



MARYLAND **Hunter** **Education** Teaching Safety, Respect and Responsibility for 40 Years

Written by **Dorie Coleman, DNR** Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

KARRINGTON PAUGH, although an experienced shooter, goes through detailed instruction with official Maryland instructor, **JIM TICHNELL**. The gun is a 410 shot gun and was not loaded for this photo or for instruction purposes. At the end of the instruction all of the students actually shot the gun and did very well with it and their new knowledge of firearms safety.

A CENTURY AGO WHEN THE MARYLAND COUNTRYSIDE WAS THE PROVINCE OF SUBSISTENCE FARMERS, YOUNG PEOPLE ABSORBED THE FUNDAMENTALS AND ETHICS OF HUNTING BY SIMPLY FOLLOWING THEIR FATHERS AND GRANDFATHERS INTO THE FIELDS AND WOODLOTS THAT SURROUNDED THEIR HOMESTEADS.

Today, in a society where a supermarket is within 10 minutes of most residents, hunting is no longer a necessity but a manner to supplement the family diet while passing down time-honored traditions from one generation to the next. In this setting, skill sets are not necessarily as well-developed, and the pastime is often practiced in close proximity to neighborhoods and settled areas.



DWIGHT WILSON (far right), 30 year veteran of the Maryland Hunter Safety Program discussing the safety and proper instruction of the course. **JIM TICHNELL** (back) looks on as (left to right) Alec and brother Cory Horner share instruction with Karrington Paugh.

Enter Maryland's Hunter Education Program offered by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The goal of the program is to reduce hunting accidents and violations within the context of promoting safe, knowledgeable and ethical hunting activities and wildlife conservation. For 40 years, the program has been committed to putting safe, knowledgeable and responsible hunters into the state's forests and fields. Over the past seven years, more than 50,000 residents have completed a Maryland's Hunter Education Course.

In 1966, the State of Maryland started with a voluntary program of hunter education. Eleven years later, the Maryland General Assembly made it mandatory for all first-time hunters to complete a hunter education course. Today more than 600 instructors teach over 200 hunter education courses each year, with approximately 7,200 enrolled annually.



It's no accident that hunting is a safe activity – today's hunters are better educated than ever before! Young and old, male and female, they are taking to the field armed with the knowledge of how to hunt safely and responsibly provided by thorough preparation. Maryland's Hunter Education Program is one of the best in the nation because its instructors are dedicated to insuring that first-time hunters have the skills and aptitude to be safe and responsible in the field.

Hunter Education Courses are offered statewide, ensuring that anyone who would like to hunt can find a class nearby. Students must attend all sessions and classes run a minimum of 10 hours in length but typically run 12 to 14 hours. As there is no minimum age to obtain a hunting license in Maryland, there is no minimum age to take a Hunter Education Course. Young children often have a difficult time

with the amount of information that must be learned, and they may also lack the upper body strength and coordination to safely handle a firearm during practical exercises. With that in mind, most courses require that youngsters under the age of 14 attend with a participating adult.

The course includes instruction in hunter responsibility, firearms and ammunition, firearm handling and safety, marksmanship and shooting fundamentals, principles of wildlife management, bow hunting, muzzleloader hunting, safety and first aid, water safety, and Maryland legal requirements. In order to pass the course, students must pass a 50 question multiple-choice exam with a grade of 80 percent, demonstrate to the instructor that he or she can safely handle a firearm through practical exercises, and participate in live firing. Students must also be recommended by the instructor to obtain certification by demonstrating responsibility and the maturity to be a safe, responsible and ethical hunter. Maryland Hunter Education Certificates are recognized by all 50 states and the Canadian provinces.

Hunter education courses are scheduled between August and October with most offered in the late summer and early fall prior to the start of hunting seasons. As the program's dedicated corps of volunteer instructors is comprised of hunters, they generally prefer to be in the woods rather than the classroom during hunting season.

Recently, the Maryland Hunter Education Program has developed a program of independent study to provide an alternative method of delivery of the education course. Implemented successfully in several states, Maryland's program was tested in Frederick County and is now expanding to other parts of the state. Hardly a short cut to receiving a Certificate of Competency, the Independent Study Program is a self-paced course in which students must read a study guide and complete a workbook prior to attending a one-day program of instruction and testing.

Maryland residents 16 years of age and older can participate in the Independent Study Program. A minimum of 8 to 24 hours is required to complete the program's workbook, which must be completed in its entirety prior to the class. The workbook is then reviewed by an instructor for completeness, and the student then participates in a lecture covering hunter ethics, basic firearm safety and handling, and tree stand safety. As with the traditional course, the student must then pass a 50 question exam with a minimum

score of 80 percent. Only then are firearms handling and live firing skills evaluated. Upon successful completion, a Certificate of Competency is issued allowing the participant to purchase a hunting license.

What many people do not realize is that the majority of funding for Maryland's state wildlife programs comes from hunting licenses and fees and from a special federal excise tax on sport hunting devices and ammunition. About 77 percent of Maryland's state budget for wildlife programs for the fiscal year 2008 comes from these two sources. The federal aid funds are derived from an 11 percent excise tax on sport hunting devices and ammunition through the Pittman-Robertson Fund. Since 1937, sportsmen and women have been contributing to this fund through the excise tax mechanism. Each state receives a share of the funds, which is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Less than one percent of funding for Maryland's wildlife programs comes from the state of Maryland's general fund.

So you want to take to the Maryland wilds to try your hand at hunting this fall...before you head out, be mindful of what's required. To purchase a hunting license or to hunt in Maryland, state law requires:

- Presentation of a Certificate of Competency in Firearms and Hunter Safety (required for junior licensees), or
- Certification that the applicant held a hunting license issued prior to July 1, 1977, or
- Certification that the applicant hunted on private property prior to July 1, 1977, and was legally exempt from purchasing a hunting license, or
- Certification that the applicant is purchasing a nonresident license and will only hunt waterfowl.

For course information contact the Maryland Natural Resources Police Safety Education Division at (410) 974-2040 or visit the DNR website. A complete class listing is available at: <http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/hunterinfo.html>.

You can help ensure the future of hunting by becoming a member of our elite corps of Maryland Hunter Education Instructors. For further information contact Maryland's Hunter Education Coordinator, Rick Walbeck at 410-260-328 or email to rdwalbeck@dnr.state.md.us.