



2023 Hunter Education Annual Report

Photo Credit: Nick Berard

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection



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PROGRAM SCOPE

The mission of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) hunter education and bowhunter education program is to promote safety, conservation and Wisconsin's hunting heritage through a comprehensive educational program.

DNR hunter education program goals:

1. To develop, deliver and maintain standardized curriculum that meets or exceeds the International Hunter Education Association and the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies recommendations and standards for basic and advanced hunter education programs.
2. To enhance and sustain a progressive, professional, consistent, effective and efficient DNR hunter education program.
3. To recruit, reactivate and retain safe, knowledgeable and responsible hunters.
4. To increase public awareness and understanding of the value and role of hunting in sound wildlife management and conservation.

One of the goals of the Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection is to enhance public safety and enjoyment of outdoor recreational experiences, including safe hunting in Wisconsin. Another goal is to promote appreciation of our natural resources and the benefits they provide to everyone, lead by example in conservation, and pass on the conservation ethic to future generations through education and outdoor opportunities.

Hunting in Wisconsin is safe, as the continued downward trend in hunting incidents demonstrates. Wisconsin has a strong tradition of safe hunting, and it is everyone's responsibility to continue this tradition.

General Contact

Email: DNRLESafety@wisconsin.gov

Program Contacts

Lieutenant Michael Weber, Hunter Education Administrator
 Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection
 Phone: 715-299-4765
 Email: Michael.Weber@wisconsin.gov

Ashley Van Egtern, Hunter Education Program Specialist
 Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection
 Phone: 608-513-9625
 Email: Ashley.VanEgtern@wisconsin.gov

2023 YEAR IN REVIEW

What did we accomplish in 2023?

- **Hunter education/R3 welcome centers.** Welcome centers are display booths led by DNR staff in collaboration with volunteers where focused efforts are placed on safety, course enrollment and instructor recruitment/retention. In 2023, welcome centers were utilized at the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) Tournament, Milwaukee Sports Show, Wisconsin High School State Trap Tournament, Admirals hockey game, Lake County DockHounds baseball game, Eau Claire Express baseball game and the I39 “Deer Camp Breakfast” in addition to several local community events.
- **Innovation and exploration of additional pathways and opportunities for our hunter education graduates.** Current research indicates that approximately 60% of students purchase a hunting license after completing hunter education. We have continued research into student license purchase tendencies after hunter education and have worked with internal science staff who have conducted surveys on barriers for new hunters. We also have communicated the importance of R3 efforts to instructors through information provided at certification/recertification trainings and town halls.
- **Promotion of in-person training and learning.** We utilized internal media releases and KW2 media advertising to promote hunter education course enrollment, emphasizing in-person traditional and internet + field day courses. In addition, Outdoor Skills Trainers (OSTs) provided several in-person volunteer instructor certification/recertification opportunities across each region.
- **Spread TAB-K.** Whether through internal media releases, KW2 media advertising, staffing the hunter education welcome center or communication with volunteer instructors, we continued to stress and advocate for the spread of TAB-K messaging. In addition, we utilized simplified safety messaging based on past hunting incident causes to focus on muzzle control and target identification.
- **Engage and connect with R3 efforts.** The Hunter Education Program made a conscious effort to work closely with the DNR’s R3 team to enhance and provide further education opportunities for novice hunters, legacy hunters and those who are hunting curious. Both teams also joined forces to recruit instructors.
- **Increase instructor recognition and appreciation.** Volunteer instructors are the backbone of the hunter education program and the reason for its continued success. In addition to years of service awards, program staff utilized instructor appreciation banquets, instructor appreciation gifts and International Hunter Education Association (IHEA) memberships to show appreciation for instructor efforts.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024

What are we excited about in the new year?

- **Updates to hunter education courses.** The continued analysis of hunting incident trends across the state has resulted in high-quality and effective hunter education courses, including a new interactive online format for internet + field day and online-only options. Ongoing work with the DNR's Office of Communications and volunteer instructors **has determined** areas of the state that may lack hunter education course offerings.
- **Spreading the word about safety.** Continuing to communicate hunting incident trends to volunteer instructors, students and the public. Utilizing aggressive media outreach through our Office of Communications and additional paid advertising to promote simplified safety messaging aimed at the largest causes of hunting incidents: "muzzle control" and "target identification." Continue to research tree stand-related incidents.
- **Focusing on instructor appreciation.** Continue recognizing volunteer instructors, including service awards, appreciation banquets and IHEA memberships. Ensure program staff are responsive to instructor needs and willing to solicit feedback. Work to provide high-quality training to volunteer instructors.
- **Instructor recruitment and retention.** Show appreciation for retention. In addition, communicate and be transparent with instructors on program direction. Continue to work with volunteer instructors and utilize internal media releases and paid advertising for an instructor recruitment campaign.



Hunter education hoverball setup. / Photo Credit: Mike Weber

HUNTER EDUCATION COURSES

All students under age 18 are required to take a hunter education course with a hands-on component. The traditional course and the internet + field day course include a hands-on component; no minimum age is required to attend. However, the classes are administered at a sixth-grade reading level.

Traditional Course (In-person)

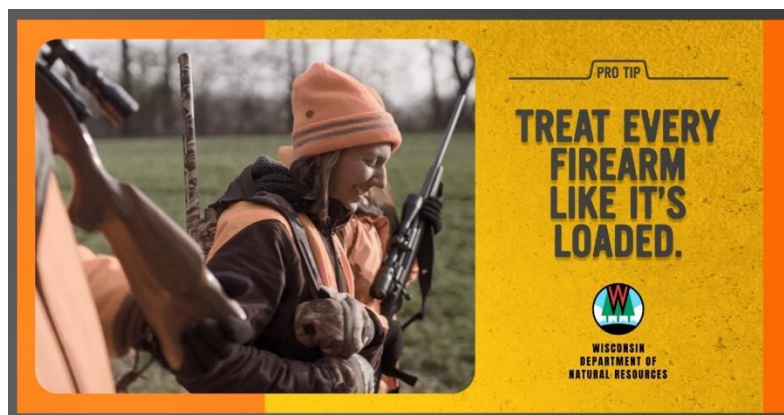
Traditional courses typically entail multiple meetings covering topics in “Today’s Hunter,” the student manual, and hands-on training. This course takes no longer than 19 hours and lasts three weeks or less. This course type is recommended for novice hunters and anyone with minimal to zero firearm handling experience. This course offers a more hands-on approach to working with a certified instructor during multiple days. Most students and families enjoy this option because they can do it locally. This option allows students to handle firearms and hunting equipment and learn about safe hunting practices, shooting and other topics.

Internet + Field Day

The online portion of the Wisconsin hunter internet + field day course can be completed at no charge to students. However, students are still required to pay the \$10 certificate fee to the instructor on the day of the course. Traditional hunter education instructors may require students to complete the hunter internet field day online course as a pre-requisite to attend a traditional hunter education course. This course is a good fit for someone who has handled firearms or will be hunting with an experienced individual to help them improve their hunting skills. During this course, there are four to six hours of firearm-handling opportunities.

Online Only (18+)

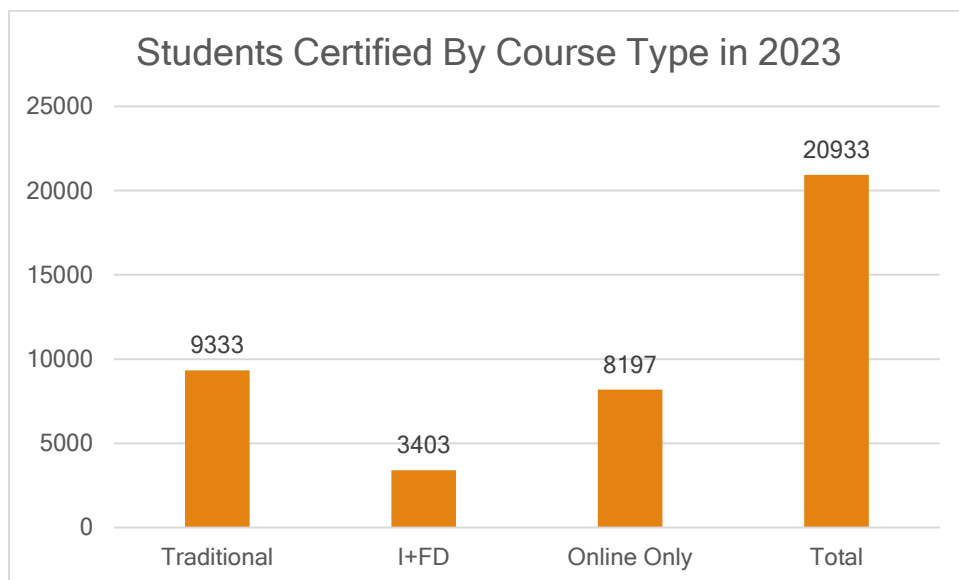
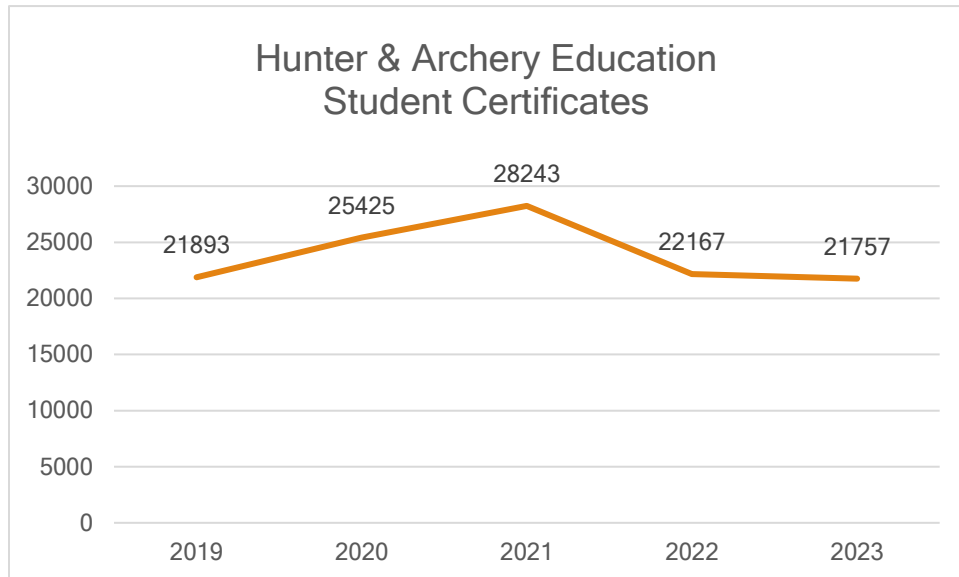
Adults (ages 18+) can complete their hunter education certification requirements entirely online. The online course is ideal for individuals who have had exposure to firearm handling already or will have direct access to a trustworthy mentor while handling firearms. This course is offered through Kalkomey. Learn more about the [online-only hunter education course](#).

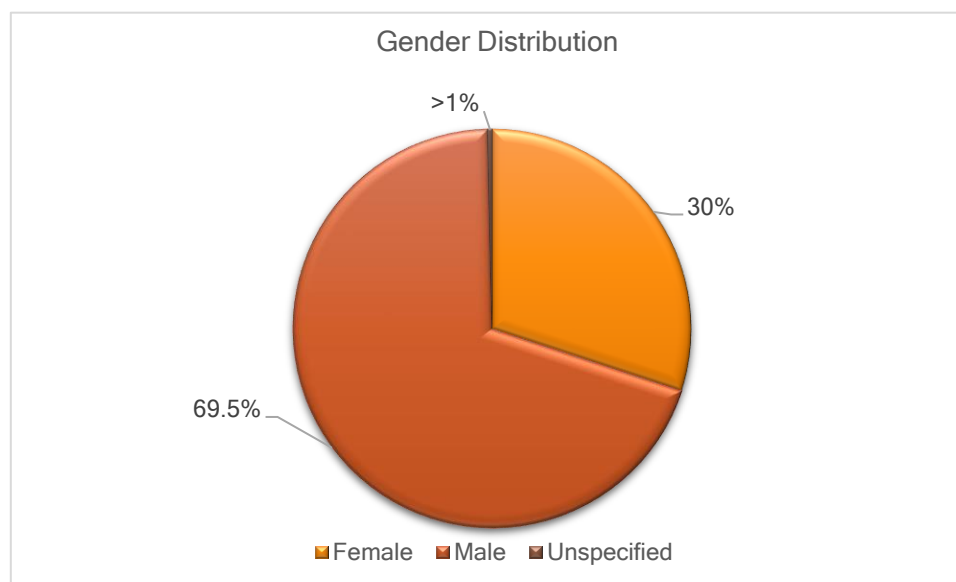
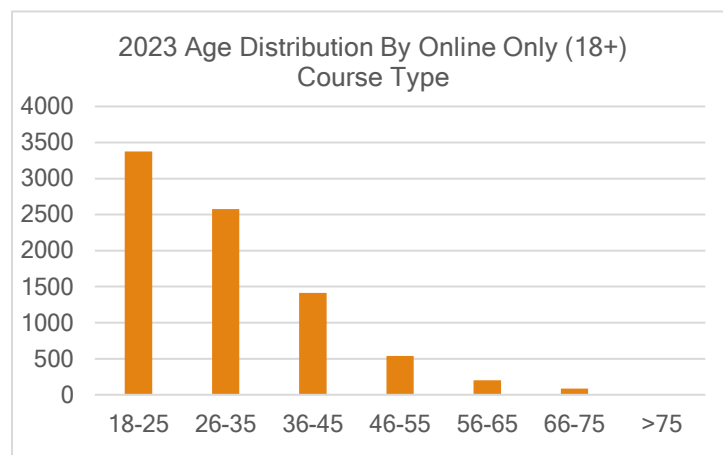
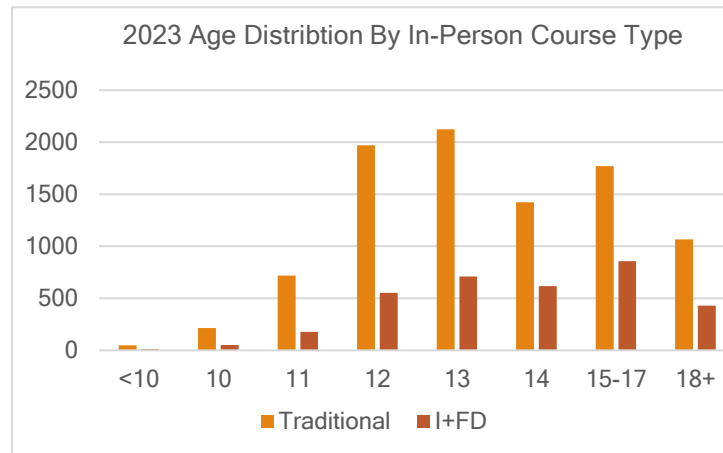


Ad from KW2 advertising agency.

HUNTER EDUCATION CERTIFICATIONS

In 2023, 21,757 students were certified through Wisconsin hunter and archery safety education courses. Of the 20,933 students who received hunter education certifications, 9,333 were issued through a traditional course, 3,403 through an internet + field day course and 8,197 through the online-only course. Eight hundred twenty-four students earned archery certifications through bowhunter education courses.





In 2023, the program saw an 18% decline in student certifications from 2022. Students 17 and younger must enroll and complete a course with a hands-on component to gain their hunter education safety certificate. Many students in this age group continue to take the traditional (multi-day) course.

Nearly 60% of all traditional students under 18 were 12-14 years old. In 2023, the youngest students in the traditional hunter education course were approximately nine years old. The average age of adult traditional students (over 18) was 36, with the oldest student(s) being 80 years old.

The average age of students who completed the internet + field day course for certification was 16. The youngest student was nine years old, and the oldest was 73 years old. At 55%, most students taking the internet + field day course were those aged 12-14. 25% of students were aged 15-17.

The average age for the online-only course (for those 18+) was 31. The oldest student to complete certification utilizing this method was 77.

Roughly one-third of all students (archery education included) are female.

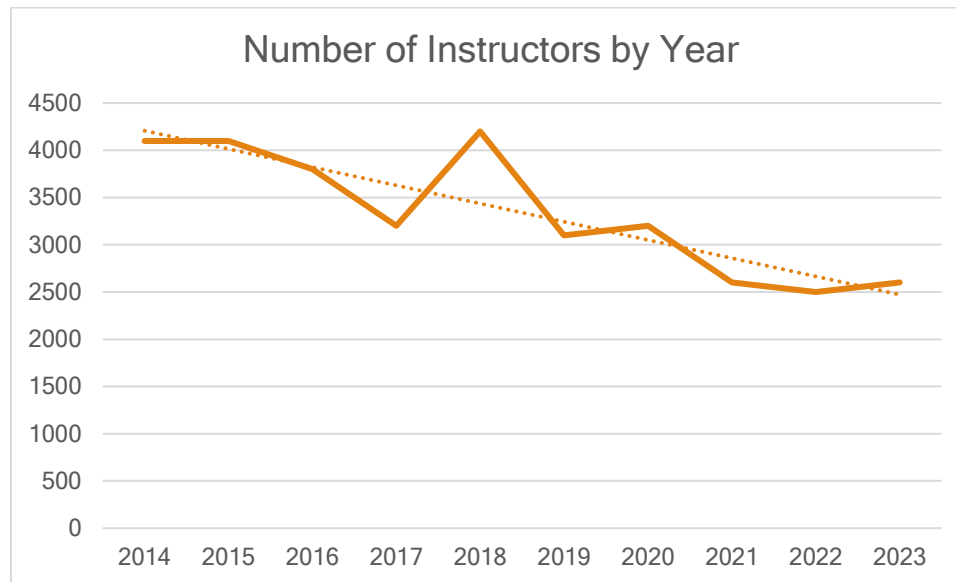
63% of hunter education graduates purchased hunting/archer licenses in 2023. This is a 3% increase from 2022. Participation is determined by the number of hunter education graduates who go on to purchase a hunting license. Working closely with the DNR's R3 team and other partnerships, we can connect with people who want "a little more" or "to do more." The program recognizes that hunter education is not a "one size fits all" type of program, and there are several motivating factors when taking one of our courses. As you can see, hunter education truly is for everyone. Over the past year, we've put on several "next-step" programs for hunter education graduates, novice hunters and shooting sports enthusiasts.



DNR wardens serve lunch at an instructor appreciation event in Green Bay. / Photo Credit: Ashley Van Egtern

VOLUNTEER HUNTER EDUCATION INSTRUCTORS

Wisconsin has a volunteer hunter education corps of approximately 2,600 active instructors certified to instruct traditional courses, 1,377 internet + field day instructors and 758 archery instructors. In 2023, the program welcomed an outstanding total of 499 new instructors to the ranks. The average age of our volunteer instructors was 54 years old, and the average length of service was 12 years. Currently, 14% of instructors are female, and 86% are male. We are very proud of our junior instructors, who also play an integral part in hunter education. As of 2023, the program had 161 junior instructors involved with hunter education in their local communities. Overall, the volunteer instructor corps has increased by 4% from 2022.



2023 Hunter Education Instructor Awards

Every year, the DNR recognizes hunter education instructors and instructor groups that have volunteered to significantly advance the cause of safe hunting through exceptional service in training or education. We thank all those who nominated individual instructors and instructor groups by the annual February 15 deadline. The following individuals and instructor group were selected to receive the 2023 hunter education instructor awards. A big congratulations to the following folks:

- Instructor of the Year: Jesse Schulz
- Group of the Year: Wisconsin Rapids Area Hunter Safety
- Archery Instructor of the Year: Jacob Timm

2023 50 Years Of Service Awards

The DNR hunter education program is unique in that it comprises a corps of volunteer instructors from across Wisconsin. Year after year, volunteer instructors remain dedicated to promoting, encouraging and inspiring new generations of safe hunters. For 2023, we congratulate and thank the following instructors for 50 years of service as volunteer hunter education instructors:

- Kenneth Beutler
- Bernard Stuttgen
- Vern Tollaksen

2023 Hunter Education/R3 Professional Of The Year Award

Our goal within the Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection is to enhance public safety and enjoyment of outdoor recreational experiences, including safe hunting in Wisconsin. Another goal is to promote appreciation for our natural resources and the benefits they provide to everyone, lead by example in conservation and pass on the conservation ethic to future generations through education and diverse, inclusive outdoor opportunities. This award is designed to recognize and honor an individual's outstanding dedication, service and commitment to the future of hunter education, shooting sports and/or R3 hunting, fishing or trapping-related efforts:

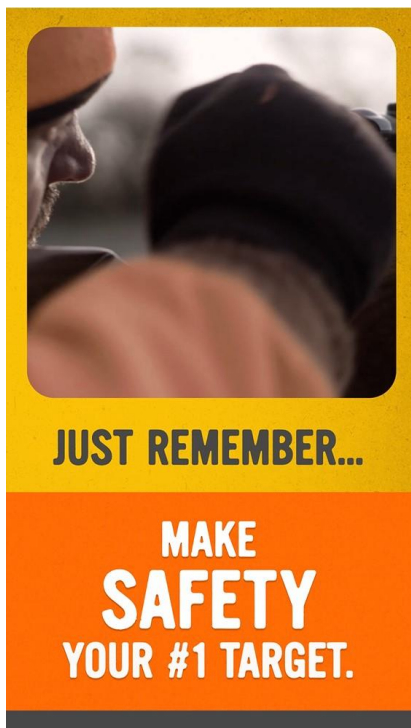
- 2023 Hunter/R3 Professional of the Year: Kayla Sasse, OST – Northeast Region



DNR Hunter Education Administrator Mike Weber presented instructor Paul Kellesvig with a 50-year award. / *Photo Credit: Ashley Van Egtern*

PUBLIC OUTREACH

- Each year, in collaboration with the DNR's Office of Communications, we develop and implement a media outreach plan focused on hunting safely, the four basic rules of firearm safety, treestand safety and the promotion of hunter education courses.
- We use a multi-media approach, including radio interviews, radio ads, billboards, social media, email campaigns and news releases.
- Our organic social media posts had 476,000 impressions. Facebook ads alone garnered 1.7 million impressions and nearly 20,000 clicks to the website.
- For radio, we advertised with Packers Radio Network. Eight ads ran across 49 radio stations during Packer games, producing 16.8 million impressions.
- We also ran 12 billboards across the state. These billboards led to an estimated 6.5 million impressions.



Digital "Make Safety Your #1 Target" ads (in English and Spanish) were utilized to promote TAB-K, created by KW2.

HUNTER EDUCATION PARTNERS

We could not accomplish nearly as much without collaboration with our partners, specifically the Wisconsin Hunter Education Instructor Association (WHEIA), the International Hunter Education Association (IHEA) and the Wisconsin Hunter Education Coalition.

The **Wisconsin Hunter Education Instructor Association** is an organization of volunteer hunter education instructors who promote safe hunting. We rely on the group to be the voice of our volunteer instructors. When this organization is out and about, they talk to instructors and provide valuable feedback. We also rely on them for financial assistance for things outside our abilities as a government agency. We work collaboratively with the association.

The **International Hunter Education Association** is responsible for creating and maintaining a national standard for hunter education, which is commonly used by every state to offer their hunter education programs. As a voting member of this association, we rely on them to review other countries' hunter education programs to ensure they meet our standards. IHEA created and maintains a database for hunting incidents and keeps the state administrator in communication with others on current laws and proposals to help with information sharing. IHEA also provides information, a community for volunteer instructors and discounts on hunting equipment.

The **Wisconsin Hunter Education Coalition** is a group that advocates for the promotion and provision of skilled and structured safe firearms handling practices, including in-person training and testing elements. The coalition's primary goal is to generate a common bond with the department to promote various hands-on training opportunities for youth and adults. This would help maintain the integrity and credibility of the program in reducing incident rates by 96% over the years. They are eager to work closely with us to enhance the current instruction and certification program.



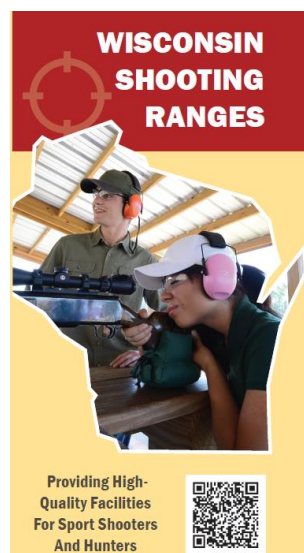
HUNTER RECRUITMENT, RETAINMENT, REACTIVATION (R3)

The DNR has staff dedicated to promoting hunting, fishing, trapping and shooting sports in Wisconsin. The approach is commonly called “R3” for recruiting, retaining and re-engaging participants in outdoor activities. R3 courses, programs and events are considered “Advanced Hunter Education” because they provide additional outdoor experiences beyond the safe handling of firearms taught in hunter education classes. Through participation in R3 events, hunter education graduates can learn and gain experience with all the other details of hunting, including equipment, methods and techniques, ethics and conservation, and population and habitat management.

To expand the number of R3 programs and event offerings, the DNR partnered with four organizations to add individuals to Wisconsin’s R3 team. Those organizations are Pheasants Forever, Raised At Full Draw, Pass It On—Outdoor Mentors and the National Deer Association. Together, DNR staff and employees from these organizations are actively planning more R3 programs and events.

In 2023, the DNR and partners provided 88 Learn to Hunt programs for species such as deer, pheasant, waterfowl, bear and turkey. The DNR and partners increased the number of workshops teaching people how to butcher deer from four in 2022 to nine in 2023. New in 2023, the DNR financially supported Wisconsin’s annual Women’s Trap Camp, which taught women interested in trapping and recruited trapper education instructors.

A final component of the R3 program is shooting sports. Shooting sports include archery, clay target and firearm shooting programs and ranges. The DNR manages 11 public shooting ranges that continue to see high use, especially in the weeks leading to the 9-day gun-deer season. However, these ranges are increasingly used by non-hunters who enjoy shooting firearms and will be a focus in the future to continue to provide safe, quality shooting experiences. The DNR has a growing archery education program that supports the National Archery in the Schools Program, Scholastic 3D Archery and various summer and physical education courses that involve archery. The DNR offers loanable archery equipment and technical support to schools, recreation departments and other programs that are focused on introducing people of all ages to archery. The R3 program is increasing awareness and support for high school clay target programs and intends to do more.



HUNTING INCIDENTS

Each year, DNR conservation wardens conduct investigations of hunting-related shooting incidents. A reportable incident is any incident in which a person has been injured or killed by the discharge of a firearm or arrow while hunting, fishing or trapping.

We use our historical data and inquiries into the circumstances of each incident to effectively modify the hunter education curriculum, regulations, media outreach efforts and training volunteers and DNR staff. Keep in mind that incidents that are not reportable occur every year. Some of these incidents include death by natural causes and treestand-related injuries.

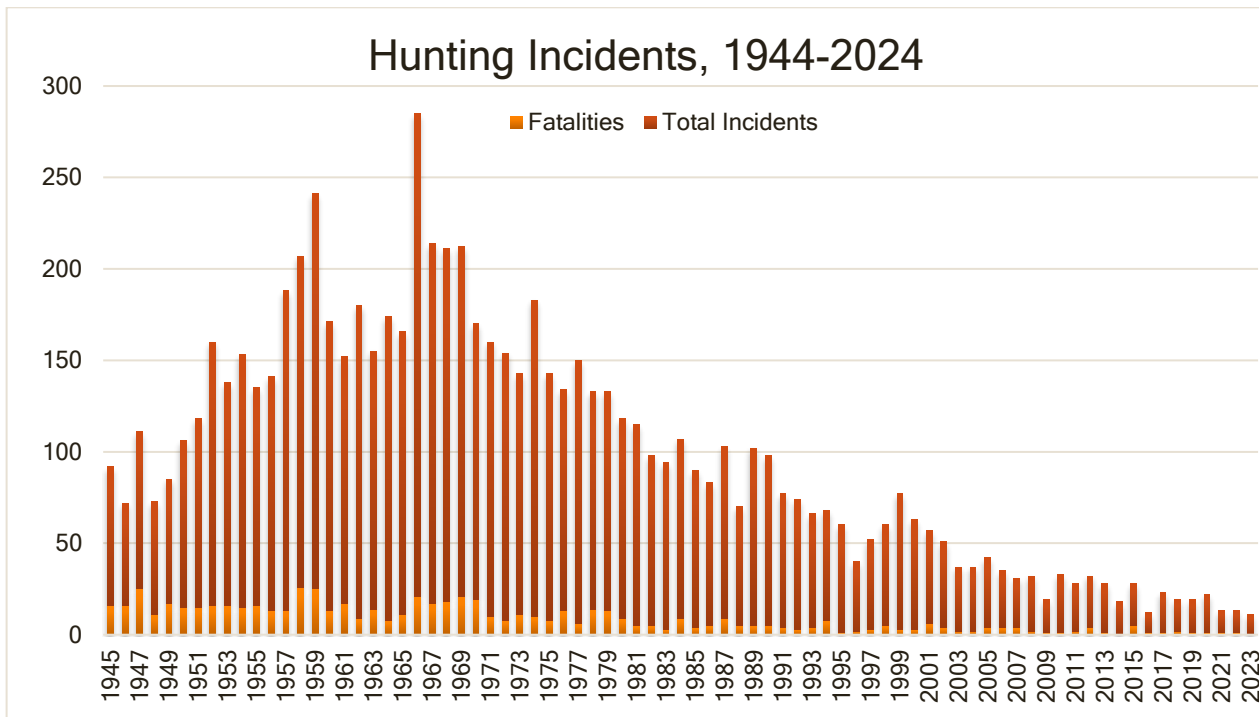
The hunter education program is committed to teaching, developing and retaining safe, knowledgeable and responsible hunters, whether novice or experienced. Before shooting, all hunters need to reinforce the importance of always identifying your target, what is before it and beyond it. Never shoot at sound or movement. A safe zone of fire and a safe backstop are equally important to knowing your target.

In every hunter education course, DNR volunteer hunter education instructors stress the need to fully understand and follow the four basic rules of firearm safety. Protect yourself and fellow hunters by following these four essential rules of firearm safety by remembering the acronym **TAB-K**.

- T – Treat every firearm as if it was loaded.** Never assume a firearm is unloaded, and never treat it that way, even if you watch as it is unloaded. Make it a habit to treat all firearms like they are always loaded.
- A – Always point the muzzle in a safe direction.** A safe direction is a direction where the bullet will travel and harm no one in the event of an unwanted discharge. There are no accidental discharges with firearms, *only unwanted discharges*. A 10-year average reflects that 36% of all hunting incidents are self-inflicted injuries. That means the muzzle was pointed at some part of the hunter's body.
- B – Be certain of your target, what is before and beyond it.** Positive target identification is a must. To shoot at something you only *think* is a legal target is gambling with human life. You must be certain and correct in judgment before deciding to shoot. Otherwise, it is reckless behavior. In addition to identifying the target, a hunter must know that a safe backstop for their bullet is present in every shooting situation. We don't always hit our target, and, in some cases, the bullet passes through the target. A safe backstop guarantees that no one will get hurt.
- K – Keep your finger outside the trigger guard until ready to shoot.** Your finger has no business being anywhere near the trigger until you intentionally want to shoot something.



Digital ad from KW2 advertising agency.



Important Dates In Wisconsin Hunter Education

1967 - Hunter education begins

1980 - Mandatory use of blaze orange

1985 - Mandatory hunter education begins

2009 - Mentored Hunting Law passed – age 10 and up may hunt without hunter education

2012 - Wisconsin ACT 168 enacted by the legislature – adult hunter education

2016 - Wisconsin ACT 131 – blaze pink introduced

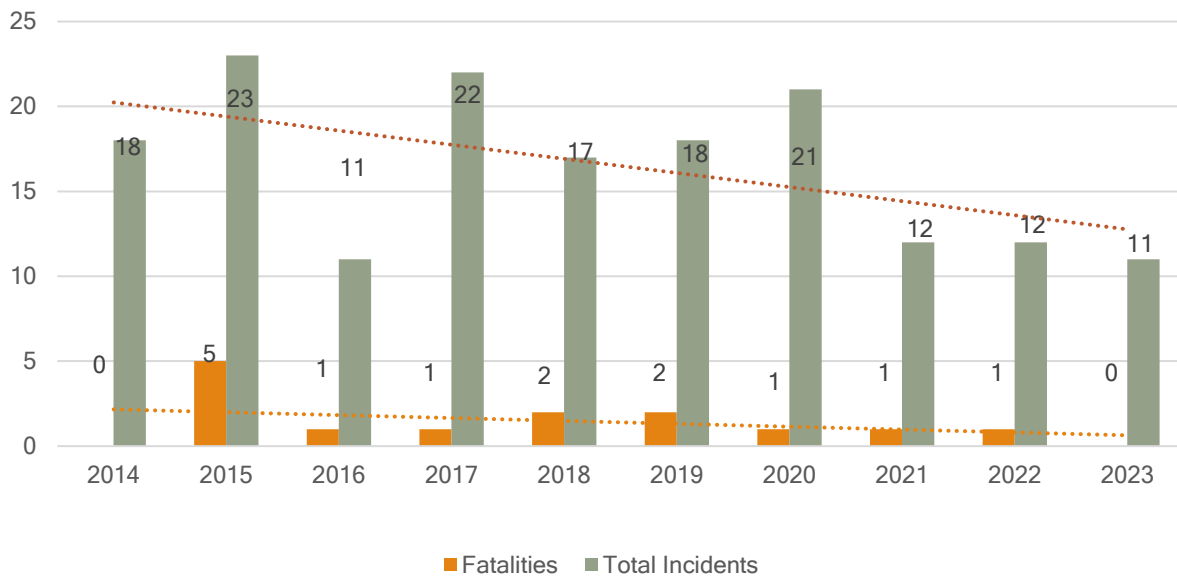
2017 - Wisconsin Act 62 eliminated the requirement that a person be at least 10 years old to hunt under the hunting mentorship program. The act also removed the restriction prohibiting a mentee and a mentor from possessing more than one weapon between them while hunting.

2023 Hunting Incident Summary

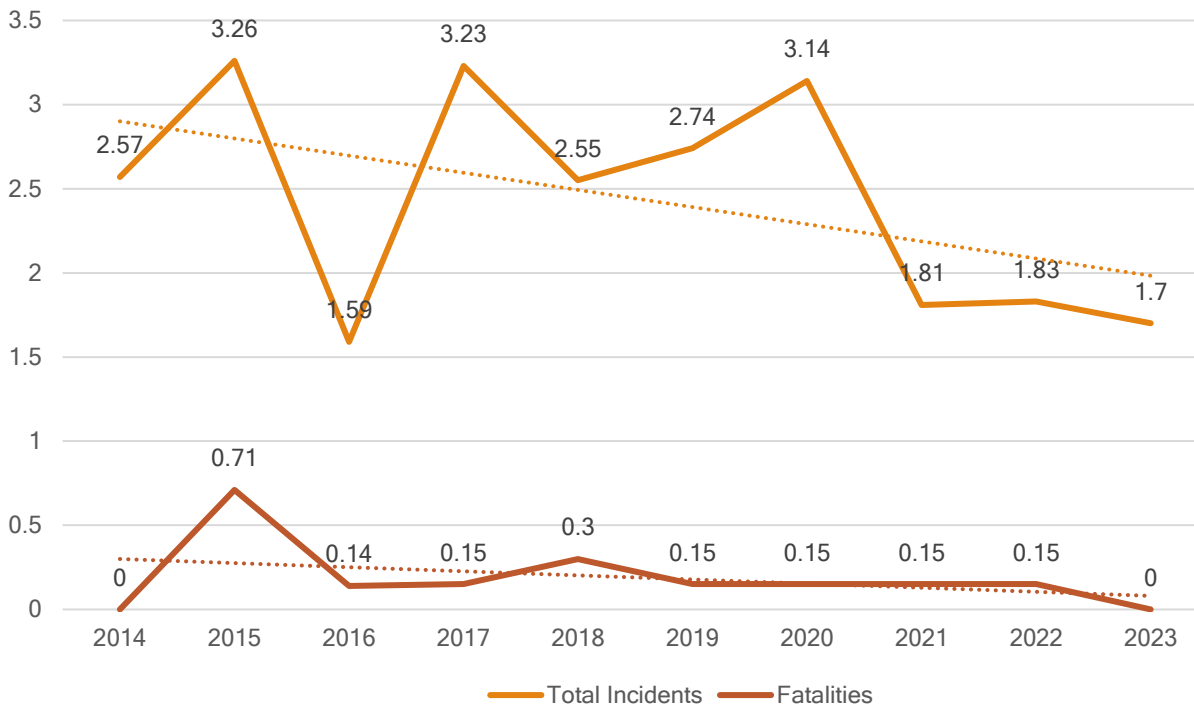
There were 11 non-fatal hunting incidents during the 2023 hunting season in Adams, Bayfield, Forest, Jefferson, Juneau, Kenosha, Oconto, Oneida, Racine, Taylor and Waukesha counties. Seven incidents occurred on public property, while four occurred on private property. Nearly half of the incidents (5 of 11) were self-inflicted. The average age of the shooter in all incidents was approximately 36 years old. Two of the shooters had not taken a hunter education course.

Five out of 11 incidents happened in the morning, one at noon, four in the afternoon and one in the evening.

Total Hunting Incidents for the past 10 years



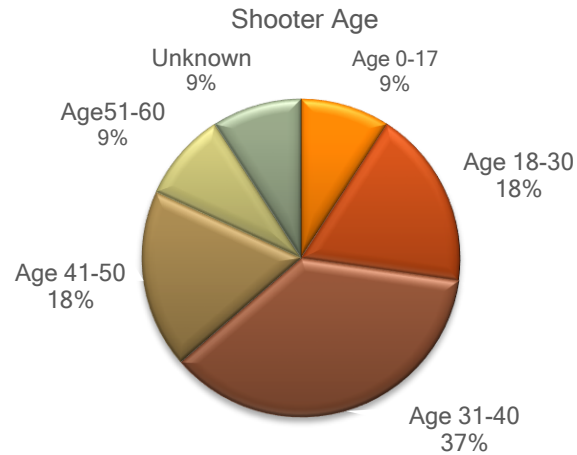
Total Incidents per 100,000 total hunters



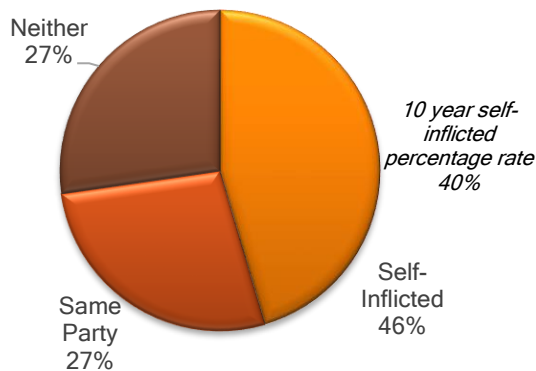
Shooter Age

In 2023, 9% of the shooters involved in hunting incidents were under 18. Adults caused 82%, and 9% were unknown (the incident is still under investigation).

On a 10-year average, juveniles account for 17% of the total number of incidents, while adults account for 83%.



Self-Inflicted vs. Same Party



Self-Inflicted vs. Same Party

In 2023, self-inflicted incidents decreased from 50% in 2022 to 46%. Four out of five self-inflicted incidents occurred with individuals who had hunter education safety certifications. Two out of 11 total incidents did not have certification, and one out of 11 remains under investigation.

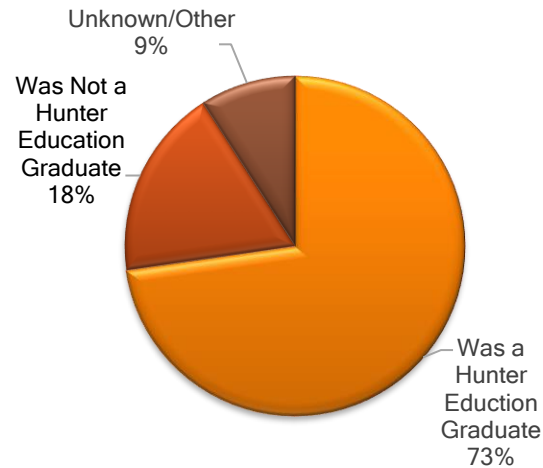
Three incidents in 2023 involved members of the same hunting party.

Note: "Neither" is when an incident is unknown, under investigation or unrelated parties.

Hunter Education Status

In 2023, 18% of the shooters involved in a hunting incident had yet to complete a hunter safety education course, and 73% were graduates of the hunter education program. The unknown is for incidents under investigation (attributing 9%). The average age of the shooter in all incidents in 2023 was 36.

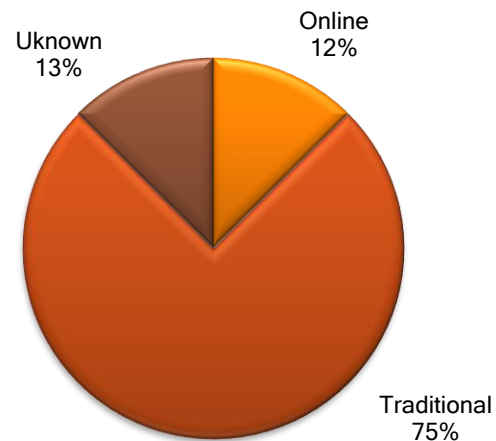
Hunter Education Status



Hunter Education Type

Of the 73% who were hunter education-certified, one was certified with the online-only option, while six were certified by traditional, hands-on courses. One was also certified out of state and, therefore, by an unknown method.

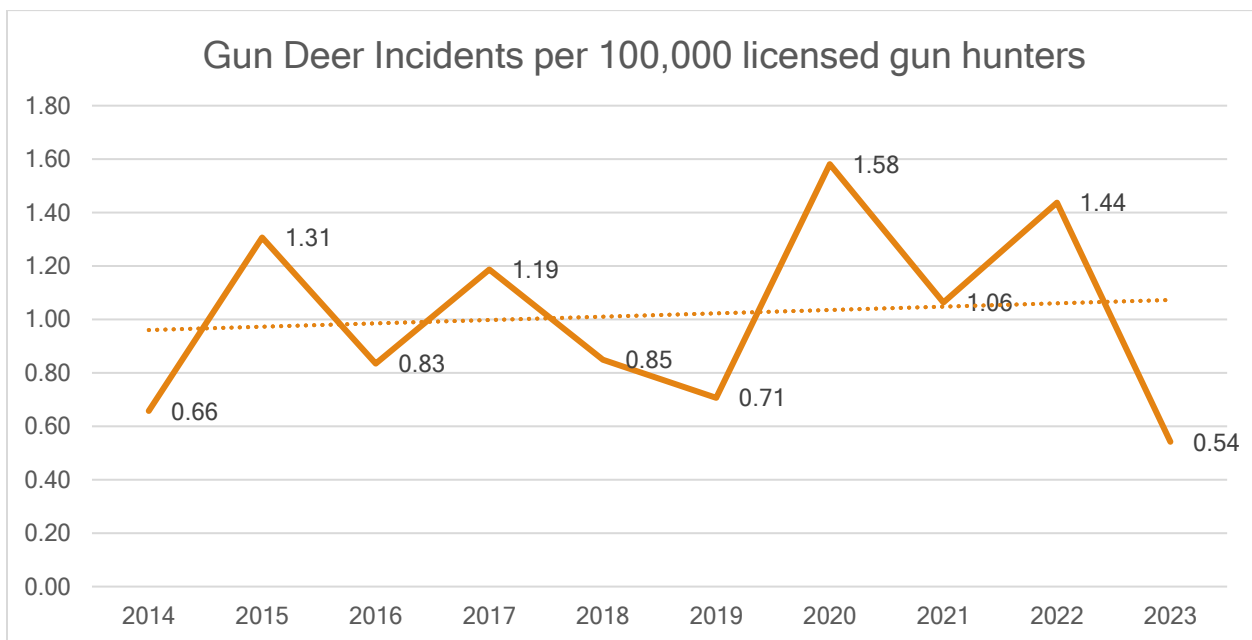
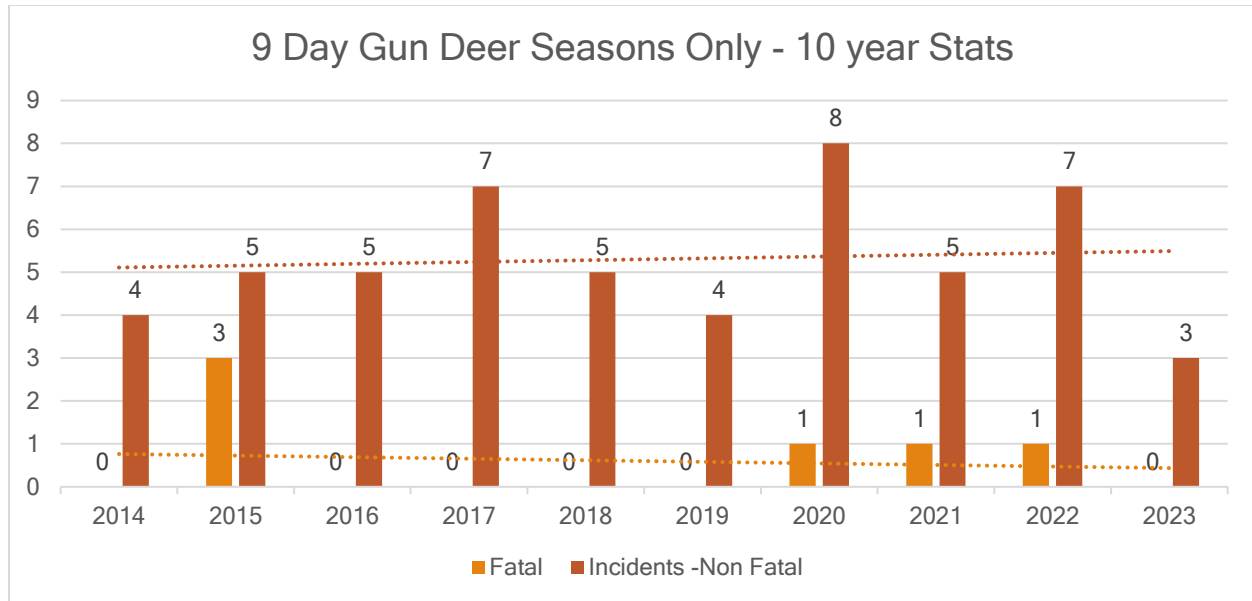
Hunter Education Type



2023 Deer Season Summary

Nearly 553,500 hunters headed into the woods, fields and marshes for the start of the nine-day gun-deer season. Conservation wardens investigated three non-fatal hunting incidents in Adams, Forest and Taylor counties. One incident occurred on public property, while two occurred on private property. A third of the incidents were self-inflicted. The average age of the shooter in all incidents was 50 years old. All shooters were graduates of hunter education courses.

Six of the last 10 gun-deer seasons have been fatality-free. The average rate of incidents in these previous 10 years has been approximately 5.9 per season, and the 2023 gun-deer season marked the lowest rate of incidents in nearly 40 years.

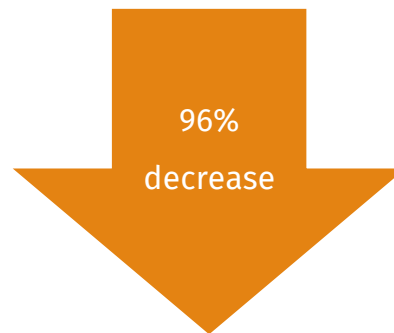


Decline In Hunting Incidents

In 1966, there were 264 hunting incidents. One year later, in 1967, Wisconsin's hunter education program was established. Since then, the annual hunting incidents have decreased by nearly 96% to 11 in 2023.

Wisconsin requires anyone born on or after Jan. 1, 1973, to successfully complete a hunter education course to purchase a hunting license, contributing to the continued decline in hunting incidents. We will continue to strive for zero hunting incidents in Wisconsin as we collaborate with volunteer instructors to provide high-quality courses. In addition, we will continue to explore efforts to analyze hunting incident trends and provide effective public safety messaging.

264 incidents in 1966



11 incidents in 2023

OUTDOOR SKILLS TRAINER MAP

Outdoor Skills Trainer Administrative Area Map

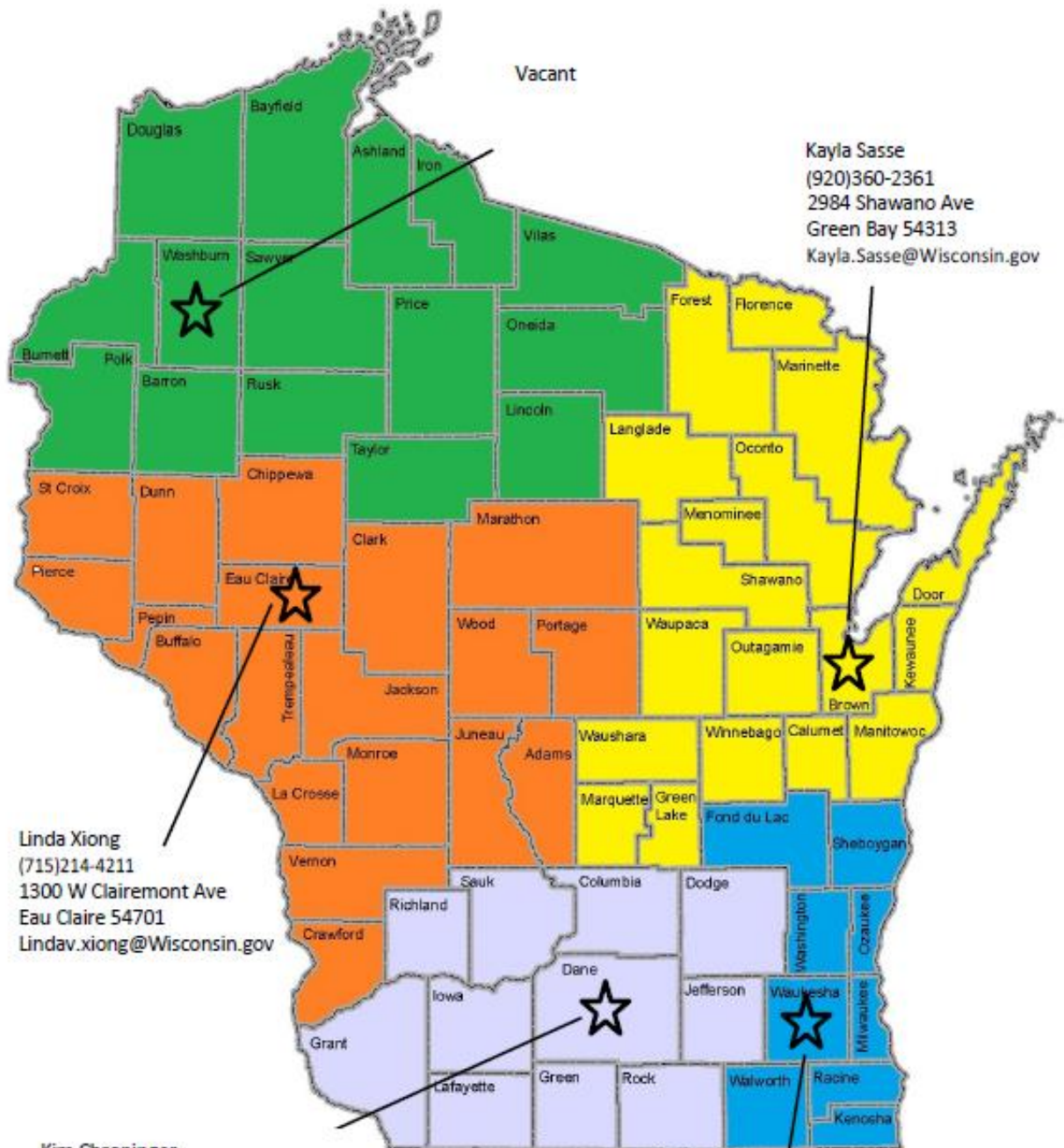
Recreational Safety & Outdoor Skills Bureau Director: April Dombrowski:

608-852-9456 R3 Team (OST) Supervisor: Bob Nack 608-617-3492

Boating Law Administrator: Darren Kuhn 920-615-6075

OHV Law Administrator: Jacob Holsclaw 715-491-0283

Hunter Education Administrator: Michael Weber: 715-299-4765



Kayla Sasse
(920)360-2361
2984 Shawano Ave
Green Bay 54313
Kayla.Sasse@Wisconsin.gov

Linda Xiong
(715)214-4211
1300 W Clairemont Ave
Eau Claire 54701
Lindav.xiong@Wisconsin.gov

Kim Chroninger
(608)575-3615
3911 Fish Hatchery Road
Fitchburg 53711
Kimberly.Chroninger@Wisconsin.gov

Spencer Jost
(262)933-0901
141 NW Barstow St
Waukesha 53188
Spencer.jost@wisconsin.gov