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Heartland Wildlife Ranches help fulfill disabled youngsters' dreams

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By BILL WEHRLE/C-T Outdoor Editor

This area's nationally recognized premier hunting preserve, Heartland Wildlife Ranches near Ethel (northeast of Marceline), Mo., was the setting this fall for big game (elk) hunts fulfilling the fondest dreams of three youngsters suffering life-threatening impairments. These Outdoor Adventure Camp hunts were funded by the Tony Semple Foundation for Hope, a fairly new non-profit organization financed by some of the biggest names in the outdoor world plus the National Football League and Detroit Lions where pro-footballer Tony Semple enjoyed a distinguished career.

There are several national organizations that exist to fulfill severely impaired or terminally ill youngsters' wishes, but the Tony Semple Foundation is uniquely different because it doesn't shy away from providing outdoor experiences including hunting with an emphasis on the "whole" experience. Candidates selected are provided with everything they and their families need to fulfill their dream, including transportation, lodging, guide services, animal harvesting fees, meals, clothing, video and photographic services, expedited taxidermy, commemorative plaques and standby medical services. The Tony Semple Foundation for Hope is dedicated to providing these youngsters with a first-class outdoor experience.

Corporate partners for the Tony Semple Foundation include Bass Pro Shops, MothWing Camo Technologies, the National Football League, the Detroit Lions, Leupold Optics, Thompson Center Firearms and Trail-Flex backpack systems, just to name a few. PB Adaptive Sports Equipment provides the equipment necessary to all youngsters to harvest animals with firearms from the confines of their wheelchairs.

One of the 2007 Outdoor Adventure Camps provided three youngsters with a five day dream hunt at Heartland Wildlife Ranches, where they were able to harvest trophy elk despite their severe impairments. Candidates selected for this Outdoor Adventure were Zachary Watson, age 14 from Georgia, who suffers from spina bifida; Eric Corey, age 21 from Illinois, who is terminally ill with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease); and Justin Shirley, age 13 from Texas, who has cerebral palsy. All three are confined to wheelchairs, but were able to participate in their dream hunt with the help of Heartland's experienced crew. . . .

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