

TURKEY COUNTRY

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LEEK Bear Hunt honors wounded veterans

Veteran Raymond Kusch picks out a prosthetic leg and an accompanying foot like a woman might choose shoes depending on her activity and function. He has nearly a dozen to choose from, but this time, he's selected one suitable for a bear hunt.

We're up in the mountains of Potter County, Pennsylvania — God's country, to the folks at LEEK Hunting and Mountain Preserve. This nonprofit organization orchestrates hunts for America's wounded veterans.

Kusch had never hunted until his wife decided to help her husband out of his slump. They applied for as many outdoor adventure programs they could find. He has been deep-

sea fishing in Cancun, whitewater rafting in Idaho, turkey hunting in Kansas and now bear hunting in Pennsylvania. "Anything to take me away from the hospital, but especially being out here in nature," Kusch said.

"These trips are good for taking me out of my comfort zone. They force me to be independent. No one should live in a hospital. It's depressing," he said.

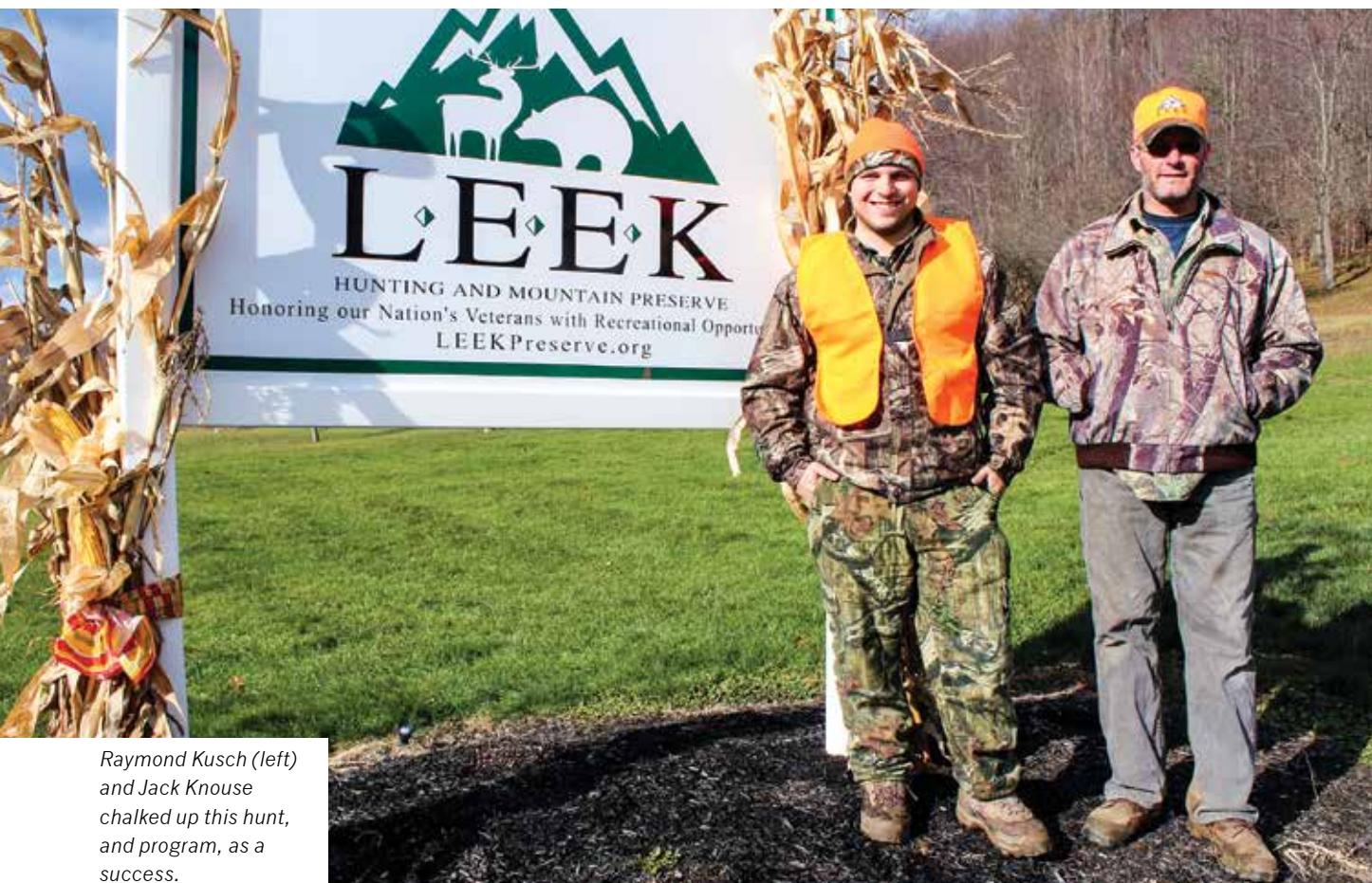
A sniper in Afghanistan, Kusch stepped on an improvised explosive device and was thrown 10 feet in the air by the explosion and landed 15 feet away.

"It's a little uncomfortable at first, arriving at LEEK from Walter Reed and not knowing

anyone," he said. "I was an extroverted person before I blew up."

It's difficult to tell that he is missing a leg. The morning of the hunt, he demonstrated how the socket of his prosthesis has a seal-in liner and pushes out the air to create a tight seal. Inside his hunting boot is a rubber shell around a carbon-fiber foot.

On this morning, we sat together at a stand and waited for the LEEK volunteers to walk through the thick clear cuts, trying to drive out a bear. I had his back, standing behind his tree, watching the opposite direction for him. We talked some, but mostly we shared the experiences of the morning.



Raymond Kusch (left) and Jack Knouse chalked up this hunt, and program, as a success.



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—Raymond Kusch

After six hours, multiple drives and still no bear, Kusch relaxed and moved around talking freely to me. He shared his disappointment with what is happening in Iraq, worries for the village people who became his friends and his desire to go back and help them. He apologized for his “tirade,” but we were there to help and listen.

I asked if sitting with a gun and hunting brings on flashbacks from Afghanistan. “No,” he said. “I like being in the woods.”

“Some days, I am stuck in my chair,” Kusch said. “Using a prosthesis is very hard on your body. In the future, I will be confined in the chair. But for now, I can get around. I want to stay out of it for as long as I can. Being in the woods, with a gun in my hands, I feel like I’m not broken anymore.”

All of LEEK’s accommodations are designed for people with impairments like Kusch’s. For soldiers who aren’t as mobile as Ray, LEEK has track chairs available to

transport them over fallen tree limbs, across rocks, through wet areas, up and down the steep slopes and right into the carpeted blinds, where they have high odds of shooting an animal. They also shuttle soldiers and volunteers using Kawasaki Mules and Yamaha Rhinos.

The range-house has wide, open windows that face a variety of targets from 25 to 800 yards. Hunting participants can practice here and get used to their guns.

There is a wide array of boots, coats, long underwear, socks and orange hats to select from at the lodge. Guns are also provided. Ammo and licenses are courtesy of the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and volunteers cook the meals.

“We don’t want the warriors to worry about anything,” said Ed Fisher, a retired Army colonel. He and his wife, Kate, along with many volunteers, created LEEK seven years ago to provide injured servicemen and servicewomen a way to enjoy therapeutic outdoor activities.

Hunts include: bear, black-powder deer, spring gobblers and pheasants. LEEK is licensed to raise the pheasants, and volunteers bring their hunting dogs to help with the hunts. The harvest gets divided and all participants go home with meat.

The facility grew from 256 acres to having 31,000 acres at their disposal. Seventy stands and blinds pepper the acreage. There also is a well-stocked pond for fishing.

LEEK knows the life of an outpatient veteran is hectic and full of meetings, appointments, therapies, operations, etc. They come to hunt with LEEK for a much needed break.

These men and women can rise before dawn and get in position for a hunt or decide to sleep in, fish and relax. Once the veteran kills an animal, volunteers busy themselves by cleaning and packaging the meat.

“It’s their hunt. It’s whatever they want to do,” said volunteer Jack Knouse. Three years ago, he was in Kusch’s position: He was recuperating from a war-related injury. Jack is in the National Guard, but you can usually find him giving back during a LEEK hunt.

Learn more at www.leekpreserve.org.
—Cindy Ross