

## OUTDOORS

# **Wisconsin gun deer hunting season was the safest in history**



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The 2024 Wisconsin gun deer hunting season was the safest on record, according to preliminary data from the Department of Natural Resources.

Just one non-fatal shooting incident was documented in the nine-day season that ran Nov. 23 to Dec. 1, said Renee Thok, DNR hunter education administrator. The previous low was three non-fatal incidents in 2023.

"We're always striving for the safest possible seasons, so every improvement we can make is a point of pride for all of our hunters, hunter safety instructors, the warden staff and others who work so hard to prevent shooting incidents," Thok said.

The 2024 gun season's lone shooting injury was a two-party, non-fatal incident Nov. 29 in Vernon County. Additional details were not immediately available.

**More:** Hunting in Wisconsin is getting safer. Accidents still happen. Here's a database of incidents

Wisconsin has regulated deer hunting in some form since 1851, just three years after statehood. For much of that history it was not unusual for more than a dozen deer hunters to die from shooting injuries during the season.

In 1914, 24 hunters were killed and 26 injured in shooting incidents; about 155,000 people bought licenses that year, according to DNR records.

As recently as 1970, 13 hunters were killed in Wisconsin hunting seasons; 501,799 licenses were sold.

But the state's firearm hunting seasons have been getting safer for decades.

State officials and volunteers point to several factors, including the 1967 establishment of the Wisconsin hunter education program, a 1980 rule that required gun deer hunters to wear blaze orange clothing, and changes in hunter behaviors such as an increase in hunting from elevated stands and a decrease in deer drives.

The Wisconsin Hunter Education Instructors Association has about 4,000 volunteers who teach hunter safety classes each year in the state.

John Janik of New Berlin, WHEIA president, said in recent years he's seen more parents coming with their kids to classes and taking part in the learning.

"We encourage the whole family to come, certainly," Janik said. "We often hear a parent say, 'I learned something new' or 'I should rethink how I've been doing something.' We know it can help everybody be safer."

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In 1966, there were 264 hunting incidents across all hunting seasons, according to DNR data. The number declined 96% to 11 in 2023.

The gun deer season has historically accounted for most of the shooting incidents and fatalities but has grown markedly safer in recent years.

Six of the last 10 gun deer seasons have occurred without a shooting fatality. The average rate of shooting incidents was 5.9 over the last decade, according to the DNR.

This year is poised to set a new standard for safety in the nine-day gun deer hunting season.

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.

Thok said the DNR will continue to strive for zero hunting incidents in Wisconsin as the agency collaborates with volunteer instructors to provide high-quality courses.

The agency also will continue to analyze hunting incident trends and work to provide effective public safety messaging.

A final hunting incident report as well as preliminary deer harvest report is scheduled to be issued Tuesday morning by the DNR.