

MINNESOTA

PHILIP P. MASSARO
President, Massaro
Ballistic Laboratories, LLC
Photos Courtesy of Author

GOVERNOR'S DEER OPENER

Members of the Otterstad Camp with spike buck.
BELOW: Kraig Kiger taking the BB Gun Challenge.



“Phil, I hope you have warm clothes. It’s a bit chilly this morning.” Ron Otterstad wasn’t kidding. November 8, the opening day of Minnesota’s firearm deer season had dawned with a standing air temperature of 12°F, and winds gusting over 30 mph, yet the camp was buzzing like a nest of hornets. Coffee brewing, bread toasting, boots being laced; this was the very definition of deer camp. Four gentlemen I’d never met were kind enough to host a writer from upstate New York, and I’d be joining them for the opening weekend—usually the best deer hunting days of the season. As I climbed up the ladder of the box blind, wearing almost every piece of clothing I had brought along, I watched the first light in the east and reflected on exactly how I ended up here.



What I did leave Minnesota with was a new set of friends, memories of new terrain, and a positive experience overall. And when all is said and done, isn't that what we're all after?

My buddy Kraig Kiger, Shooting Sports Program Administrator of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, had told me about the 12th Annual Minnesota Governor's Deer Opener, held each year in a different city throughout the state, which celebrates the common tradition of deer hunting and its universal appeal to the almost half-million Minnesota deer hunters. I was immediately intrigued to hear about a deer hunting event, not only tolerated but endorsed by the state government of Minnesota. This year's location was the city of Bemidji, situated in the northern part of Minnesota, very near to the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The event is coordinated between the Governor's office, the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association (MDHA), and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. It was Governor Tim Pawlenty in 2003 who initiated the Governor's Deer Hunt Opener, modeled after the Governor's Fishing Opener; and Governor Mark Dayton has continued the tradition. Regardless of party affiliation, Minnesota's Government recognizes the importance of the outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen, and the financial benefits associated with the outdoor heritage throughout the state.

There is a huge banquet at which key speakers from the Minnesota DNR and the

MDHA address the crowd, as does the governor himself. The event features a "Wall of Shame" from the DNR, displaying the collection of huge bucks that the DNR has claimed from poachers. Believe you me, there are some jaw-dropping B&C trophies in that mix.

One thing that I noticed immediately was the level of camaraderie. It really seemed like everyone was happy to be there, from the DNR officers and representatives of the MDHA, to the attendants. Adults and kids alike were entertained with a scavenger hunt of sorts, with the "Bad Axe" award as the top prize. From identifying mammal footprints to an air rifle competition and cartridge identification contest, there was fun to be had by all.

Minnesota is a state that is blessed with a landscape full of natural resources, and the state government fully embraces the outdoor lifestyle. Minnesota is one of 18 States with a constitutional right to hunt and fish, having passed an amendment in 1998 ensuring that right. Article XIII, Section 12 of the Minnesota State Constitution reads, "Hunting and fishing and the taking of game and fish are a valued part of our heritage that shall be forever preserved for the people and shall be managed by law and regulation for the public good." This concept of an equal



opportunity for all to hunt and fish is widely reflected in the state's licensing structure. Deer licenses and tags are available over-the-counter, and while deer quotas have been reduced for 2014, there is always an opportunity for a hunter to head to the woods after deer.

I was privileged to sit down with folks from the Minnesota DNR and MDHA who work hand-in-hand on many of Minnesota's outdoor programs, including a joint program to supply deer with high protein feed in especially harsh winters. A one dollar fee is added to hunting licenses and those funds are allotted for the purchase of the feed, which volunteers from the MDHA distribute on state lands to ensure the proliferation of whitetail deer.

THE GOVERNING BODY

Both Tom Landwehr, commissioner of the DNR, and Dave Schad, Deputy Commissioner, were nice enough to sit and talk deer hunting in Minnesota, and Minnesota hunting

in general. They were both proud of the Governor's Deer Hunt Opener, which is open to the public, and the way the event highlights the importance of the hunting way of life. Instead of being a prestigious governor's tag sort of event, it celebrates the Minnesota outdoorsmen's common ground: the family unit that hunts together, and the friends made at deer camp. There were discussions of Minnesota's deer herd, which has been diminished by a pair of tough winters, and is feeling the effects of predation from coyotes and timber wolves alike. Tom and Dave were proud of the DNR's efforts to help the deer herd, from the feeding of deer in rough winters to the direct application of trapping and hunting pressure to maintain sustainable, yet balanced wolf populations. With the lowered deer population, the DNR had no choice but to restructure the amount of deer each hunter could take in 2014, and both Dave and Tom indicated to me that the news was rather

THE EDUCATION

When I spoke to the officials from both the DNR and Minnesota Deer Hunters Association (MDHA), there was one concurrent theme: education. The desire to pass on the hunting legacy was a high priority with both organizations, and the programs that are in place seem to be working. Doug Applegren, VP of MDHA, was very pleased with the school archery programs.

Kraig A. Kiger of Minnesota's DNR helps to implement these programs in the 400 participating schools, and there are roughly 198,000 school kids taking part in this program. The program culminates in a tournament, where over 1,300 children compete in different classes for the top prize: a lifetime hunting or fishing license. There is a top prize for both male and female winners.

"Everything we're doing leads to increasing outdoor participation," said Kiger, "and that is the ultimate goal." I fully concur, Kraig. Please keep up the good work.

While spending time in the hunting camps, I definitely noticed that among the wizened veterans, middle aged experts (including the author), and energetic teens and twenty-somethings, there were the younger kids, soaking it all in, wide-eyed and eager. For the first time I feel optimistic about the future of hunting.

THE FINANCES

In Minnesota over 470,000 deer hunters head to the woods annually; and those hunters pump more than \$700 million into the state's economy each year. Hunting creates over 12,000 jobs within Minnesota, supports restaurants, lodging, sporting goods stores, and much more. The Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Council introduced a 0.375% sales tax, which goes directly toward conservation efforts. Those efforts are clearly visible in the amount of land that has been reserved, via conservation easements, for hunting and wildlife purposes. The Lessard Sams movement was put to a public vote, and was passed by a huge margin, which should tell you how strongly Minnesotans feel about the outdoor heritage. DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr told me that Lessard Sams generates over \$90 million per year, and that's nothing to sneeze at!

The Governor's Deer Opener isn't the only event of this type; it is predated by the Governor's Fishing Opener, and Governor Mark Dayton, being an avid upland bird hunter himself, has started the Governor's Pheasant Opener to continue the motif.

Minnesota has seen it fit to protect the outdoor lifestyle in its constitution, and is one of 18 other states to do so. Vermont, my neighbor to the northeast, had the wisdom to introduce this type of language into its constitution in 1777, but it took 219 years for another state to do so. Alabama signed the right to hunt and fish into law in 1996, and Minnesota was third to follow suit in 1998. I can attest to the popularity of the hunting lifestyle in Minnesota; nearly everyone in rural parts of the state was dressed in blaze orange and other hunting gear, and no one even cocked an eyebrow. In my home state, I've gotten many strange looks when enjoying breakfast in a remote diner while garbed in hunting gear. Kudos to you, Minnesota; please continue to embrace hunting and fishing.

well received among hunters, who understood given the circumstances. Tom and I talked about diseases that affect deer, such as CWD and blue tongue. Blue tongue isn't present in Minnesota, but CWD did rear its ugly head years ago, and the DNR was quick to respond, effectively containing the disease. Today Minnesota is CWD free.

"We did have a problem with bovine tuberculosis in northwestern Minnesota," said Commissioner Landwehr, "and we worked very hard to eradicate both the infected cattle as well as the infected deer. We used sharpshooters from helicopters to stop the spread, and I'm happy to report that we've been TB free for three years now."

Dave Schad and I discussed the moose population in the northeast section of the state, and he expressed his concerns about dwindling numbers. "The moose season is suspended at the present time, and the DNR is working very hard to find a way to improve herd numbers. We now have better radio collars, which have a 'mortality mode,' and will alert us instantly when the animal stops moving. This allows our personnel to rush in and retrieve the animal, so an autopsy can be performed and we can better determine the cause of

death. In the past, the corpse would be devoured by predators before the body could be retrieved." Dave relayed that black bears and wolves are the top predators of both adult moose and calves, and that the DNR is using forest management as a tool to enhance moose habitat in that region of Minnesota.

THE PEOPLE

I also had a very pleasant conversation with Doug Applegren, vice president of the MDHA, who was equally proud of the successes of the event. "The MDHA has over 16,000 members, and we work hard to promote deer hunting among the youth of Minnesota. We help promote the National Archery Shooting Program in Minnesota schools, and of the participants in that program, almost 40 percent go on to become hunters. That's a substantial number, and it's encouraging to see the next generation take up the tradition." In addition, the MDHA helps fund the Four Corn Camps, a weeklong youth education program centered on deer biology. When the topic of 'deer farms' came up, Doug fervently indicated that the MDHA supports fair chase, and he went on to explain how the Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, which the MDHA fully



supports, has helped to place a conservation easement on over 600,000 huntable acres in the recent past. "It is this kind of conservation that MDHA wants to be affiliated with" said Mr. Applegren.

The banquet was a success, and although Governor Dayton had fallen ill just after Election Day and was unable to attend the event, the show went on as scheduled.

HUNTING THE LAND OF LUTEFISK

Each year, hunters with deer camps in the area of the event offer to host members of the media, and Ron Otterstad and his campmates had drawn the name of yours truly. Less than 30 miles north of Bemidji, I arrived the night before opening day at their deer camp in Quiring. While it was remote, it was not exactly "roughing it." Radiant heat floors, hot running water, and satellite TV (all of which were just fine with me!) rounded out the amenities, and I immediately felt at home. Mr. Otterstad, his son Jon, Eric Samuelson, and Jerry Smith rounded out the camp populous, although I was quickly introduced to the

surrounding neighbors. They are a very welcoming and accepting group of people, and I felt immediately at home. Food and drink were shared, and all the accoutrements of deer season were present. A local buck pool was settled on, and although all agreed deer numbers were way off, all had equal optimism.

As I said initially, the weather was none too pleasant, with high winds and snow squalls all weekend long. Eric took a spike buck the afternoon of opening day, the only buck of the season from the Quiring camp. When we headed to the weighing station, better known as the Washenberger garage, there was but one other buck: a gorgeous eight-point that I estimated would exceed 130" of antler. Taken by 19-year-old LeAnn Washenberger, you'd have had to contact a surgeon to remove the smile from her face. Me? I didn't see a single deer, but hey, that's fair chase hunting. What I did leave Minnesota with was a new set of friends, memories of new terrain, and a positive experience overall. And when all is said and done, isn't that what we're all after? ■



The good people of Minnesota were kind enough to host a hunter for the event. OPPOSITE: Doug Applegren of the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association mans the booth at the event. ABOVE: 19-year-old LeAnn Washenberger and her trophy.