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Annual charity event draws hunters from across the nation

By **Lori Dann**

Montgomery Advertiser

Tony Pecorella had never visited Alabama, but the ad on the Buckmasters Web site immediately grabbed his attention.

For Pecorella, who lives in Queens, N.Y., deer hunting season ends in November. However, the ad offered him the chance to hunt at a Southern lodge in January, with all fees going directly to charity.

"I love the sport so much, it was an easy decision," Pecorella said. "I decided it was time to see the good ol' boys."

Two trips to Alabama later, Pecorella plans to make the Blue-Gray Charity Hunt an annual vacation. And for good reason.

In each of the first two hunts, Pecorella has come home with the biggest buck, including an 11-point, 220-pounder at this year's event.

"We've had a great time both years," he said. "The good is great, the hospitality is wonderful and we made a lot of new friends. The fact that all this goes to charity makes it even better. I'm already planning my trip next year, and I plan to bring some more people with me."

The hunt is the latest fundraising effort by the Montgomery Lions Club in an attempt to offset the losses of the Blue-Gray All-Star Classic football game, which has been canceled indefinitely due to the lack of a corporate sponsor.

Last year's inaugural hunt drew 43 participants. This year, the number swelled to 60, with 65 percent being returning hunters.

The goal is to more than double that total in the near future.

"We grew the event about 50 percent this year over last year and made \$43,000," said Lions Club member Kyle Kyser, the chairman of the event. "If we could draw 125 hunters, that would generate \$100,000 in net income going directly to charity. We really feel like this event has a lot of potential."

One of the best things about the fundraiser, Kyser said, is that the bulk of the money comes from outside Montgomery. Of this year's participants, only two were from Montgomery. Eight were from other parts of Alabama, and the remaining 50 were from outside the state.

Pecorella and his friend, Louis Neos, didn't even make the longest trip. There was one hunter from Canada, and others came from Michigan, Pennsylvania and Texas. Like Pecorella, many of them are looking to extend their hunting seasons, since most northern states don't permit hunting in January.

The Lions Club generated the outside interest primarily by advertising with Buckmasters. This year, for the first time, it also sold 10 hunts on ebay,

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"When you're doing charity work, a lot of times you have to ask the same people for money, so this is a way to generate some outside money," Kyser said. "Plus, a lot of these guys are coming into Alabama for the first time and staying in local hotels, so it's an economic boost as well."

The Blue-Gray Hunt is a three-day event held at the Crescent Lake Lodge, with a registration fee of \$750 per hunter, which includes four outings. Eighteen land owners offer full use of their property, and many also volunteer as guides.

Kyser calls them the "lifeblood" of the event.

Pecorella won't argue that.

"As thrilled as I was over my 11-pointer, the guides were even more excited for me," he said. "They were jumping up and down and giving us high-fives. We had such a good time, we're planning a fishing trip to the Florida Keys with them."

It's that kind of experience that Kyser hopes will keep hunters coming back year after year.

"Everyone I've talked to had a great time, and there were 45 deer killed, so that's a pretty good success rate," he said. "Hopefully, those people will come back next year and they'll bring more people with them. If they do, it will only continue to grow."



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