

Alabama

STEP OUTSIDE Youth Dove Hunts Reach Thousands of Kids and Parents

SUMMARY

In 2003, Alabama received \$26,000 in HHP funds for its mentored STEP OUTSIDE youth dove hunts. At that time, youth dove hunts were a relatively new initiative; the agency had laid ground work and achieved some success in introducing youth to the excitement and tradition of hunting. Alabama's youth dove hunts reached 1778 youths and about 1,700 adults/mentors at 56 events in 2003. Many of these young hunters are first-timers, and the program is recognized for its potential to become one of the most successful youth hunt efforts nationwide.

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| KEY AGENCY | Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources |
| EXTERNAL PARTNERS | Alabama's private landowners, businesses and a host of conservation organizations provided time, volunteers, support, land and facilities, refreshments, seed and fertilizer, other in kind contributions and financial donations. |
| INTERNAL PARTNERS | Wildlife biologists, conservation law enforcement officers, biologist aides and fisheries biologists assist in conducting hunts. Communications staff promotes hunts. Department personnel post information locally in various retail outlets and other locations. Staff members tabulate results and prepare statistical information. |
| PROJECT DATES | May 2003-February 2004 |
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| RESOURCES | HHP final report; Info on youth hunts at www.outdooralabama.com/hunting/youth-hunts/ |

BACKGROUND: Why this effort?

Like in many states, Alabama's hunter base is merely stable. The statewide population is surging, but hunter numbers remain the same.

"If we're not growing, we're losing ground," says Gary Moody, chief of wildlife at Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. "And that's not something we want to say for very long."

Each year, youngsters and parents take part in shooting sports and hunting through Alabama's wildly popular youth dove hunts. The hunts began as a pilot program in 2000 with two hunts. 2001 marked the first year for a statewide effort. By the third year of statewide hunts, it was important to secure funding to maintain momentum and expand the program. The 2003 HHP grant allowed this program to grow and continue.

"It's gratifying to see parents sharing their love of hunting and spending quality time with their children, while knowing we're reaching important goals for the agency," Moody says, "Twenty-seven

percent of 2003 participants were first-time hunters, so we're reaching a new audience by using youth dove hunts to jumpstart their hunting experiences."

What was delivered?

Success is in the numbers. At the 2003 events, Alabama reached the following:

- Number of youth at hunts: 1,778
- Parents/adults attending: 1,700 (approximate)
- Number of hunts: 56 events in 37 counties (Alabama has 67 counties)
- Average age of youth: 11 years
- First-time youth hunters: 500 (27 percent of participants)

Dove hunts are simple, and that is a big attraction for families. Less-patient people don't have to sit still for long. Doves take less initial skill to hunt successfully, so almost anyone can do it. "We believe in starting kids young to give them the lifelong desire to hunt," Moody says. "They're playing baseball and soccer; it's important to help make hunting a priority."

Youth (aged 15 and younger) and adults (properly licensed, 25 years and older) sign up on a first-come, first-served basis. Before each hunt, youth receive instruction in safety, firearms use and key conservation messages; some hunts feature a warm-up session with shooting clay targets. They receive a free youth hunting license, good for that event. Moody says licenses validate them as "true hunters," and some return the next year with their prized licenses to show.

SUCSESSES AND OUTCOMES

Life-long support: Youth and parents can become long-term supporters for agency goals, hunting and shooting sports. Events create positive interaction and public relations between participants, partners and the agency. Events introduce thousands of youth and parents to positive shooting and hunting experiences, helping to establish and strengthen social support mechanisms so essential to developing life-long hunters. (See adoption model information on page X.)

"Some kids are our future hunters; for others, it is a passing thing," Moody says. "Either way, we win. If we give kids a great hunting experience, it will be harder for them to believe later that hunting or firearms are bad. Of course, we win with their parents as well."

Landowner relationships: Alabama has limited public lands, Youth hunts improve relationships with landowners who provide access to private lands. Alabama exchanges seed and fertilizer for landowner access. "We don't have enough public land to meet demand," Moody says.

"Landowners are very positive when it comes to providing hunting spots for these kids." He also realizes that youth dove hunts could eventually allow the agency to help landowners segue into allowing other types of hunting on their private lands.

Agency staff contacted potential landowners to gain support and involvement. Staff sold landowners on the idea of helping recruit new hunters by providing exclusive dove hunting opportunities which they might not have had before.

EVALUATION

Exit surveys: After hunts are completed, wildlife biologists, conservation law enforcement officers and biologist aides summarize collected registration data, demographic information and comments from exit survey cards.

Comments from landowners, adults/parents and youths are overwhelmingly positive about events. Feedback includes statements such as: good chance to interact with law enforcement officers, biologists and agency staff; hunting with parent/child is great way to spend a day; learned a lot about hunter and firearm safety; enjoyed seeing wildlife and being in nature; dove hunts are a convenient, inexpensive way to introduce kids to hunting; events provided good social interaction with others adults and kids; hunts and staff present a positive portrait of the state agency; events were well organized and safe; getting a license made kids feel like real hunters; conservation officers were friendly and helpful; youth/adults enjoyed learning about conservation.

Full-scale evaluation: Alabama is considering full-scale evaluations of youth dove hunts to specify how hunts meet recruitment and retention goals and to maximize their already-strong efforts.

PARTNERS

Partnerships are key to the success of youth dove hunts. Communities, landowners, conservation groups and businesses are active in the hunts, strengthening the likelihood that this goodwill continues with the agency. Internal partners from a variety of agency sections ensure that events happen efficiently and with the highest degree of expertise and support.

Conservation organizations, church groups and communities hold spin-off hunts based on Alabama's model; they are inspired to take action after witnessing Alabama's success. "A goal for Alabama is to get other organizations and citizens to join in this effort, so that the responsibility and resources are no longer squarely on the agency's shoulders," Moody notes. "There's plenty of work to go around when it comes to recruitment and retention. Sometimes you just have to give people the chance to get started, and they take off on their own."

CURRENT STATUS

Alabama has made a huge commitment to hunter recruitment and retention through its youth hunts, and that commitment only gets stronger with each passing year. Alabama also has united with NSSF's STEP OUTSIDE program to coordinate youth hunts in pursuit of turkey and deer. The agency also coordinates special youth waterfowl hunting days.

Youth dove hunts have grown each year since 2003. In 2005, 54 youth dove hunts were held, reaching 1,336 kids, 18 percent of whom were first-time hunters.

"The youth dove hunting program is now considered a normal event during the course of the year," Moody says. "There are no longer discussions about will youth dove hunts be available; it is just something that is done. The field staff coordinates events at the local level. It is one of the more rewarding activities in which the department participates."

Alabama will add partners as opportunities arise. Hopefully several of these will eventually conduct youth hunts. The state will continue to introduce young people to hunting in a positive atmosphere and in a way that encourages parents and other adult mentors to involve youth in hunting and other outdoor activities.

"On many fronts, special hunts and outreach help Alabama's agency and youth," Moody notes. "I've seen more than one daddy bring a 6-year-old who is still too young to hunt—the child totes a BB gun instead. When that happens, the odds are good they'll return when the youngster can trade that Daisy for something bigger."