



LEFT: After a successful morning of hunting near Morrill, from the left, Scott Cowan, Andrew Holsinger, Mike Adkins and Jeff Teasley pose for a picture. Teasley was the first veteran to take part in the special hunt while Holsinger was the first youth to be part of the mentored hunt.

Photos by Roger Holsinger

BELOW: Teasley, a disabled veteran from Cheyenne, Wyo., pulls up to take a shot at some passing ducks during a hunt southwest of Morrill on Jan. 4.

# Lending a hand

## Local group helping veterans, youth enjoy outdoors

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MORRILL — Jeff Teasley hadn't been hunting in more than 30 years mainly, because of a spinal cord injury that requires him to be in a wheelchair.

But it didn't take him long to get back into the game as he sat in blind along a slough near the North Platte River on Jan. 4.

"I've got nothing to lose and everything to gain," he said about the opportunity.

Thanks to the work of many people and members of the Platte River Basin Environments, Teasley and other veterans have the opportunity to experience a hunt.

Teasley said his morning on the river was "awesome" and that he couldn't express his gratitude enough for everyone who made the experience possible.

In addition to veterans, the new outdoors program also offers young people — who might not have the chance otherwise — the opportunity to hunt while being supervised by specially trained mentors.

Mike Adkins, the organizer of the veteran's portion of the project, said he came up with the idea about six months before his discharge from the U.S. Marine Corps.

"I wanted to do something for the vets, since I am one, and especially the injured ones that don't have an opportunity to get out and do it."

He said his first thought was to try and do it on some friend's property until he ran into Bruce Rolls at Western Trails Sports.

Adkins said while visiting with Rolls, he learned that a portion of some PRBE land was going to be set aside for veterans to hunt on as well as offer youth the opportunity to experience supervised hunting.

"By running into Bruce (Rolls), Hod Kosman and Platte River Basin Environments, I was able to achieve this," Adkins said. "I talked to some other people and was able to obtain donations including steel and wood for blinds. There has been an overwhelming amount of support and we hope that we can continue to do it," he said.

Once Adkins found the support, he prepared the area in about four months. The area includes access to two blinds — one that is wheelchair accessible — along a slough from the North Platte River.

Teasley was the first veteran to use the specially designed blind, which was made to accommodate his all-terrain wheelchair.

"It's a culmination for all the different people's ideas and it

happened (Jan. 4) and it's extremely rewarding," Adkins said adding that the purpose of the program is to give back to those who have served this country.

Teasley, who lives in Cheyenne, Wyo., said he heard about the opportunity through Public Affairs Officer Andrew Ruben with the VA Medical Center in Cheyenne and then it "just all fell into place," he said. While Teasley, 49, can walk short distances with a cane, he has no feeling in his left leg and has some use of his right leg. Most of the time he needs a wheelchair.

Teasley's injury occurred when he was 20 and fell off a ladder, damaging his spinal cord while serving in the U.S. Navy on the U.S.S. Spiegel Grove LSD-32.

The last time Teasley had been hunting was when he was in his teens. He said following his injury he found there weren't many places accessible for someone in a wheelchair.

"This is a new normal," he said. "I'm able to get out here and shoot at a goose; the camaraderie, getting to meet new people. I've met some new friends who I hope to be lifetime friends."

"My wife said she hadn't seen me smile this much and I hadn't even left the house yet to come up here so it means the



world to me."

He said that while he has a special wheelchair designed to assist veterans with spinal cord injuries, he hadn't been able to use it because there aren't many hunting areas in Wyoming accessible for people in wheelchairs.

"As soon as this opportunity became available two weeks ago, I jumped on it."

He said that he would encourage any veteran — disabled or not — to take advantage of this opportunity.

"This is an opportunity to get outside and do something ... it's beautiful here, the guys you are with are great and it really helps your mind-set," Teasley said.

Ruben said Adkins who had a vision to open land that he was raised on and share it with his fellow veterans contacted him "out of the blue."

He said the adaptive hunting trip was a first for Cheyenne VA.

"I'd say it was a great experience," Ruben said. "Getting to know Mike (Adkins) and Hod (Kosman) was a very fortunate encounter."

Ruben said it would be hard to measure the amount of enjoyment Teasley had saying that he told him that he had

trouble sleeping the night before because he was so excited.

"I think what happens with a lot of veterans that have a life-changing illness or injury oftentimes it's hard to move beyond that and through the opportunities that the Platte River Basin Environments created for us, it really illustrates to guys like Jeff that there is still a lot to be discovered out there."

"It's really uplifting to see the evolution of our communities over time ... just because a man or a woman might be in a wheelchair, it's not a limitation," Rolls said.

Rolls said that in addition to helping veterans, the group of sportsmen wants to reach out to young hunters that might not have the opportunity to hunt, fish and explore the outdoors.

"We have a number of mentors that have taken the Hunter's Safety Instructor Certification and they are set up now. If we have some kids who don't get an opportunity to hunt who need some place and someone to mentor them, we're ready to do that," he said.

Youth interested in taking part in the program must be certified through the Hunter's Safety Program and then fill

out an application form at Western Trails Sports in Scottsbluff.

Both Rolls and Adkins said none of this would be possible without the commitment shown by Hod Kosman and members of the Platte River Basin Environments.

"He (Kosman) is the driving force behind all of this and we wouldn't be able to accomplish any of this without him."

"We are really just trying to get our feet under us but we're looking at any number of opportunities for kids and veterans," Rolls said.

He said future plans for the property include offering youth and veterans the opportunity to hunt turkey in addition to the waterfowl and possibly fishing.

Assisting Adkins in making the program a reality included Scott Cowan who did the wood work for the blinds; Randy Kleager opened his shop to build the blinds, Mike Winchell scouted the ground and made suggestions as to where the blinds should be placed, while Tom Welsh and Roy Lyles donated heavy equipment for dirt work and excavation and B & C Steel and R & C Welding donated steel and welding services.



Hod Kosman, a director with Platte River Basin Environments and his dog, Nutmeg, pick up one of the ducks shot during a hunt near Morrill on Jan. 4.



Adkins, the organizer and spokesperson for the veteran's project, works to call in some ducks during the first veteran hunt on Jan. 4.