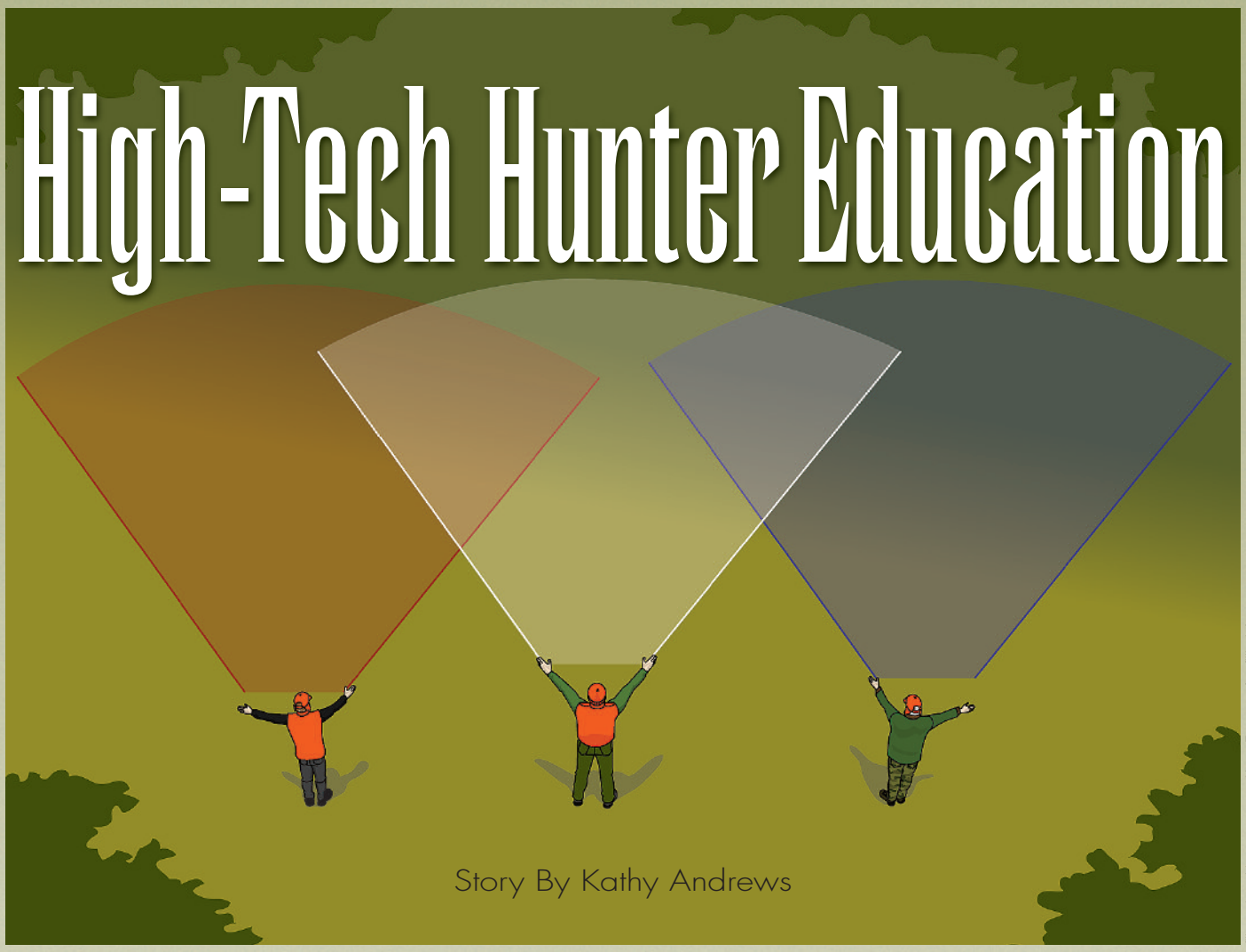
DNR reaches out with an alternative to the traditional two-day hunter safety education program.

High-Tech Hunter Education



Story By Kathy Andrews

(Illustrations this page courtesy HunterExam.com/usa/illinois.)

Color visuals enhance Illinois' new, online hunter education courses.

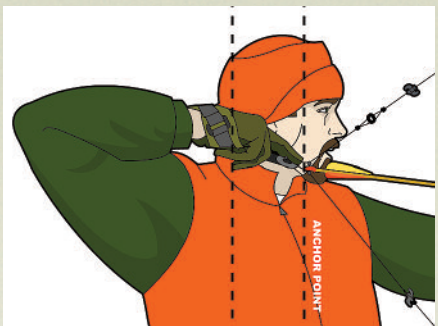
Times have changed.

In 1976, the United States celebrated the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. That year, Apple Computer Company was formed and the first commercially developed supercomputer, laser printer and VHS home video cassette recorder were introduced. Queen Elizabeth II sent her first royal e-mail. Not for another 6 years were hand-held mobile phones approved for the market.

And, it was on January 1, 1976, that the Illinois General Assembly mandated that anyone under 16 years of age (amended in 1996 requiring attendance if born after January 1, 1980) attend a Hunter Education program before being issued a hunting license.

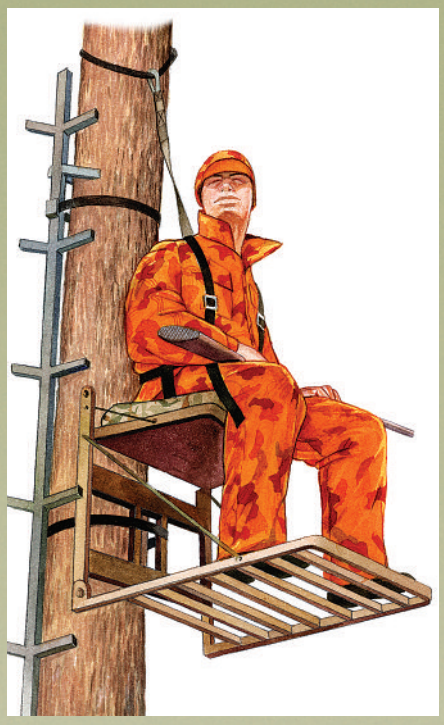
Over the past 33 years, nearly 409,000 people—youth as well as a fair number of adults interested in learning safe and responsible gun handling skills—have attended one of the 12,810 two-day hunter education programs conducted by volunteer instructors certified by the Department of Natural Resources.

"A lot has changed since the hunter education program was enacted," explained Director Marc Miller. "Today's youth have been exposed to incredible advances in technology and for that reason DNR has been investigating different avenues to present the hunter education program."



Now, rather than blocking off two days to earn their certification, students may opt to take the coursework section online using one of two new, interactive hunter education courses. To finalize their certification, students are required to attend a one-day Field Day.

"By completing the coursework online, students can work at their own



(Illustrations this page courtesy Hunter-Ed.com/illinois.)

pace, completing as much or as little in a single session as time allows," Jeff Hopkins, administrator of the Illinois safety education program, said. "The program allows you to log in and out as many times as you'd like, but once you begin to take the final exam you can't log out. If the student is willing to cover what normally is a lecture, more time can be devoted to hands-on instruction.

"We recognize families have chaotic schedules, and that learning styles can vary considerably," he continued. "By offering both the traditional, lecture-style course and the opportunity to learn the material online, parents and students may select the option that works best for them."

Hopkins sees additional benefits from the electronic course.

"Since you don't have to pay for the course until you are ready to submit the final exam, anyone can register and review the online content," he explained. "What a terrific opportunity this provides the seasoned hunter wanting to refresh their skills or learn about new programs and equipment, or hunters branching out and looking for information on specific skills, such as a squirrel hunter interested in turkey hunting."

Not only are the online education programs valuable for new hunters, experienced hunters gain valuable updates by reviewing the material.

Hopkins also believes that the one-day instructor-led Field Days will benefit the program by attracting additional volunteer instructors.

"We know that, in addition to different styles of learning, people have different teaching techniques," he said. "Field Days will be a great opportunity for those volunteers who don't like to teach in a classroom setting, but excel in a hands-on learning setting. And, as a bonus, teaching a Field Day requires only a one-day commitment."

Each Field Day will be content-based, and the number of hours will vary somewhat based on the number of students and the instructor teaching the course. Content will include many of the factors cited in DNR's annual hunting accident report, including tree-stand safety, safe handling of firearms, zones of fire, rules and regulations.

"Some other states have implemented an online hunter education program and the public has overwhelmingly supported the technological advancement," Hopkins concluded. "DNR implemented an online boating education program a couple of years ago, and if the trend toward online learning carries over to the hunter education program, we certainly will have a hit on our hands."

Case in point with the boating program: Most boating courses are conducted in the spring, and before implementation of the online course, those purchasing a personal watercraft in July were having a tough time meeting the letter of the law.

Times have changed.

Online hunter education

Two providers offer an International Hunter Education Association and Department of Natural Resources sanctioned online study program: Hunter-Ed.com and HunterExam.com.

The Department of Natural Resources has reciprocity with all 50 states and some Canadian provinces, meaning that students certified under either the traditional or the online course meet program requirements when traveling as a hunter.

The required learning format means students must work their way through the program, starting with chapter 1, page 1, and work their way through to the final exam. Only when students have completed and passed the final exam and paid the nominal fee to the provider will their Field Day vouchers be made available. These vouchers will have an expiration date, and must be presented for entrance to a DNR Field Day.

Note: At press time, the fall 2009 Field Days schedule was under development. Visit www.dnr.state.il.us/safety/hunt.htm for a schedule of traditional classes and Field Days.

For more information visit www.dnr.state.il.us/safety/hunt.htm, www.hunter-ed.com/illinois or www.hunterexam.com/usa/illinois.