

Aiming to please area shooters: St. Joe Valley Conservation Club caters to trap- and skeet-shooting, and will host nationally known competition this weekend

By Bruce Lehman

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Pickles may rule in St. Joe, but clay pigeons are not far behind.

Most area folks know St. Joe is a cucumber throw away from Sechler's Pickles, a national brand with vines all the way back to 1914. What's been more of a secret — even with all the shotguns going off — is the nationally and internationally recognized St. Joe Valley Conservation Club.

The club, located about 20 miles northeast of Fort Wayne, has invested in creating a stage worthy of professional events and yet welcoming to any shooter. Pros and novices alike find certified instructors from the Amateur Trapshooting Association, National Skeet Shooting Association and the National Rifle Association. There are 10 skeet fields, nine trap fields and the five-stand field, all fully lighted, and a renovated and expanded clubhouse on the way.

The club and its facilities will be on display during **the Kolar Mid-America Skeet Shoot** this Thursday through Sunday. This will be the ninth straight year St. Joe has hosted the Kolar event, one of the top competitions nationally for skeet shooters. It is sponsored by **Kolar Arms** of Racine, Wis., a world leader in manufacture of competition shotguns.

Diverse, growing membership

Based mostly on recollections and a few documents still around, club history can be traced back to 1924. Shooters would gather at the field and use a hand-cocked thrower to launch clay targets, or pigeons. There were a lot of years of ebb and flow, but the club kept plugging along and can now claim worldwide prominence in the sport of clay target shooting.

“Our current membership is close to 400 men, women and youth, from ages 11 to 92,” said Jeff Blue, the club president. “Some join as families, and the fastest-growing segment is women. We have a diverse membership and are welcoming to anyone who is interested in learning and improving their skills.”

According to Blue, “We've become known as one of the premier trap- and skeet-shooting facilities in the U.S.” He said the club is member-based but open to the public for trap, skeet and five stand.

Trap-shooting primer

For the unfamiliar, in trap shooting you fire your weapon from 16 yards behind where the targets are launched. You do not know exactly what angle the target will fly, so your job is to see the target, catch up with it visually

MORE INFORMATION

Top shots

What: Kolar Mid-America Skeet Shoot competition will feature some of the top professionals in the sport.

When: Beginning at 9 a.m. daily Thursday-Sunday

Where: St. Joe Valley Conservation Club, 5871 DeKalb County Road 60 near St. Joe

Cost: Free. For details, go to www.stjoevalleytrapandskeet.com or call 337-1011.

and shoot it out of the sky, usually about 40 yards from the shooter.

Skeet is a game of speed and leads. All targets are shot at 10 to 20 yards from the shooter. The field has eight stations in a semicircle. The throwers are calibrated so targets fly through an imaginary 3-foot-diameter hoop in the center of the field about 10 feet in the air.

Five stand features a wide variety of targets with five “stands,” or stations, to shoot from. Six to eight traps throw targets, and participants take turns at each of the five stands.

Blue, president of the club since January 2010, shoots sporting clays. While St. Joe does not offer a course for that, Blue said, “Sporting clays is set up like a field course. You walk through the woods to different stations, much like a hunting situation. At each one, you shoot several times, and the targets come from different directions at every station.”

Volunteers drive events

The club's dedicated trap enthusiasts include Robert Reynolds, a retired East Allen County Schools teacher. He said the club has hosted numerous trap events, including the Amateur Trapshooting Association (ATA) Central Zone Shoot in 2008 and 2010.

Reynolds has been shooting traps “since around 1968” and was the singles champion at the 1998 Indiana State Trapshooting Championships, hitting a perfect 200 of 200. He is also one of nine club board members.

Other than a few local youth paid to pull and score for trap and five stand, every aspect of the club, from maintaining the site to running concessions and holding events, is handled by volunteers, said several members. The Kolar event is a major beneficiary of this group effort.

“The projection for 2011 is 200 shooters,” said Jim Roussel, a nationally recognized, world-class shooter and St. Joe member credited with the growth of the event. “Interest has been high, and it looks like we'll max out at that number,” Roussel said.

At least 23 states will be represented as well as England, Canada and Australia.

Learn more

Roussel said there will be opportunities to find out more about the club, general information on clay target shooting and a raffle featuring a \$16,000 Kolar custom shotgun.

The raffle is a fundraiser for the club, which is working toward completion of the Aiming Higher Campaign to do needed repairs and complete its clubhouse expansion. The expanded clubhouse will further club growth, including continued development of leagues and programs for men, women and youth, along with competitions at all ability levels.

Blue said that in addition to year-round leagues, the club offers programs on safety, shooting instruction and is dedicated to promoting youth participation for the future of the shooting sports.

“One program is the Amateur Trapshooting Association's AIM (Academics, Integrity and Marksmanship),” he said. “The purpose of the program is to provide a safe and positive experience with firearms through registered trapshooting programs for youth, elementary school up to college-age. AIM even requires participants to maintain satisfactory academic levels and conduct themselves in a safe and respectful manner at all times.”

The club's AIM coaches, the husband-and-wife team of Rob and Tina Wolfe, are both NRA and ATA certified. They have been competitively shooting for more than 10 years and have coached for six years.

This year, the club also received a charter for its own Boy Scout troop, lead by member Jim Thomas. The club will host the Northeast Indiana Boy Scout shoot again this fall, as well as Indiana Department of Natural Resources' youth education classes and the annual 4-H shooting program