# **Showcasing the DNR: Cultivating the next crop of hunters**

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**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

They say it takes a village to raise a child. In Michigan, it takes a network of nearly 3,000 volunteers to teach the next generation how to be safe and responsible hunters.

Despite a decline in Michigan hunters in recent years, recreational safety programs like hunter education are in demand.

Coordinated by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Division, the state’s recreational safety programs include classes taught by more than 2,800 volunteer hunter safety instructors.

During 2018, 18,800 students received a hunter safety certificate, which allows them the opportunity to hunt for a lifetime.

“Conservation officers are involved with the program, but there aren’t enough officers available to teach recreational safety classes in every community throughout the state in addition to their other responsibilities,” said Lt. Tom Wanless, conservation officer and hunter education administrator for the state of Michigan. “We heavily rely on a strong network of devoted volunteer instructors to make our program successful.”

Conservation officers work with volunteer instructors, often assisting with classes, which gives them a chance to interact with the students and engage with the next generation of Michigan hunters.

“When the DNR officers come in, that’s a huge part of it,” said Rick Singleton, a hunter education instructor who lives in Ludington and devotes much of his time to volunteering with various programs. “Having a conservation officer talk to the kids at hunter safety allows them to see the real human side of an officer. Conservation officers are humans; they care about the people going in the woods.”

Singleton, a proud U.S. Coast Guard veteran, started volunteering with the DNR two years ago, after spending much of his time at the Fin and Feather Club of Mason County. Club members suggested that Singleton, who wanted to become more involved with carrying on Michigan’s hunting tradition, become a hunter safety instructor.

**Devotion**

“I always wanted to be a teacher,” Singleton said. “I have a ton of knowledge in recreational safety. We have such an amazing environment around us, I want to make sure that people can be safe and enjoy it.”

The process of becoming a volunteer instructor begins with submitting an application, and then a background check is conducted. The volunteer applicant then needs to pass a written exam, teach as a student instructor and receive sign-off from the lead instructor and mentor.

Once volunteers have completed their instructor training, they are responsible for working with the DNR Law Enforcement Division to plan their curriculum, promote their classes using an online database and get materials to teach their class.

Additionally, the DNR hosts an annual multi-day hunter education volunteer instructor academy, which all instructors are encouraged to complete at least once.

Volunteer instructors are invested in the success of the program. They share their knowledge and time with an abundance of people in their community through more than just the formal teaching setting.

“I had at least five calls to my house just the other night – questions about getting into hunter safety classes,” said Larry Stafford of Royal Oak, who has been a volunteer hunter safety instructor for 13 years.

After taking an early retirement from General Motors, Stafford went to the Bass Pro Shops store in in Oakland County, asking for volunteer opportunities. He has been teaching hunter safety education at the store ever since, educating several hundred students per year.

**Lifelong skills**

Volunteer instructors bring a plethora of lifelong hunting and outdoors experience to their classes, which is crucial, especially since many parents are trusting these volunteers to teach their children how to safely handle a firearm.

“At some point, the students are going to look back and remember the hunter education instructor who taught them those skills,” Wanless said.

The program covers more than just proper firearm handling. It includes skills that students can use for the rest of their life, even when they’re not hunting – from providing basic first aid to an injured friend to understanding which direction is north in a crowded city or on a remote trail in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

“Our instructors teach children, men and women basic first aid and outdoor survival skills,” Wanless said.

Most importantly, volunteer instructors teach about ethics, which Wanless said is the basis for the hunter education program.

“You have to do the right thing, right,” Stafford said. “Even when you think nobody is watching.”

Volunteer instructors teach students about taking clear and accurate shots and being respectful with game.

“You’re taking that animal’s life – do it respectfully and don’t make it suffer,” Stafford said.

**Encouragement**

The passion instilled in volunteer instructors drives them to go above and beyond to ensure students succeed.

“I had one kid afraid he wasn’t going to pass his test,” Singleton explained. “I told him, if you think you’re going to have a problem, say something to one of the helpers, ask them to read the test to you. His face lit up – from, ‘I’m not going to pass this,’ to ‘things are possible.’ It was great seeing his face.”

Singleton encourages people who are interested in hunting, but have limited outdoor experience, to start by simply going outside.

“I was fortunate to have my grandpa,” Singleton said. “Hunting was something he enjoyed, and I got to tag along and learned to love it. Find someone who is truly passionate about the outdoors and ask them to take you along. You don’t even need to hunt. Sit in a deer blind. Watch the geese come in. If someone gets out there that’s never done it and they can see what’s available, I think it can change their whole life.”

The DNR offers hunter safety education as an online, self-paced course with a required field day, a home-study option with a required field day and in a traditional classroom setting. More information is available at [Michigan.gov/HunterEducation](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79119_79147_81282---%2C00.html).

If you are interested in volunteering as a recreational safety instructor, go to [Michigan.gov/DNRVolunteers](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79137_79767---%2C00.html) and select “[Volunteer Recreational Safety Instructor](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79137_79767_81160-139685--%2C00.html).”

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