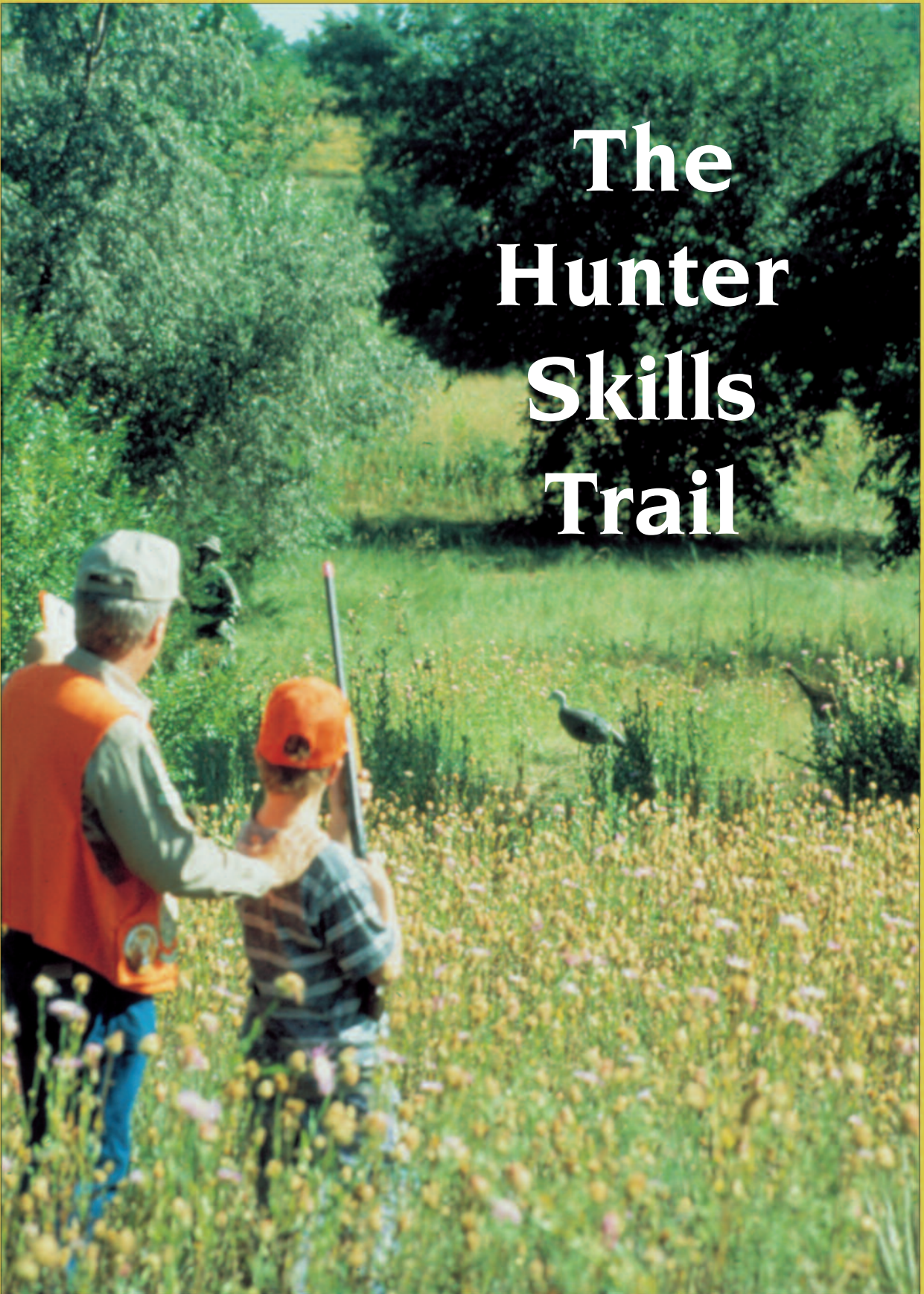


# The Hunter Skills Trail



# The Hunter Skills Trail

Tamara Trail, Larry Hysmith and Denise Harmel-Garza\*

Hunter education, especially hunting and firearms safety, is an important process. Hands-on teaching techniques usually are most effective. The hunter skills trail is hands-on hunter education for both adults and young people.

This publication describes the hunter skills trail experience and suggests ways to plan, equip, set up and conduct a hunter skills trail. However, it does not include all possible ideas and variations for developing such a program. The content and set up of the trail are limited only by the instructor's imagination.

## Objectives

The hunter skills trail may be the first “hunting trip” for beginning hunters. It gives novices a chance to practice muzzle control, loading and unloading guns, field carries, and other basic skills. The skills trail allows students of all abilities to experience a variety of hunting situations, not just ones with which they are familiar. The objective is to motivate students to make safe, legal, ethical decisions in actual hunting situations. Instructors may evaluate, encourage and correct student behavior instantly through effective field exercises and tests. These exercises let students practice what they have learned in the classroom. The hunter skills trail teaches students to think about their own actions and the actions of others.

## Methods

The hunter skills trail is a sequence of scenarios set up to simulate a real hunting experience. Individuals or small groups are directed through the trail and asked to react to these scenarios. The instructor evaluates students' reactions to the scenarios, either immediately or at the trail's end. In a small group, immediate discussion works best. When individuals are taken down the trail for testing or competition, discussion of the scenarios works best at the end of the trail.

Participants are often put in “shoot or don't shoot” situations. They must rely on their knowledge and skills to answer three questions: 1) Is the situation/shot safe? 2) Is the situation/shot legal? 3) Is the situation/shot responsible or ethical? Participants must respond to the scenario by “shooting” or declining to “shoot.”

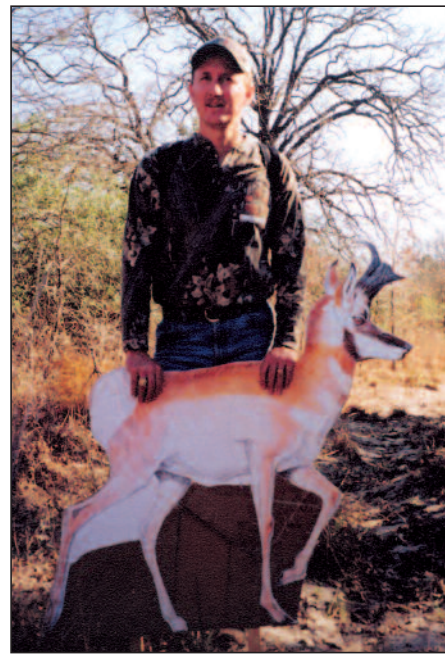
Other scenarios involve safe or responsible actions while in the field (e.g., tree stand safety, boat safety, obstacle crossing, littering, etc.). Examples of scenarios begin on page 5.

## Materials and Equipment

The items listed below are only suggestions. A successful hunter skills trail is constructed with creativity and imagination, so the lack of some items should not mean excluding a scenario. The materials needed will vary with the specific site, the needs of the students, and the instructor's objectives.

**Decoys:** Decoys can be actual hunting decoys or archery targets. Although decoys enhance the authenticity of a scenario, they are large, cumbersome and expensive. Some alternatives are life size paper targets glued to plywood or cardboard, or tacked to hay bales. An inexpensive set of life size targets can be ordered from the N. R. A. (see references). Cardboard targets also are available through retail stores. Soft decoys work well for turkey and dove scenarios.

**Firearms:** Operational firearms can be used, but only if no live ammunition is available. Guns can be simulated with broom handles, yard sticks, or stakes cut to gun length with muzzle ends painted orange. Guns also can be cut out of plywood or other materials. Inoperable firearms with the firing



\*Extension Associate-Conservation, Extension Associate-Conservation, and Extension Assistant, The Texas A&M University System.



pins removed and holes bored in the sides of the chambers are as effective as operational guns. Local gun dealers or others may donate old firearms and a gunsmith can remove the firing pins. Actual firearms, whether operational or dummy, provide a more authentic experience of firearm handling in the field. Participants should be instructed to assume they have the proper firearm for each scenario (i.e., shotgun, light rifle, large bore rifle) regardless of what they are carrying.

**Deer stand:** A stand can be simulated with a stepladder. If a real stand is used it is best not to set it at full height, but to leave it low for safety and control and to allow everyone to see and hear the discussion. Existing stands also can be used. Check them first (just as you should before hunting) for damage, weak points, wasps and other animals.

**Camouflage:** Camouflage clothing can be put on mannequins or hung on a clothes hanger in a tree. Camouflage pieces do not have to match. Large pieces of camouflage cloth can be used as demonstration blinds.

**Mannequins:** Retail stores often can provide old mannequins, but they may be bulky and heavy. Lightweight mannequins can be made with chicken wire or camouflage clothing stuffed with newspaper or hay. Clothes also can be hung in trees and brush. Using live “mannequins” can be very dramatic when they respond to the student hunters’ actions.

**Vehicle:** An actual vehicle can be used, or one can be simulated with chairs.

**Fence:** Take precautions if an existing fence is used, especially barbed wire. Using existing fence is discouraged when there is the possibility of damaging the fence or injuring a student. Create a fence crossing with two t-posts, stakes, existing trees, smooth wire, rope, or flagging tape. Even a broomstick across chairs works well.

**Dummy Ammunition:** Dummy ammunition looks and feels like live ammunition, but lacks powder and primer. It can be obtained from the state hunter education staff and possibly from hunter education area chiefs. This adds to the realism of firearm handling because students can choose the proper ammunition for the gun and practice handling and loading it properly.

**Hunter orange vests and caps:** These items are used to identify hunters and to illustrate laws and safety practices related to the use of hunter orange.

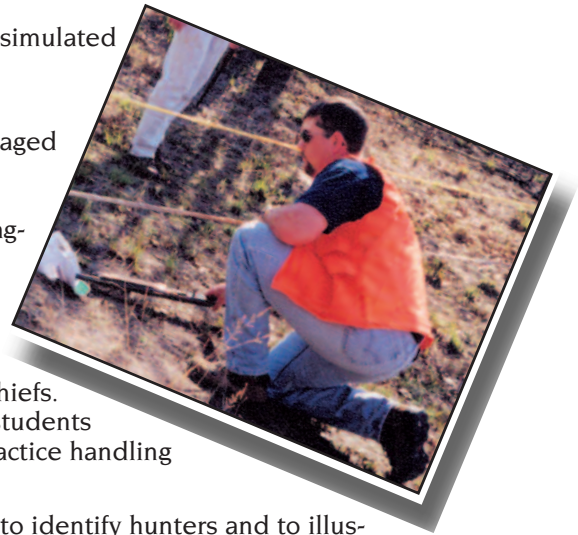
**“No Trespassing” and/or “No Hunting Without Permission” sign/Purple Paint**

**Wildlife identification materials:** Shed antlers, tanned hides, feathers from game birds, tracks and other materials can be used to teach wildlife identification.

**Clay pigeon thrower:** Use this to simulate flushing quail or dove.

**Binoculars:** These are part of a responsible hunter’s equipment. Use them instead of a rifle scope to identify game.

Asking local landowners and businesses to donate items is a great way to get them involved and keep them informed of local hunter education events. Do not be afraid to ask for help. Your excitement and enthusiasm are contagious.



## Procedures

### Site Selection

Site selection is a very important consideration when setting up a skills trail. Although a large pasture with plenty of wooded cover more closely resembles an actual hunting experience, a successful hunter skills trail can be set up in a vacant lot, city park, state park, on school grounds, and even in a parking lot. Students can be informed that certain man-made features (some buildings, vehicles, etc.) are not to be considered in the scenarios. Remember that creativity is essential for the success of this activity. Using natural features of the topography and vegetation adds to the experience. The site should be large enough so that each scenario is hidden from adjacent scenarios. This prevents confusion, retains the element of surprise, and maintains student attention on the current situation.

## Planning and Set-up

Planning is essential if each scenario on the skills trail is to effectively simulate a hunting situation. Remember, the student must decide if a scenario is safe, legal and ethical. Scenarios should be planned so that there are several possible choices related to laws, firearm safety, and ethical decisions. Ideas for scenarios and the set-up required for each are discussed in the next section. Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to set up properly and to rehearse each station. It is a good idea to walk through the site and identify possible areas for each scenario before setting up. This will ensure that the best use is made of the landscape (roads and fences, topography, natural draws, vegetation, etc.).

## Safety Precautions

Just as in a hunter education classroom, live ammunition is NOT allowed on the skills trail. Dummy ammunition is available to instructors through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Education Division (see resource section).

Review firearm safety before beginning the skills trail exercise. This is a perfect time to review the 10 Commandments of Shooting Safety (see resources).

Have a risk management plan. Keep a first aid kit, insect repellent, sun screen, and other helpful items on hand. Make sure water is available, especially on hot days, as well as restrooms and shaded areas.

## Foul Weather Options

If the weather is bad there are several ways to simulate hunting scenarios in the classroom.

**“Trigger films”** are videos that depict hunting situations and that solicit a “shoot or don’t shoot” response from the students. With these video simulations, each situation can be “debriefed” or evaluated just as on the actual skills trail.

**Indoor props and obstacles** can simulate outdoor experiences. Tie ropes between chairs or a frame to create a fence crossing. Practice field carries using chairs as obstacles, or tape the floor to indicate narrow areas on a game trail. Use a stepladder to represent a tree stand, and a harness and haul line to demonstrate stand safety. Camouflage/hunter orange demonstrations also can be just as effective indoors.

**A discussion of ethical dilemmas** is a valuable part of the training.

**Wildlife identification and habitats** can be taught using animal parts (skulls, hides, molds of tracks, etc.) and posters or photos for identification. Have the students view photos of different types of habitat and rank them for various game species (see resource section for 4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation).

**Playing** hunter education trivia is a good way to review what has been taught. Divide the students into teams and ask them questions about firearm safety, laws and regulations, wildlife conservation, etc.

## Evaluation

Students can be evaluated during discussions following each situation, by actually scoring their responses (see evaluation and scoring form in the resources section), or with a mixture of both. In a typical hunter education class, discussion is often best. In the hunter education home study testing procedure, the instructor keeps track of student responses to situations and also leads discussion. In competitions, such as the Youth Hunter Education Challenge (YHEC), each student is scored individually.

## Possible Scenarios

### Vehicle

Use a real or simulated vehicle to demonstrate storage of firearms and ammunition while traveling and safe removal of firearms. Have a variety of gun cases available and discuss their uses. Firearms can be put in the cab or bed of a truck or in the trunk or back seat of a car. This is a good time to discuss gun racks and traveling with unloaded rather than loaded guns. Use current hunting incident reports (see resources) to emphasize the need for vehicle safety. Demonstrate placing firearms in the vehicle both correctly and haphazardly to encourage discussion of correct procedures.

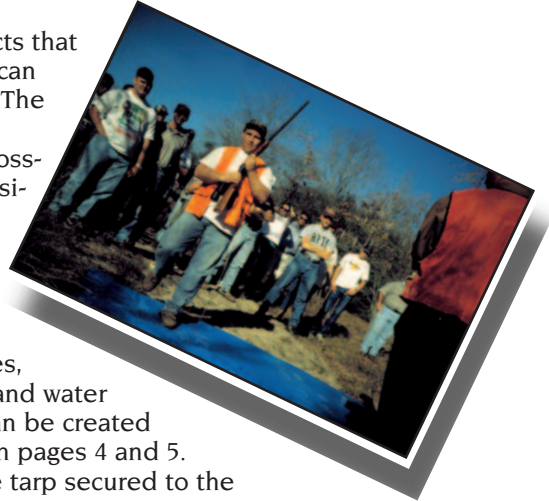
## Landowner Relations/Hunting Regulations

To set the stage, inform students that they have a lease with a landowner. Discuss the fact that the landowner may have restrictions, such as “does only” and hunting only in designated areas. Tell students to assume it is the proper season for any legal game animal encountered, such as dove, spring turkey or deer. This is a good time to discuss a hunter’s responsibility to landowners and the resource, and to emphasize the importance of following hunting laws and regulations.



### Obstacles

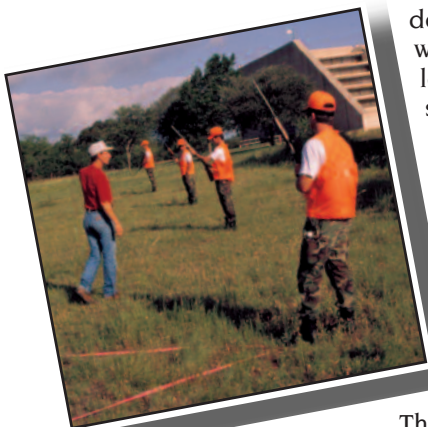
Obstacles are any objects that must be crossed and that can cause an unsafe situation. The general rule is to always unload a firearm before crossing an obstacle. When possible and necessary, unloaded firearms can be handed to hunting partners while one crosses an obstacle. Some examples of obstacles are fences, brush, logs, rocks, gullies and water (creeks, etc.). Obstacles can be created with props as described on pages 4 and 5. Simulate water with a blue tarp secured to the ground with rocks or stakes.



### Deer Stand

Using any type of stand or blind requires certain safety precautions. Entering and exiting stands should be done without the firearm or bow in hand. Instead, the firearm or bow should be unloaded or un-nocked and tied to a haul line to raise and lower it into or from an elevated stand. The stand itself, whether elevated or on the ground, should be checked for wear or deterioration and unwanted tenants (wasps, birds, raccoons, etc.) before the first hunt. Regular checks should be made during the season and repairs made if needed. The hunter’s field of view should be unobstructed to ensure a good shot. When multiple blinds are set up, various zones of fire must be considered. Tower blinds or tree stands should have safety harnesses or restraining straps to keep the hunter from falling. Always secure the opposite end of the safety harness above the head of the hunter. The

instructor can use existing stands for demonstrations. Portable tree stands work well and can be set up at the lowest level to lessen the risk of student injury. Set up a stand that has a few problems and ask students if they would use it. Discuss each problem and solution.



### Zones of Fire

Mark zones of fire with orange flagging tape or orange spray paint on the ground. A hidden clay target thrower can be used to test zones of fire, swinging on game, and reaction time. Setting this up requires special equipment and extra assistance. Clay targets can be thrown across the path a short distance in front of the hunters.

This brings up the opportunity to discuss communication between hunting partners, especially when they are out of each other’s sight.



## Narrow Trail

Use this scenario to force hunters to walk single file rather than side by side. Entering this area, they must think about muzzle control and the type of carry necessary to maintain control of a firearm. Use existing trails or simulate a narrow trail with wooden stakes and orange flagging or rope. In order to see how the students react, don't give prior explanation.



## Turkey and Camouflage



Before this scenario, tell the students it is spring turkey hunting season. They should then know that it is legal to shoot only toms. Set up turkey decoys in such a way that only one (a male) is a clear shot. Put another male in a group of hens to create a "don't shoot" situation. Behind the lone male that is in the clear, place a camouflaged "hunter," preferably backed to a large tree as a real turkey hunter would be. The camouflaged hunter could be a mannequin, a live person, or a set of camouflage clothing hung on the tree. Using a live person adds to the effectiveness of this scenario. Discuss wildlife identification, special hunting safety rules (e.g., hunting in full camouflage, special turkey hunting safety), what to do when another hunter approaches, specific hunting tactics and laws.

## Road Hunting

There are several ways to set up this scenario, but the idea is to place a decoy beside a "public" road (specified by the instructor) so that the shot is not legal, safe or ethical. You can place the decoy at a curve in a road and make the students think about people driving around a blind curve. This scenario also helps students think about what is in front of their target as well as behind their target.

## Unidentified Target

A white-tailed deer decoy (a "grazing" deer target works best) with its head in the brush challenges the student to think about laws and regulations as well as landowner management objectives. The instructor may inform the students that hunting is allowed for does only or bucks only. The purpose of this station is to make the students sure of their targets. Most students will recognize that the deer is a white-tailed deer, but will not know whether it is male or female. Both does and bucks may be legal in the county where they are hunting; however, if the landowner wants them to hunt only bucks, then the shot is no longer ethical because it may jeopardize good hunter-landowner relations. This emphasizes that proper identification of game is essential for making a safe, legal and ethical shot.

## Horizons

Place a decoy on a skyline or horizon. This shot is not safe, especially if the students do not know what is on the other side of the hill. If the light is fading, identifying the species and sex of the target also can be difficult.

## Water Safety

This scenario is for practicing getting into and out of a boat with firearms. The boat does not necessarily have to be in the water. A boat set on inflated inner tubes or old tires provides surprising realism. If the boat is in the water, make sure that it is stabilized at both ends so that it does not tip or capsize. A flat bottom or "john" boat in the water can be secured by tying off each end to give the students the true tipsy feeling of stepping in a boat while keeping the students and equipment safe. Safety equipment such as personal floatation devices should be used. Guns should be



unloaded and safe muzzle direction maintained. This is a good station for discussing drowning, hypothermia, and other safety courses such as boater education.

## In the Line of Fire

Place a target between parties of hunters to demonstrate the importance of not shooting at movement and of identifying what is in front of and behind your target. This situation reinforces the concept of “planning your hunt, and hunting your plan.” It also shows the importance of wearing hunter orange and keeping in touch with other hunters on your property or hunting lease.

## “No Trespassing”/“No Hunting” Sign/Purple Paint Markings

These signs and/or purple paint markings can be added to any scenario to challenge students to think about property boundaries and the responsibilities associated with hunting on private property, such as lease agreements, establishing contact with neighboring landowners, etc.



## Beyond the Target

This scenario stresses the importance of knowing what is beyond your target and the effectiveness of hunter orange in a situation where more than one hunter may be in an area. Place a large decoy about fifty yards from the point at which the hunters will come into view of the animal. Place a mannequin dressed in camouflage and hunter orange (vest and/or cap) in some brush beyond the target. If a mannequin is not available, simply place the clothing in the brush. This is also a good time for instructors to discuss what should be done if one is on the other side of the target as a hunter approaches and the hunter is unaware of your presence.

## Building/Vehicle Beyond Target

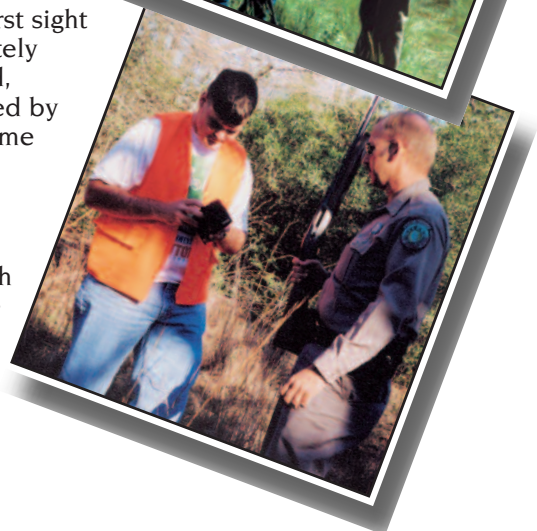
The point of this scenario is, again, proper identification of the target and knowing what is beyond the target. This may also be a good time to discuss firearm selection (i.e., shotgun vs. rifle), the hunter's image in the public eye, and the importance of ethical behavior.

## Game Warden/Conservation Officer

Make sure students know what to do if they encounter a game warden while hunting. Have the local game warden come out and “check” the hunters on the skills trail. At the first sight of a warden, a hunter should unload his/her firearm and politely greet the warden. The hunting license, hunter education card, photo identification, and applicable permits should be carried by the hunter at all times. These should be presented to the game warden in a polite and respectful way.

## Litter

Place a soft drink can or paper sack along the trail to teach students about our responsibility to be good stewards of the land, and to leave it in better shape than we found it. Landowners have a better view of hunters who do not leave trash behind. It is a good idea to pick up and remove any litter you find, even if it isn't yours.





## Good Shot

Set up a decoy (target) where students can get a good shot that is safe, legal and ethical. Again, have students correctly identify the target, judge the distance, and be sure of what is in front of and beyond the target. Having “good shots” interspersed throughout the course encourages participation and builds confidence.

## Vital Zones and Blood Trailing

After the student has made a good shot, use this scenario to talk about what happens after the shot. Vital zones can be discussed, as well as blood trailing and care of big game after harvest. To simulate blood, mix approximately 4 ounces of milk, 1/2 ounce glycerin, and 1/2 ounce red food coloring. Put it in a small bottle with a spout for laying out the blood trail (a transparent dishwashing detergent bottle works best). Adding less food coloring and shaking the mixture until it becomes frothy and pink can simulate lung blood. Have the students follow the “blood trail” to a “bedded down deer” under a tree or bush. Discuss tagging, field dressing and the three things that cause meat to spoil (heat, moisture and dirt). When following the simulated “blood” trail, stay off to the side so as not to disturb any of the sign.



Another method of making simulated blood is to use dry red tempera paint instead of red food coloring with the milk and glycerin mixture. The tempera remains suspended in the liquid and has some interesting properties that make it superior to food coloring. When it dries, it becomes flaky and slightly darker on leaves. The mixture reacts with moisture in a manner similar to blood.

The National Bowhunter Education Foundation also has a new, inexpensive product for making simulated blood. It makes 32 ounces and lasts approximately 1 year (see references).



## Doves in Tree

Dove decoys arranged in a tree can stimulate discussion. Is it legal to shoot them? Is it ethical? Student responses will vary. There is NO wrong answer. It is legal, and for some, ethical (e.g., a youngster's first hunt). Let the student decide, then honor the decision. It might make a difference in his or her future participation in hunting.

## Extensions

### Orienteering Course

Basic orienteering activities can be used in conjunction with the hunter skills trail. For example, students might locate bearings from one blind to another and back to camp; this is a simple triangle course. Keep these activities short and simple, but encourage practice for proficiency.



## Survival and First Aid

Techniques and principles of survival and first aid can be incorporated into the hunter skills trail at appropriate locations, and definitely should be included as part of planning the hunt. Topics might include building a shelter and solar still, using pressure points to stop bleeding, identifying poisonous plants, and dealing with wild animals.

## Hunting Regulations

This topic is a must in any hunter education course, and it can easily be covered on the hunter skills trail. If a game warden is a team member or a resource person for the skills trail, he or she could teach about regulations. Topics should include seasons, bag limits, proper tagging, hunting hours, legal methods, game retrieval, trespassing, and hunter orange.

## Wildlife Identification

Of course, each target encountered must be properly identified. However, students can be given more opportunities to learn wildlife identification if tracks (either natural or staged), skulls, skins, feathers, nests, roost trees, rubs, scrapes, droppings, etc. are used also. This also helps students learn the habits of animals.

## Habitat Management and Conservation

Use the skills trail site to discuss possible habitat management techniques. In some areas there may be recent burns or brush clearing, special food plantings, feeders, and other management practices in place. Use these to illustrate basic wildlife management techniques. Habitat evaluation techniques also could be used to help students determine whether the site would support wildlife, and if so, which types. Useful habitat evaluation techniques can be found in the 4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Project Manual (see resources).



## Resources

### N.R.A.

Life size game targets  
To order: 1-800-336-7402  
[www.nrahq.org/store](http://www.nrahq.org/store)  
(training materials)

### Texas Parks and Wildlife

4200 Smith School Road  
Austin Texas, 78744  
1-800-972-1112, option 6, 1  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us)

- dummy ammunition
- Youth Hunter Education Challenge (YHEC) information and contacts
- videos
- hunting incident reports
- other education resources and training materials

### 4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Manual

To order: Dr. Will Cohen  
Texas Agricultural Extension Service  
Rt. 2, Box 589  
Corpus Christi, Texas 78406  
(512) 265-9203

### National Bowhunter Education Foundation

Blood trail powder  
To order:  
101 1/2 N. Front St.  
Townsend, Montana, 59644  
(406) 266-3237 or 266-3238  
FAX (406) 266-3239

# Hunter Skills Trail

## Student Evaluation and Scoring Form

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Score: \_\_\_\_\_

**SKILL** **1 = least competent/5 = most competent**

Muzzle control	1	2	3	4	5
Firearm carry positions	1	2	3	4	5
Shooting positions	1	2	3	4	5
Unloaded firearm passing or receiving	1	2	3	4	5
Distance judging	1	2	3	4	5
Shoot/don't shoot decision & reaction time	1	2	3	4	5
Crossing obstacles	1	2	3	4	5

**KNOWLEDGE**

Zone-of-fire	1	2	3	4	5
Enter/exit					
vehicle	1	2	3	4	5
stand/blind	1	2	3	4	5
boat	1	2	3	4	5
Horizon/beyond target	1	2	3	4	5
In line-of-fire	1	2	3	4	5
Swinging on game	1	2	3	4	5
Proper identification of target	1	2	3	4	5
Regulations	1	2	3	4	5

**ATTITUDE**

Shooter participation/cooperation	1	2	3	4	5
Conduct as an observer	1	2	3	4	5
Ethics/conservation	1	2	3	4	5
Landowner/game warden relations	1	2	3	4	5





Funding for this publication was provided by the  
Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration program through  
Texas Parks and Wildlife.

A special thanks for assistance and cooperation with this publication to Steve Hall, TPW Education Director; Terry Erwin, TPW Hunter Education Coordinator; Scotty Oliver, TPW Range Coordinator; and John Dea, Hunter Education Area Chief Instructor, Lubbock.

Produced by Texas A&M AgriLife Communications  
Extension publications can be found on the Web at [AgriLifeBookstore.org](http://AgriLifeBookstore.org)  
Visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at [AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu](http://AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu)

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin.

---

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System.