

# Wildlife officials luring hunters



Mikey Cliff, 9, has been hunting for a couple of years. He goes out with his dad, Mike, who taught him what he knows about the sport. State programs are working to get more kids like Mikey involved.

— Photo by Carolyn Plotts/The Norton Telegram

## Recruiting youth to sport will keep numbers up

By Veronica Monier

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Because more and more activities occupy the time kids once spent hunting, wildlife officials are spending more and more time luring new recruits to the outdoor way of life.

"When I was a kid, everybody hunted," said Larry Stones, a game warden for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. "It was just something everybody did.

"That is not the case today. Now, there are so many more things, like the Internet, video games and TV, to occupy their time. Kids who were too young to play football used to be out hunting. Then they made a little league for football. That's just one more thing to take them away."

This is a problem, Mr. Stones said, not only because of the loss of a great tradition, but because as kids lose interest and hunting numbers go down, sales of licenses go down as well.

The money generated by hunting and fishing licenses goes into habitat programs which keep game numbers up.

"With less money coming in, there is less money available to conserve habitat," he said. "We're losing habitat every year. Most of the time, when there's good habitat, there's more wildlife."

With a decrease in habitat programs, Mr. Stones said, we're now seeing a decrease in quail, prairie chickens and even turkey.

It's a "Catch 22," he says.

"Hopefully, when we take little kids out as a part of one of our youth programs, it gets them interested early," he said. "Then, when they turn 16, they can go buy a license, which feeds into programs for habitat and youth."

Programs like the department's Pass It On seek to recruit youths to reverse the declining trend in hunting numbers.

Pass It On uses several ideas, including Outdoor Mentors, Shooting Opportunities, Hunting Access, Special Hunts, and Education and

Awareness, to get kids involved in a sport that was once considered a standard activity.

In those days, of course, most Americans lived in rural areas or small towns. Today, most live in cities, and even in rural areas, kids don't get out to hunt like they once did.

The Outdoor Mentors program uses volunteers recruited from many places, including hunter education and bow hunter education instructors, conservation organizations, shooting-range operators, civic and service organizations, law enforcement groups, and controlled shooting area operators, to teach kids about hunting.

The volunteers are interviewed, checked for criminal history and then trained to be a good mentor.

Shooting Opportunities is designed to introduce non hunters and youths to shooting sports. By introducing kids to sporting clays, rifle shooting and 3D archery shoots, the department hopes that they will develop hunting skills and become interested in hunting.

Hunting Access programs aim to increase access to quality hunting grounds by using the Walk-In Hunting Area program, land acquisition and opening public lands that aren't currently open to public hunting.

"Walk-In Hunting is a good example of why the money generated by license sales is needed," Stones said. "The program opens up private land to public hunting. We monitor the land so the farmers are bothered less by hunters wanting permission to hunt on their land. And they also get a little money for something they would allow most of the time anyway."

Special Hunts complement mentor programs by giving youths and beginning hunters a quality place to hunt where there isn't a lot of competition and crowding.

The program opens up land before the season's traditional opening day and so gives youth a better chance to "bag" something, he said.

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