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Annual Horicon Marsh duck hunt aims to bring veterans together

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Guides and hunters gather for a group photo during the 2013 Horicon Wounded Warrior Duck Hunt at Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area near Maryville, Wisconsin, on Dec. 2, 2013. (Paul A. Smith/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/MCT)

HORICON, Wis. — Horicon Marsh is an internationally acclaimed wetland.

But at the moment, its state had shifted decidedly toward solid.

"At least we know no one else will be in our spot," said Damon Hesse of Deerfield, Wis.

Hesse plowed forward on marsh skis, each stride breaking through a crust of ice.

Overnight temperatures dipped below freezing. The calm water developed a 1-inch-thick crystal cover.

The trail ahead was unbroken.

Ryan Williams of Milwaukee and I followed Hesse. For Williams and me, it was our maiden marsh ski excursion.

"I'm getting it," said Williams, 37. "At least, that's what I keep telling myself."

It wasn't just Williams' first time on marsh skis. It was his first duck hunt.

What better way for a U.S. Marine veteran to experience his first hunt?

"We've got our own amphibious unit," said a smiling Williams, who served four years in the Marines, including a deployment in the Middle East.

The occasion was the fourth annual Horicon Marsh Wounded Warriors Duck Hunt.

Founded by Ryan Voy of Horicon and Chuck Dodge of Allenton, the event offers military veterans a weekend of fellowship and waterfowl hunting on the Horicon Marsh.

It's a way to say thanks to the veterans for their military service. And

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hopefully an assist to healing as they deal with a range of physical, emotional and cultural issues.

The 2013 event was the biggest yet — it included 33 veterans.

Voy and Dodge grew up hunting on the marsh.

“This marsh is something that we enjoy and we like to share with others,” said Dodge, 48. “To be able to take veterans out is something we look at as a privilege and an honor.”

The local community has rallied around the event. “We haven’t had anybody say no yet,” said Voy, 42.

Dozens of hunters such as Hesse volunteer their time, boats and gear and serve as hunting guides. Businesses donate food and supplies. And individuals from Horicon and nearby communities prepare meals and serve up perhaps the most important ingredients of all — sincere gratitude and friendship.

“It’s more than a duck hunt,” said Nick Vento, 34, a Marine veteran who lives in Waukesha. “We’re here sharing stories, remembering comrades and feeling the appreciation of these hosts and guides. The kindness of these folks has been awesome.”

The idea for the Horicon Wounded Warrior Hunt was born on Memorial Day 2010.

Dodge and Voy were camping on the marsh with their families, thinking about how much they have to be thankful for, wondering what they could contribute to veterans.

Dodge had just learned that his friend Kirk Morris of Gurnee, Ill., lost his son in Iraq. Eighteen-year-old Geoffrey Morris had enlisted in the Marines and was killed in his first year of service.

Their thoughts turned to what they know best.

They began to organize a weekend of hunting and support for military veterans.

The hunt is held on a weekend in mid-November, close to Veterans Day.

The event has a base camp at boathouses owned by Voy and Dodge along the Rock River in Horicon. This particular Friday night included a dinner and bonfire at the boathouses. The local machinists union — IAM Lodge 873 — provides its hall as a barracks Friday and Saturday nights.

I joined about 30 vets that Friday night in the hall. We slept on cots, had a 4 a.m. reveille and made our way over to the boat houses for a hot breakfast, then joined guides for a morning on the marsh.

The group reassembled for lunch at the bot boathouses, then dispersed for an afternoon hunt. Vets who were interested were taken out again Sunday the next morning.



Marine Corps veteran Ryan Williams holds a northern shoveler he downed in the 2013 Horicon Wounded Warrior Duck Hunt at Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area near Maryville, Wisconsin, on Dec. 2, 2013. (Paul A. Smith/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/MCT)



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Marine Corps veteran Ryan Williams participates in the 2013 Horicon Wounded Warrior Duck Hunt at Horicon Marsh State Wildlife Area near Maryville, Wisconsin, on Dec. 2, 2013. (Paul A. Smith/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel/MCT)

"I've been hearing about these types of things for years," said Andy Wentworth, 32, a Marine veteran who lives in Madison. "This is the new brotherhood thing for me."

Wentworth said the event happens not just close to the national holiday, but at an anniversary that he and several fellow Wisconsin Marines

will never forget. Several members of his Marine unit were killed in action in November 2004.

The group was deployed to what became known as the "Triangle of Death," south of Baghdad.

"This is a time of the year we need to be around each other," Wentworth said.

Ryan Baudhuin, 31, a retired Marine sergeant from New Berlin, has participated in three of the Horicon hunts. The man they know as "Buddha" has been instrumental in making sure as many veterans as possible stay in contact.

"I want this to be an annual event for vets who want to get together," Baudhuin said. "I know it's valuable for me."

The event's reach extended to Arkansas this year.

"It's always been a dream to hunt ducks in the north," said Stephen Wright, 25, of Little Rock.

Wright drove 16 hours from Arkansas with fellow Army National Guard member Andy Ivy, 25.

Wright heard about the hunt in July while serving in Afghanistan.

"It's pretty much the only thing I thought about the whole time I was over there, duck hunting," Wright said.

He'd been back on U.S. soil only six weeks when he drove north for the November hunt.

It's so important to have something to look forward to.

After our introductory marsh ski, Williams and I settled on marsh chairs next to Hesse in a high clump of grass and cattails. The wind blew hard, occasionally spitting sleet and rain.

About 8 a.m., a northern shoveler decoyed beautifully and Williams shouldered his shotgun. Within seconds Nova, a chocolate Lab owned by Voy, splashed out to make the retrieve.

Williams admired the colors on the handsome bird. For the Marine vet, it was a morning of milestones: first duck hunt, first marsh ski, first duck.

As the ice had been earlier, the path for returning vets can be uncertain.

The efforts of volunteers with groups such as Horicon Marsh Wounded Warriors Inc. make the journey more comfortable for our military veterans.

Source: McClatchy Information Services

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