



Soldiers of good fortune

Dec. 3, 2011

Horicon - It's 5 a.m. and there's a traffic jam on Chestnut St.

"That's it, pull it right along the fence," says Ryan Voy of Horicon, directing a truck-and-trailer rig to a grassy parking spot.

In the frosty pre-dawn, a steady stream of vehicles, many with boats in tow, has gathered at the intersection of pavement and Rock River.

A crowd begins to assemble at a trio of boat houses adjacent to the public landing.

Labrador retrievers bound out of trucks and wag with anticipation.

And camouflage-clad men make their introductions, voices rising in clouds of steam under incandescent lights.

To a person, they're accustomed to "o-dark-thirty" starts.

Half are duck hunters, most from the Horicon area. The other half are U.S. military veterans.

"Yeah, sometimes sunrise is what happens after you've completed your mission," says Ryan Baudhuin, 29, of New Berlin, a retired U.S. Marine sergeant.

The occasion is the second annual Horicon Wounded Warrior Duck Hunt.

Founded by Voy and Chuck Dodge of Allenton, the event offers military veterans a weekend of camaraderie and waterfowl hunting on the Horicon Marsh.

It's a way to say thanks to the veterans for their military service. And hopefully an assist to healing as they deal with a range of physical, emotional and cultural issues.

I joined Voy and Baudhuin for the November hunt held in commemoration of Veterans Day.

At 5:30, we boarded Voy's 17-foot skiff and joined a flotilla heading north into the world-famous marsh.

Nova, Voy's 4-year-old chocolate Lab, pressed against Baudhuin as the boat sped through the cold air.

Baudhuin was raised in Door County and has always enjoyed hunting.

But today is the Wisconsin native's first outing on storied Horicon Marsh.

At more than 33,000 acres, Horicon Marsh is one of the largest freshwater marshes in the United States. It is listed as a globally and state important bird area.

Relying on his three decades of experience in the marsh - and the occasional application of a hand-held spotlight - Voy drives the boat along curving shores and into narrow paths.

"It's a floating bog system," Voy says. "So the channels and potholes are always changing."

Twenty minutes after leaving the boathouse, Voy noses the boat into a 5-acre opening known as Cotton Pond.

After tossing out a couple of dozen decoys, Voy snugs the skiff into a cattail slot and we erect camouflaged panels on the boat.

Now it's just a matter of settling in and watching the day unfold. Orange and pink bleed up from the horizon and push the black into memory.

Baudhuin was deployed to Iraq in 2004 and 2005. Our conversation, though, centers on the Green Bay Packers - Baudhuin is such a big fan he named his dog Raji after star defensive tackle B.J. Raji - and hunting.

The event is focused on appreciation and new opportunities. No one dwells on injuries or disabilities.

"Neither of us served in the military," Voy, 40, says of himself and Dodge. "But our fathers and grandfathers did and we know we can't do enough to appreciate our fellow Americans who choose to serve today."

Voy and Dodge grew up hunting on the marsh.

"My dad used to carry me in on his shoulders," said Dodge, 46. "It gets in your blood."

Two years ago, Dodge learned that his friend Kirk Morris of Gurnee, Ill., lost his son in Iraq. Eighteen-year-old Geoffrey Morris had enlisted in the Marines and was killed in his first year of service.

The idea for the Horicon Wounded Warrior Hunt was born on Memorial Day 2010.

Dodge and Voy were camping on the marsh with their families, thinking about how much they have to be thankful for, wondering what they could contribute to veterans.

Their thoughts turned to what they know best.

They began to organize a weekend of hunting and support for military veterans.

They contacted the Wisconsin branch of the Wounded Warrior Regiment to spread the word about the event and invite veterans.

Dodge and Voy also enlisted the help of friends and fellow hunters to provide the two dozen boats and guides for the event.

"We haven't had anybody say no yet," Voy said of his fellow volunteers.

Many members of the Horicon community, including the local machinists union, are generous donors.

Breakfast is served Saturday starting at 4:30 a.m. at the nearby IAM Union Hall.

Then the veterans are paired with guides and assigned to boats for a morning of hunting. A lunch is served at the union hall at noon.

This year Chris Jacke, the former Packers kicker, stopped by to sign autographs and hang out with the veterans at the Saturday lunch.

The afternoon features hunting until dark. The schedule repeats Sunday for all who are interested.

The 2011 event included 21 veterans.

"This marsh is something that we enjoy and we like to share with others," Dodge said. "To be able to take veterans out is something we look at it as a privilege and an honor."

Many of the veterans have never duck hunted.

Francisco Rodriguez, 32, and Jason Withrow, 26, both Army veterans from Rockford, Ill, heard of the event through their Veteran's Administration hospital.

They were teamed with guides Damon Hesse of Deerfield and Todd Whittaker of Oconomowoc.

Whittaker asked the veterans if they would like to use marsh skis to access a hunting spot.

Rodriquez and Withrow said, "What are those?"

Whittaker said it was like cross-country skiing.

The vets said, "Well, we've never done that before, either."

The foursome returned for lunch with 18 ducks, mostly drake mallards.

At Cotton Pond, the day has dawned calm and clear.

Two green-winged teal blast over our blind at legal opening. No shot is fired.

Twenty minutes later four mallards circle high above but stay out of range.

"That was my 'go away' call," says Troy Sadowski of Burnett, who is guiding another veteran 40 yards to our west.

"Yeah, I've been waiting for you to learn to do it in reverse," Voy says to his friend.

Baudhuin, the former Marine sergeant, appreciates the banter.

At 7:45, a drake mallard decoys perfectly. Baudhuin fires and seconds later Nova is splashing her way to the first retrieve of the day.

Baudhuin kneels to pet Nova as she scrambles aboard with the handsome prize.

Ex-Marine and Labrador then share a smile, each feeling confident and natural as they played out their roles in the marsh.

The Marines use a Latin phrase "Etiam in Pugna," which means "Still in the fight."

When the Marine, sailor, soldier or airman returns home, the mission is often to get and stay well. A hand extended in friendship and gratitude - sometimes accompanied by a spot in the duck skiff - can be as precious and hopeful as the sunrise.

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