



77-YEAR TRADITION

By Ron Wilson

MIKE LALONDE

Roughly one in six North Dakotans – it's more like one in five, actually, if you discount those not old enough to legally secure a license – hunt during the state's deer season. That's significant, especially when you try and come up with another single activity that fosters as much attention from 100,000 or so people wearing the same colored outfits.

North Dakota's first "official" deer season – the first time a specific deer license was required – was in 1931, and just 2,061 licenses were sold to hunters. (In mid-October of this year, more than 125,000 had already been issued, with additional licenses still available in some units.) Yet, because there were so few deer back then, it wasn't guaranteed there'd even be a season most years. And when there was, it likely lasted less than a week, sometimes just 2 ½ days.

Starting in 1954, the state's deer season has run annually for more than a half-century. Thank heavens for that, a chorus of devoted deer hunters would shout. North Dakota's deer gun season is about tradition, about revisiting places you've been going to for years – grandpa's farm, a tree stand in a chunk of woods where you shot your first deer, or maybe a deer camp that makes up in memories what it lacks in curb appeal.

"The tradition of the deer opener, of getting together and hunting with family is huge in North Dakota," said Terry Steinwand, North Dakota Game and Fish Department director. "There's that anticipation about noon rolling around on opening day. For most of my deer hunting days it was about getting up before the sun and sitting on a prairie hilltop watching where the deer bedded down for the day, and then going back when noon rolled around and finding that they'd moved."

The 2007 deer opener was the first Steinwand missed in 40 years. Instead he went to a North Dakota State University wrestling tournament to cheer on his son, Tyler, now a Bison sophomore.

"When I was a kid and the world was still flat,

I don't remember them shutting down school in the rural Garrison community that I grew up in, but you can bet it was a ghost school because most everyone went deer hunting," Steinwand said.

For many, the deer season is long anticipated and its arrival is celebrated. Sort of like one of those birthdays, say, your 18th, that means something. So, how cool would it be to have your birthday on opening day of the season? Would good fortune ride shotgun in your tree stand because it's *your* special day?

According to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's deer lottery database, 334 hunters will celebrate their birthdays on November 7, opening day.

This is what else we learned by rummaging through the database of 100,000 hunters or so, and by visiting with a few of them:

- Henry Boppre, Bottineau, celebrated his birthday on August 5. He turned 100, which makes him the oldest deer hunter in the state. Unfortunately, Henry suffered a stroke earlier this fall, said his son, Dave Boppre.

"He's doing about as well as you'd expect," Dave said of his dad. "We're going to take him along this deer season even if he has to sit in the pickup and watch."

Dave said his dad and mom, Mary, who is 95, continue to live on their own.

"Last season we set (dad) up in a little shack with a heater," said Dave, who owns some land in the Turtle Mountains. "He did get a shot at a deer, but missed."

- While there are younger hunters who have a youth deer bow license, Nick Barden, Bismarck, is the youngest rifle hunter. Nick turns 14 November 6, the day before the opener.

An eighth-grader at Horizon Middle School, Nick said he'll hunt with his dad and a couple

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CRAIG BIRKLE

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Be it the badlands of western North Dakota or in more open country farther east, opening weekend of deer season draws thousands of hunters.

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of uncles in the Crosby area. Not long on words, the state's youngest hunter said what he's looking forward to most about the deer season is simple: "I just want to get a deer."

- Turns out, Bismarck is more than the Capitol City; it's the Deer Hunter's City as well. Bismarck boasts 8,465 deer hunters for the 2008 season, which is more than any other town in the state.
- Marshall, located north of Richardton in Dunn County, on the other hand, has just one licensed deer hunter for 2008.
- The number of people from Killdeer, North Dakota who bought deer licenses is 223, while 111 in Hunter, 74 in Deering and 48 in Antler did the same.
- And just because we bothered to look it up: There are 22 deer hunters with the last name of Buck and one with the first name Buck; 53 people with the last name of Hunt; and

17 with the last name Horn, even though deer have antlers. There is also one hunter with the last name of Doe who has a doe license for the 2008 season.

The nod for traveling the farthest for the North Dakota deer season goes to Davide Alessio of Verona, Italy, at approximately 4,756 miles. The 2008 season will be his first deer hunt.

Alessio's tale is an interesting one. "In Italy it's very difficult to hunt. Little spaces, a lot of roads, many people, a lot of houses and very few wildlife," he said. "Then the liberal minds of many people in Italy who don't appreciate hunters because ... they kill the animal. So, it was very hard to hunt in a place where the larger part of the people – the newspaper, the TV – consider the hunting not well."

Alessio and his family bought a log house in Carrington, where they spend parts of summer,

fall and Christmas. "All my family is happy about this choice. Me, because I found one of the best places in the world to hunt and relax," he said. "My wife and daughters, because they love the horses that we have on the property ... they love the quiet of the Midwest and take the car to do shopping in Bismarck and Fargo, sometimes with their new North Dakota friends. For the quality of life for my family, the choice to come to North Dakota was the best of my life."

Alessio considers North Dakota paradise, and hopes it remains that way. "And don't talk with other European people about our state because we are good if we are few," he said.

Lynn Jacobson, lured by North Dakota's deer season, is also traveling some distance (about 3,704 miles) from Waipahu, Hawaii. Jacobson is originally from Oakes, a 1988 graduate, and has been in the U.S. Navy about 20 years. He's been stationed out of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii for the last 18 years.

"Most of my friends have concluded that I am crazy to head back to the cold weather of North Dakota just to do a little hunting," he said.

"Honestly, I miss the outdoors of back home, not that I don't love it here, but in the end it is the changes of seasons that I miss the most. Growing up back there, hunting was always something I loved to do ..."

In 2005, he tells of experiencing buck fever for the first time while hunting in North Dakota. "I returned again in 2006, again with a retired Navy buddy, to successfully fill four doe tags," Jacobson said. "Last year I was on deployment in the Western Pacific onboard the submarine I am stationed on, USS Cheyenne, so I did not have the opportunity to return and continue with my obsession. This year, however, we are in the shipyard here in Pearl Harbor and therefore I have scheduled my trip entirely around the deer season."

Jacobson would one day like to retire in North Dakota and spend the majority of his time fishing and hunting. "It may be a pipe dream, but it always brings back warm thoughts of the Dakotas," he said.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

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The tradition of deer hunting with family is deeply rooted in North Dakota. Greg Gullickson, Minot, and his dad, Ralph Gullickson, pose with a white-tailed buck shot by the elder Gullickson in 2007.