



# Hunter Information & Training Program News

Fall 2025

## Coordinator's Corner-Ginamaria Smith

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Fall is a busy time of year for the HIT Program, not only with certification classes, but we also hold instructor meetings and instructor trainings. We certified 40 new hunter ed and bowhunter ed instructors with trainings held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau!

Our new Statewide Hunter Education Coordinator, Ben Matthews has started taking on some of his new duties, and we expect him to move fully over in January once the new RCSP Range Manager is hired. Here is an introduction from Ben:

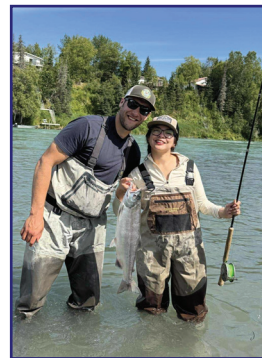


*My name is Ben Matthews and I am very excited to introduce myself as the new Statewide Hunter Ed Coordinator. I joined ADF&G in 2019 as a range tech and then became the manager of Rabbit Creek Shooting Park in August 2021. During my time at RCSP I've become a Chief RSO, Hunter Ed Instructor, Muzzleloader Instructor, Crossbow Instructor, and a Youth Shotgun Coach.*

*I was born in Chugiak, AK and introduced to an outdoor lifestyle at a young age. Some of my earliest memories were camping and fishing on the Kenai River for our annual sockeye run. After high school I left for British Columbia to pursue a hockey dream and live in a Province I had heard so many great things about. At the end of my time in Canada I came back to Anchorage to attend UAA where I earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice with a minor in environmental studies.*

*In my last years of college, I was fortunate to work at a remote fishing lodge as a guide on the Yentna River. It was a tremendous experience that lasted 5 summers and fueled my passion to educate and help people enjoy the outdoors. At this point in my life, I decided I wanted to hunt big game and haven't looked back since. Each fall I try to spend as much time as I can in the backcountry chasing sheep, goats, moose, caribou, and enjoying the experiences along the way.*

*When I am not out hiking, hunting, or fishing I can be found at the local hockey rink or spending time with my fiancé Ana. I am honored to join the HIT team, and I look forward to teaching the next generation of hunters in Alaska!*



### DID YOU KNOW?

We purchased new dummy ammo sets through IHEA-USA for the non-functional firearms sets and are excited to hear what instructors think about them!

As we approach the holidays and 2026, the HIT Program Staff wishes you and your family a wonderful, healthy holiday season and a happy new year!~Gina



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## Sealaska's Cultural Heritage Institute Hunter Education Course

Mike Kelly, Southeast Coordinator



On an unusually sunny weekend in September, nine energetic, young men from communities across Southeast Alaska joined together at the Juneau Hunter Education Shooting Complex for a Hunter Education course in partnership with Sealaska's Cultural Heritage Institute (SHI). In May of 2025 SHI began a new program called the Culture Warriors Program (formerly the Uncles Program):

*As part of SHI's Haa Kusteeyi Initiative—Our Way of Life—the Uncles Program pairs Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian young men (ages 16–22) with Alaska Native mentors in seven Southeast communities: Haines/Klukwan, Juneau, Angoon, Sitka, Kake, Hoonah, and Hydaburg. Through hands-on harvesting practices and formal instruction, Nephews will reconnect with their traditional roles as providers, protectors, and leaders in their communities.*

The HIT Program had the privilege of providing a lengthened Hunter Education course that took place over two days. The course, primarily presented and led by Instructor James White, included an expanded discussion of traditional hunting practices, subsistence, and careers in the outdoors with a guest presentation by Alaska Wildlife Trooper Shaun Kuzakin.

Longtime Juneau Instructors Bruce Bowler and Brock Meredith were also on hand to assist with hands on training such as firearms handling, the field course, and the shooting proficiency.



The course was presented as part of a weekend gathering in Juneau during which the students also learned and participated in skills and traditional practices such as navigation training and fish smoking at SHI.

The opportunity to live a way of life deeply rooted in the Southeast Alaskan landscape and its resources is an important part of what keeps so many of us here. The Culture Warrior Program provided an incredible opportunity to work with and learn from the traditions that pioneered that way of life as we continue to chase black-tailed deer through foggy muskegs and old growth forests.

For more information about the program please visit: <https://sealaskaheritage.org/shi-launches-program-promoting-traditional-education-for-young-men/>



## Welcome to New Steering Group Members

First, I'd like to thank Regg Simon of Palmer, John Western of Anchorage, and Ted Sandhofer of Petersburg for playing an instrumental role on the HIT Program Steering Group for the past two years. They gave great feedback on a variety of certification course topics, helped review "Hunt Alaska", and represented the instructors in their regions well. The years of teaching experience, expertise, and enthusiasm they brought to the Steering Group greatly assisted the HIT Program in ensuring well thought out course offerings.

The HIT Program's Steering Group has proven to be a great advisory resource in advancing HIT Program goals and objectives. Please join us in welcoming the newest members who will serve a two-year term.

**IHEA Instructor Resource Site**  
<https://www.ihea-usa.org/>

**HIT Program Site**  
[www.huntereducation.alaska.gov](http://www.huntereducation.alaska.gov)





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## **Jason Amaro (Eagle River)**



Jason is a long-time New Mexico instructor who moved to Alaska recently. He is currently a member of the Instructor Advisory Committee for the IHEA-USA and is a former Instructor of the Year for

New Mexico. Outdoor Education, and in particular Hunter Education, is a calling in his life, and he believes that it is a responsibility of all those who live the outdoors lifestyle to promote safe, law-abiding, and ethical outdoor behavior. He believes that earning a Hunter Education Certificate is a rite of passage, and successful hunters should share their harvest with others, especially elders and mentors.

Understanding that his position on the Steering Group is to help facilitate the optimization and improvement of how we deliver the agreed up HE standards, he always has an open door and space in his email inbox for your suggestions and ideas.

## **Tom Kowalske (Petersburg)**

I am an outdoor enthusiast and have spent my entire life being amazed at the countless wonders that I have experienced through the years. It all started when I was about six years old, and my grandfather took me deep-sea fishing for the first time. Later that year, he took me deer hunting. Since then, I have spent most of my life either on the water or in the woods. Until moving to Alaska, I lived in a coastal community on the lower Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. I spent most of my youth as a commercial fisherman, then earned a bachelor's degree in science in my early



thirties to pursue commercial fisheries management. This led me, my wife, and two kids to move to Anchorage in 2008. Then in 2010, I started working for ADF&G as a fisheries biologist and moved to Wrangell. I continue to hold the same position today; however, my position was moved to Petersburg in 2020, where I now reside. While in Wrangell, my desire to improve hunter education in the small, remote town led me to see and live the many different challenges these small communities face. And my heart warms up every time I help someone with some of these challenges. I continue to enjoy being part of the HIT program in Petersburg and look forward to becoming a bowhunter ed instructor this spring.

## **Brock Meredith (Juneau)**

Brock, a lifelong Alaskan, has lived and hunted in Southeast Alaska for more than 45 years. He is the son of a Master Big Game Guide and has been an Alaskan hunter since he was about nine years old. He is a former licensed big game guide himself, in addition to receiving his degree in Fisheries Biology from the University of Alaska and recently retiring from a 44-year career in various aspects of fisheries biology.

Brock has been a hunter ed. instructor for more than 20 years, conducting the first ever HIT class in the community of Kake in the early 2000s. Since then, he has instructed hundreds of students from Juneau and other communities in southeast Alaska, ranging from new hunters in the Juneau middle schools to seasoned hunters when HE certification for hunting on the Mendenhall Wetlands became mandatory. He previously served on the HIT Steering committee from 2006 through 2007. He firmly believes that this program, and the time commitment by its many volunteer instructors, is important to hunting safety in our state and a key component in recruiting and retaining new hunters.



## **HIT Steering Group Members**

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## Instructor Notes



### Above & Beyond Recipients

We'd like to recognize the following instructors for going "above and beyond" this fall. Thanks to the Alaska Wild Sheep Foundation for providing Cabela's gift certificates to help us recognize our Above & Beyond recipients. We'll continue to recognize 1-4 extraordinary volunteer instructors each quarter, so please keep an eye

out for co-instructors who go "above and beyond" in the next few months and send HIT Program staff an email.

#### Lee Brian (Palmer)

Lee has had a busy year with the HIT Program, teaching a dozen classes which certified 214 students. Whenever Luke put out a request for additional instructors, Lee could be counted on to volunteer to teach.

#### Hunter Leach (Willow)

Hunter got certified in February 2024, and has re-invigorated the hunter education program at the Upper Susitna Shooters Association in Willow. He taught 6 hunter ed classes at USSA this year, including a field day for the Su-Valley Jr/Sr High School. He has also helped instruct other field days in the area, including the Houston High School class.

#### Heidi Stefani (Fairbanks)

Heidi became a bowhunter ed instructor in May 2025. She taught 4 classes this past quarter certifying 52 students. Fellow instructors always enjoy teaching alongside Heidi as she shares her knowledge and enthusiasm for archery and bowhunting.

#### James White (Juneau)

James was instrumental in getting hunter education back into the school day after the re-organization of schools in Juneau during the 24-25 school year. This fall 52 of his students obtained their hunter education certification along with learning additional lessons about survival skills, first-aid, etc. The class was held entirely at the Thunder Mountain Middle School including the field course and the proficiency shoot was held with pellet rifles in the gym. He also helped coordinate and instruct the Sealaska hunter education course.



### HIT Program Staff Contact Information

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**These Mat-Su Central  
School students got  
to have a live example  
during the field course!**