

Katrina Shankland: 'Tis the season - for deer hunting

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It was 7:05 a.m. The rustling I kept hearing was getting closer. I whispered to my mentors, Pete and Nick, "It's a deer! I just know it!" I was excited. We listened. The anticipation was great. A few minutes later, Pete saw it. I saw its tail. It moved so I had the perfect shot. Nick said, "Go for it!" Boom. One shot. I got it. A ten-point buck.

My experience in the Learn to Hunt program in Portage County was ideal. The instructor, Mike, did a great job, and I had two incredible mentors who shared a passion for hunting and bountiful experience out in the woods - and stories to boot. We practiced at the Izaak Walton League multiple times and placed our blind in the woods together. Jon, the DNR warden, gave me confidence as I practiced. I felt prepared and excited, and when I got my buck at 7:12 a.m., I was over the moon. My mentors taught me how to field dress it and register the deer. I'm still waiting for the CWD test to come back so I can eat the venison and share it with my friends and family!

My experience out in the woods was marked by safety and preparedness. I knew the rules of gun safety, practiced, and felt ready. I asked my mentors to watch my every move and they said, "Don't worry, that's why we're here." They didn't have firearms. But when you head out into the woods this weekend, young children and their mentors can each carry a firearm, and a child of any age won't be required to take hunter safety. This is due to a recent law that repealed the minimum hunting age for mentored hunting - without requiring any training.

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While I appreciate the value of passing on our state's proud sporting heritage, the tradition should include a focused mentor and a kid who fully understands the responsibility of handling a firearm properly. That's why I opposed the bill and introduced an amendment to limit the program to one firearm. At a minimum, young kids should take a hunter safety course or be watched carefully by the mentor without a firearm. How can we expect people to pass our hunting tradition on to future generations if they don't feel safe in the woods?

I have also introduced legislation to fund CWD testing in Wisconsin. As I wait for my CWD test to come back, I know that the venison in my freezer could very well be inedible if I'm unlucky. CWD is 100% fatal and we must do more to detect the disease. Since 2002, over 3,500 deer in Wisconsin have tested positive for CWD and it has spread to 41 counties. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency recently found that CWD may be orally transmitted to primates by eating infected meats, which has heightened concerns and raised questions about human susceptibility to CWD.

CWD infection rates are at an all-time high in Wisconsin, and we need meaningful action to preserve the deer that our state's billion-dollar hunting heritage relies on. Yet total DNR spending on CWD research and management has been cut by more than half in the last three years. My bill would invest in CWD testing and research to help us preserve the health and vitality of our state's deer herd. It's just common sense.

Hunting is a way of life and a proud tradition in Wisconsin. I wish you the best of luck as you head out into the woods with your friends and family for a safe and productive hunt.

— *Rep. Katrina Shankland, D-Stevens Point, represents the 71st Assembly District in Portage County.*