age,” he says. “Now that I’ve done it for so long, I was telling my wife that it feels like a duty. It’s a passion for me now because it seems like all too often, this is the only place kids will hear about ethics and hunter responsibility, and I feel like I can make a difference.”

Toth also enjoys the energy that young students bring to the Hunter Ed Program and seeing their evident pride when they receive their certificate—a rite of passage for many of Montanans.

EVOLVING PROGRAMS

Hunter education in Montana has undergone a number of evolutions:

- ▶ **Late 1940s:** Montana begins offering voluntary hunter safety classes.
- ▶ **1957:** Montana Legislature makes it mandatory for hunters under age 18 to graduate from a hunter education course.
- ▶ **1970:** Federal Pittman-Robertson funding becomes available to provide a financial boost to state Hunter Ed programs.
- ▶ **1987:** At the urging of the Montana Bowhunter Association, the Montana Legislature requires mandatory bowhunter education for youth age 12 to 17 starting in 1988.
- ▶ **2009:** FWP initiates its first online Hunter Ed option.
- ▶ **2016:** Lawmakers pass Montana’s Apprentice Hunter Program, which allows hunters as young as 10 to hunt with a mentor. FWP responds by lowering the age for attending the Hunter Ed course from 12 to 10.
- ▶ **2021:** The Montana Legislature requires mandatory trapper education. ■



Promotional hunter education photo from 1972

ADULT-ONSET HUNTERS

Montana, like much of the West, has seen a population boom with many new residents interested in the outdoors and hunting. A growing number of older “adult-onset” hunters has also led to increasing demand for hunter education. The largest Hunter Ed demographic, at nearly 5,000 students currently enrolled, are age 18 to 35, most of whom take their class online. But some do take in-person classes, and instructors say they have seen a growing number of kids and adults with little exposure to hunting or firearms.

“We have a lot of students who don’t come from a traditional Montana hunting family,” says Dave Genter, lead instructor for the Bozeman area. “We spend a lot of time talking about the fundamentals of safety, but there’s also a lot of back and forth about decision-making and ethics, and I think those topics are just as important.”

Genter adds that many students—kids and adults—are learning for the first time how to survive in the outdoors, what to do if they get lost, and techniques for field dressing an animal they harvest. “Unless you’ve been out hunting with your dad or mom or uncle, a lot of this can be a big mystery,” he says.

As with many volunteer-led organizations, Montana’s Hunter Education Program

needs more volunteers. The average age is 65, and in many areas, a core group of as few as 10 instructors teach hundreds of students each year. Some rural areas have only one or two instructors.

FWP staff and hunter education leaders have redoubled recruitment efforts to bring in more volunteers. They show up at conservation organization banquets, distribute fliers, launch media campaigns, and urge former instructors to return.

“We recognize that people have busy schedules, and I know some people are nervous about getting up in front of a class, but I want them to know that there are many different things they can do to help,” Crowser

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says. “We have roles for instructors who only have time to come out for a field day. We have volunteers who help out behind the scenes with logistics and support. There are lots of ways to get involved.”



EXPANDING PROGRAMS In 2021, the state legislature required trapper education, which includes information on Montana’s rich trapper heritage, for all new trappers. Wolf trapper education is also required for all wolf trappers.

The efforts seem to be paying off. In a typical year, FWP sees about 40 instructors sign up. By August of this year, the department had already enrolled 54 new volunteer instructors.

SHARING A LEGACY

The final task I had to complete was to team-teach a class with an experienced mentor. That weekend, the other would-be instructors and I watched as experienced instructors taught the wide-eyed students about the “zone of fire” (the dangerous distance around a firearm where someone could be injured by an accidental gunshot), how to shoot from various positions, applying first aid, and hunting in bear country. They engaged the students to think about how they would handle each situation.

this,” and soon I was working on getting my education degree.”

After graduating from the University of Montana, Reishus taught four years at an elementary school in Missoula, then moved with his wife to the Helena area. He taught middle school social studies in Montana City for seven years, where one of his favorite projects was spearheading a new outdoor skills class.

When FWP officials hired Reishus for the posted position to manage Montana’s hunter, bowhunter and trapper education programs, he found the ideal way to match his love for the outdoors with his love of teaching. “You definitely see this need for these kids to connect to the outdoors, and I’m excited to be working with this passionate group of volunteers and staff to help kids and other beginners become ethical, safe hunters and future wildlife conservationists,” Reishus says. ■



NEW MANAGER MAKES A PERFECT FIT

When Francis Reishus read the job posting for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ Outdoor Skills Program manager in 2023, he felt like it was written for him.

Reishus grew up on his parents’ cattle ranch along the Rocky Mountain Front. “As a ranch kid, it was the greatest childhood imaginable,” he says. “It was hard work fixing fence and picking rocks, but I also got to spend a lot of time in the outdoors hunting and fishing.”

Reishus’s family moved to Helena when he entered high school, and he graduated from Capital High. Afterward, while working a construction job in Missoula, he decided to become a teacher. “The most influential people in my life up to that moment had been teachers,” he says. “I was like, ‘I can do



We rookie instructors reminded students of the four key tenets of firearm safety: Always point the muzzle of your gun 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 ready to fire. And we stressed that we expected them to always follow those directives.

I found myself listening as much as possible to my more experienced fellow instructors, but happily jumped in to offer advice from FWP’s comprehensive Hunter Ed manual and my 30 years of hunting. While many of the topics are serious, teaching Hunter Ed is definitely fun, especially to kids and adults so eager to learn and demonstrate their new knowledge.

Hunter Ed instruction includes a field day, when students must demonstrate skills ranging from safe firearm handling to blood trailing to deciding when not to take a shot—like when an animal is sky-lined on the horizon and there’s no way of knowing what’s behind it if the bullet misses.

IN GOOD HANDS

Above: Hunting accidents like those at fence crossings have dropped drastically over the past 67 years since the Montana Legislature first required Hunter Education certification for all young hunters.

Right: The author, with his newly issued FWP Hunter Ed instructor badge and vest, poses in front of the FWP headquarters building in Helena with sons Trenton (left) and Bridger.

The final step is a written test covering material from the manual and from the instructors. We instructors walked the room, clarifying the test questions as the students tried to remember the various parts of a lever-action rifle or the steps to ensuring a firearm is unloaded and safe to accept from another hunter.

As parents filled the back of the classroom and each student stepped forward to receive their certificate, it was clear that Hunter Ed is more than just checking a box for these families. It’s about a legacy that these aspiring hunters were about to be a part of. I was proud to have helped. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; THOM BRIDGE; FRANCIS REISHUS

For information on becoming a volunteer Hunter Ed instructor, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov/hunt/education/volunteer-instructors. Or contact Shelly Anderson at Shelly.Anderson@mt.gov or 406-444-9948.

Scan the QR code to the right with your phone camera to watch a short FWP video in which Montana Hunter Ed instructors explain why they volunteer their time and the rewards of teaching young hunters about safety and ethics.

