

Northwoods 'Cowboy War' Feared

Written by Wisconsin Examiner Republish
Thursday, 24 February 2022 11:40

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Conflicts between bear hunters and property owners in Northwoods lead to fears of 'cowboy war'

Sawyer County, WI - In the remote counties of Northern Wisconsin, where the closest law enforcement officer is often at least 30 minutes away, a conflict between property owners and bear hunters running hounds through the woods is reaching a boiling point.

The conflict, which has sprung up in counties including Sawyer, Burnett and Polk in the northwest corner of the state, pits hunters against hunters and scared residents who see the remote reaches of the state as a sanctuary. Adding to the frustration are the limitations of law enforcement tasked with patrolling such large areas, the political clout of the state's bear hunting lobby and the controversial practice of using hounds to hunt large predators such as wolves and bears.

"I got f--king hounds all over me," states a text message, obtained by the Wisconsin Examiner, from Sawyer County resident Steve Beining to a Department of Natural Resources warden in February of 2021.

For at least half a decade, Beining has been growing more and more troubled by the bear hunters in his area near the Town of Draper.

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Beining has had bear hunters on his property brandish loaded weapons at him. He and a family member have had gates on their property torn down so hunters could access their land with their hounds. Residents across the Northwoods regularly report caravans of bear hunters blocking public roads so their hounds can cross and harassing anyone who tries to get by.

Over the last year, Beining has spoken at local public safety meetings and statewide meetings on bear management to voice his concerns. He’s gathered a group of local residents to protest the bear hunters ignoring private property rules — and scaring off the deer they hunt on their own land.

What Beining sees is a bear hunting community with a culture that believes its members can act with impunity, knowing there won’t be any legal ramifications for breaking the rules.

I don’t want to get into a cowboy war here

– Steve Beining - Sawyer County resident

“We’ve gotten to the point where there are several bear hunting groups targeting private lands because the public lands aren’t as fertile ground to run their hounds these days,” he says. “They’re like, ‘You’re never going to stop us up here, we go where we want.’”

Beining says many of his neighbors are terrified of the bear hunters, afraid of retaliation if they speak out, and in Northern Wisconsin, where both the hunters and many of the property owners are armed, he’s worried a bad situation could escalate quickly.

“I don’t want to get into a cowboy war here,” he says.

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Elizabeth Klein, the clerk of the Town of Draper, has become a sounding board for residents worried about the bear hunters. She's not worried about bear hunters near her home because it's surrounded by public land where it's legal to hunt, but she understands it's become a big and intimidating problem for the people in her town.

"My dad had a beagle and hunted rabbits and people have duck dogs, I know people who use dogs for hunting, but when you're running large game in the woods with a pack of dogs, with highly sophisticated tracking collars, it's a lot more deliberate operation at that point," she says. "It's not as sporting as it used to be. There was a time when people hunted foxes on horseback, this is a different tradition. This is with trucks and a gang of people so it's sort of intimidating. They basically just shoot the animal when they have it cornered. That's not the same kind of hunting, it's not Elmer Fudd anymore, it's more like a militia type feeling. The people are feeling intimidated because there's different technology involved."



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And even though she isn't bothered by bear hunters occasionally crossing her property, she has had a run-in with the ugly side of the state's hunting culture.

In an email she wrote to Beining, a DNR warden and Sawyer County Sheriff Doug Mrotek, that was obtained by the Wisconsin Examiner, Klein said she once had four armed grouse hunters cross through her property and come right up to her house. After being told they weren't allowed on her property, they mocked her, tore down her posted private property sign and brandished their loaded weapons. Court records show a restraining order was granted in that case.

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Frequently, when Beining and others complain to law enforcement about hounds on their land, they're told that "dogs can't read." So how can they be expected to know when they're leaving a county, state or national forest and entering someone's property? But Klein says it's become much more deliberate than that.

"People know better, they're not supposed to trespass, everyone's land is posted," she says. "There's millions of acres of public land in every direction. Those are all public hunting lands, so to go to some guy's location in the center of a township and be hunting bears on his property is way out of line. It's deliberate, it's not, 'Oh, dogs can't read.'"

"They should know better," she adds.

Wisconsin's bear hunting [season](#) runs from September through October. In 2022, dogs will be allowed for bear hunts from Sept. 14 to Oct. 4. However, in the months before the season opens, hunters can train their dogs from July 1 to August 31 — another source of frustration for residents who say the sounds of the hounds baying at all hours of the night can be incredibly disruptive, especially during peak Northwoods tourism season.

The [DNR's Bear Management Plan](#) states that the black bear population goal is around 24,000 and early estimates show that about 3,800 bears were harvested during the 2021 season, according to the DNR. About a quarter of all harvests use dogs, department data shows.

When using hounds to hunt bears, hunters often park, release the dogs and sit in their trucks as they watch them chase a bear using GPS trackers, only leaving the truck once the bear has been cornered.

One Burnett County woman, who requested to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation from the bear hunters, says that once, as she drove by a group of bear hunters parked by the side of the road, one of them yelled that they'd send her home in a "pine box."

The same woman once called the police after a group of hunters blocked off the road near her home. For the next week, trucks slowly drove back and forth past her driveway. Another time,

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she says she hid in the woods behind her home after the hunters drove onto her property.

"I know that people are afraid," she says. "They would not think twice of doing physical harm to me if they thought they could get away with it. I fear rape, I fear getting beat up, I fear coming up and the windows are busted out of my house. I've put up beware of dog signs, video surveillance, all these things to dissuade them from taking retaliation against me or my property."



Dave Clausen is a retired veterinarian in Burnett County and a former chairman of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board. When he was on the NRB, he says the most frequent type of citizen complaint he got was about bear hunters and their dogs on private property.

"This may boil down to a property rights issue," he says. "If you look at the bundle of property rights, one is the right to exclude people from your property, that just is not happening."

He adds that after a career as a vet in the Northwoods, he's stitched up so many injured hounds he believes the bear hunt is an inhumane practice.

"During the bear training season and the hunting season, when I was taking my own emergencies, it was not uncommon to see one or two dogs a weekend that had been in a tussle with a bear," Clausen says. "Some of them were minor cuts and that type of thing, although a lot of the bear hunters carried suture material and they sewed their own dogs up. I've seen dogs

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with collapsed lungs, fractured ribs, massive abdominal hernias. There can be some pretty severe injuries.”

“My primary concern was to try to save the life of the dog and my job wasn’t to think about all of that part of it, it was to care for the animal,” he continues. “But as time went on I came to the conclusion that this was not a humane pursuit at all and basically it’s animal fighting.”

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In the middle of this fight are local law enforcement and DNR wardens, tasked with enforcing the laws and hunting rules over massive swaths of land. Local sheriffs struggle to mediate between hunters and residents.

“I don’t know what else we can do,” Mrotek, the Sawyer County sheriff, says. “But we are sure open to suggestions. Make no mistake, we in law enforcement here, surely understand where the people with this frustration level come into play here and we do feel bad for them and want to do everything we can to help them. Even though they may not believe that at times. Sometimes it’s difficult with the totality of circumstances to better accommodate or serve them.”

Often, according to Mrotek, when property owners make a report they don’t have any hard evidence of who was on their property, so not much can be done. And, in one of the state’s largest counties by area, a deputy on patrol can be miles away from the caller.

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"One of the biggest messages I've tried to disclose for us is we can't take action if we don't know who it is with proof," he says. "We've seen a lot of camcorder footage of a person, a vehicle, but no direct identification attaching that person or vehicle to the scene, which leaves us high and dry. We've seen a lot of video of dogs, but we don't know whose dogs these are."

Law enforcement is also aware of the risk that this fight could quickly escalate into a dangerous situation.

"What we recommend, we'll never recommend anyone to engage, that's the time to find 911," says Bryan Harrenstein, regional warden supervisor for 18 northern counties. "Having those conversations and educating folks on, 'Yes you're frustrated but this never turns out good if you try to take that action into your own hands.'"

But as time went on I came to the conclusion that this was not a humane pursuit at all and basically it's animal fighting.

– Dave Clausen - Retired veterinarian and former NRB chair

Adding to the problem is that DNR wardens aren't able to cite people for trespassing or violations of dog at-large rules, and overburdened district attorneys are unlikely to prosecute what they see as low level problems. Sawyer County, for example, has one of the most backlogged circuit courts in the state.

But aside from the real logistical problems with enforcing these laws, residents feel like sometimes law enforcement is looking the other way, or actively allowing the bear hunters to act with impunity.

Mrotek says that deputies treat these violations like traffic stops, using a lot of discretion for

whether or not to actually give a citation.

"We do like to give the benefit of the doubt when possible," he says.

But that's exactly the problem for people like Beining, who don't think the hunters deserve the benefit of the doubt anymore.

"The burden of proof seems to be on the victims lately," says Beining.

The problem has been simmering for so long that DNR officials are looking at ways to track reports of bear hunter conflicts and discussed the issue at the December meeting of the state bear advisory committee, according to Randy Johnson, the DNR's large carnivore specialist.

"We brought this up and everybody on the committee is concerned about this and basically we need better information on how widespread it is, how many are repeat individuals, that gets us to better address it," Johnson says. "Is it a need for change in regulations, more law enforcement, more education? Does the change need to come from within the bear hunting community, or is it a few bad apples? If that's the case, hopefully we can address those more precisely."

Harrenstein says that some of these problems probably need to be fixed at a higher level.

"We're merely the enforcement arm," he says. "We enforce the laws that are in place and understand if people want to change something or have an interest, they can propose rule changes through the spring conservation congress hearings or reach out to their local legislators. They want to see more presence, that's another thing to reach out to your local legislator and say we don't have enough wardens in our county. We are very much tied to legislative decisions. It's hard because we're trying to do the best with what we've got. You can't be everywhere at once. That's part of it. The rulemaking, lawmaking process, that's what they can do if they are frustrated with it."

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But in many parts of northern Wisconsin, local legislators are not likely to be interested in reining in the bear hunters, who are represented by a powerful lobby in the [Wisconsin Bear Hunters' Association](#) (WBHA). The WBHA declined a request for comment.

The [Wisconsin Democracy Campaign](#) found that between 2000 and 2017, the group had spent \$369,000 in individual contributions to mostly Republican state lawmakers.

"They have a good lobbyist and the bear hunters, in the last election, they gave \$65,000 in direct campaign contributions," Clausen, the Burnett County vet, says. "Their lobbyist has done a marvelous job of getting them onto committees and they do have an inordinate amount of influence, because they have worked very hard to get that. Everybody else was asleep while they put their mind to gaining a good amount of power. I don't particularly like the outcome of it but you have to admire their forethought and strategy they've put into getting where they are."

Over the last decade, a number of laws have been changed to loosen the rules for bear hunting. In 2016, Gov. Scott Walker signed a [law](#) that made it a crime to photograph hunters in the name of protecting them from [harassment](#) from conservation groups.

Harrenstein says this law wouldn't prevent property owners from filming hunters on their land. But there is confusion about the law, with Mrotek saying he's got to find a balance between the interests of both groups.

"If they're taking pictures or taking numbers down in a public place or property, that could be a fine line there and crossing the line on that end," Mrotek says. "It puts us in a tough spot both ways because the hound hunters are going to demand we cite them for harassing the hunters for hunting. How do you win that in law enforcement?"

In 2017, Walker signed a different [law](#) that repealed a requirement for hunting dogs to wear tags.

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Both of these bills were introduced by then-Rep. Adam Jarchow (R-Balsam Lake). The former Polk County legislator is now running to be the state attorney general. He's also a member of the WBHA.

The dog tag bill was co-authored by Sen. Rob Stafsholt (R-New Richmond) when he was in the Assembly. Stafsholt, chair of the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage, Small Business and Rural Issues, was formerly on the WBHA's board of directors.

It's not just Republicans either. Former Sen. Patty Schactner (D-Somerset) is also a member of the WBHA.

Wisconsin's rules for bear hunting are much more relaxed than other states with bear hunting seasons. In [Minnesota](#), for example, bear bait must be registered with its exact GPS coordinates and the bait itself must be marked with the hunter's name and address, driver's license number or hunting license number.

In Wisconsin, bear bait is anonymous.

The WBHA maintains a code of ethics for its members with 10 principles for being a responsible hunter: Respect private property. Follow state game laws. Exercise good sportsmanship. Acknowledge that public land, bear, state roads and lands belong to everyone. Be a positive spokesperson for bear hunting and other hunting sports. Consider others when driving and gathering along roads. Drive safely and courteously. Present a wholesome image and organize rigs to look respectable. Use discretion in harvesting and displaying bear. Always treat others as you would want to be treated.

But property owners who feel antagonized by the bear hunters say they believe these codes aren't being followed and the state's lax rules have allowed a culture of impunity to spread through the state's bear hunting traditions.

"I don't have the same civil rights as the bear hunters and they've coded that in Wisconsin state law," the Burnett County woman says.

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After years of frustration growing over the bear hunters, residents — who often moved to the area for the peace and quiet of the woods — say they’re fed up.

“When you live in a small peaceful woodland town like Draper, Loretta, Oxbo, most days of the year are pleasant and uneventful,” Klein, the Draper clerk, wrote in an email. “We are blessed to live here, away from what we see on the news — but we also gave up something to live here. We don’t have a lot of amenities, or services, and we have learned to be independent and fend for ourselves to survive here. When truckfuls of strangers roll into town, people notice. When those trucks have eight dog heads hanging out of makeshift wooden boxes, with tv antennas on the roof, and dripping buckets of bear bait, people notice. When those trucks are parked all up and down the roads where we live and drive every day, people notice. When those dogs are running through your lawn, garden, woods, barking to wake the dead, people notice. When it becomes evident that they are specifically hunting on your private property season after season and will not stop, people notice.”

“That is where we’re at here,” she continued. “Something has to change.”

by Henry Redman, [Wisconsin Examiner](#)
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