

Introducing the Missouri Atlatl Association

You may not have noticed, but among the CFM affiliates is a new organization devoted to an ancient hunting weapon. The spear thrower or atlatl is believed by many archeologists to date back 30,000 years in Europe, and probably 12,000 in Missouri, to the time of the great hunters who stalked mammoth and bison across land that now supports so many deer. It's a simple but effective tool, a stick with a hand grip on one end and a hook or socket on the other to engage the butt of a light spear. Just as you snap your wrist when you throw a ball, you throw a "dart" with the atlatl, and the flick of the atlatl gives a much longer lever arm than your hand and wrist. Hunting and target range is typically 10 to 30 yards, but the world record throw is over 848 feet. (The world record for a modern aerodynamically designed javelin throw is around 321 ft.)

Today, atlatlists are among the many enthusiasts practicing "primitive" skills. The World Atlatl Association is the largest organization; local and state groups like the Missouri Atlatl Association (MAA) organize events and help to educate the public. There are some 70 competitions around the country and a couple dozen in Europe each year. Although some atlatlists practice seriously and compete hard, our events are friendly and supportive, and open to all. We encourage newcomers to try throwing and join the competition, and we have

whole families participating. The atlatl is a great tool for teaching basic target sport safety - its range is short and you can't forget it is loaded. Anyone can learn to throw with satisfaction, but they soon learn to respect the skills of our ancestors as well.

Spear throwers were of course primarily hunting weapons, with a record of thousands of years of success. Although they were replaced by the bow in most parts of the world, they survived to historic times in several parts of the world: in Australia, hunting kangaroos, among the Aztecs for warfare and until a few decades ago for duck hunting, and in the Arctic, where seal and birds were the targets. Today's atlatls add another dimension to target sport and outdoor recreation.

Although the relatively heavy projectile is quite capable of driving through a deer, the range is short - you have to be a good and careful hunter to get close enough to use an atlatl. Atlatl hunting is also safer for other hunters and for anyone else around, for the same reason that atlatling is a safe sport with no recorded injuries in 20 years of competitions. A miss does not carry very far, plow through brush, or ricochet off to hurt someone 100 yards away.

Recognizing that the atlatl was safe and effective, the Missouri Department of Conservation legalized atlatls for small game several years ago, and last year they legalized it for deer during the firearms season. The MAA surveyed all



Public education is one of our missions. Jon Wood explains atlatls to the Missouri Department of Conservation Commissioners Don Johnson and Chip McGeehan, and Director Robert Ziehmer.

known Missouri atlatl deer hunters. Results of the survey indicated that about a dozen hunters stalked deer with this most ancient of weapons during the rifle season last fall.

Despite the fact that no one harvested a deer, a number of comments reflected the excitement of using the atlatl.

- *On the way in about 75 yards from my stand I spot a small doe about 50 yards*

ahead and it seems she has me pegged but she starts slowly walking towards me head bobbing. As she passes behind each tree I slowly get a dart notched and arm up in the throwing position. She is slightly quartering to my left which I am not believing as I am starting to think this is going to happen. Slowly she closes the distance 40, 30, 20 - my heart is pounding and I am at the ready. She gets to 15



Great accuracy is possible with an atlatl at 15-20 meters. Ron Mertz, Devin Pettigrew, Jon Wood, and Justin Garnett of MAA at the International Standard Accuracy Competition target, a common of our events.

yards and is just about to get her head behind a tree and give me a great shot when she suddenly starts to drift to my right and with each step she takes I am getting more out of position to throw. She lowers her head but I am twisted to the right too far and when I throw I don't get much on the throw and my dart passes under the deer and then she was gone. Anyway what a rush - just a few steps the other way and maybe history is made. (RP)

It was a fantastic experience! Quite unnerving to let deer get that close. (ES)

• I hunted for four hours one afternoon during the antlerless season with my atlatl. I had four does and one 4-point buck at 40 yards, but they did not come any closer. It was EXTREMELY exciting hoping it was going to all come together! (VC)



• Hunting with an atlatl and dart presents a number of challenges that are far greater than with a rifle or even a bow. It is much more difficult to be in meaningful range and have adequate cover, while having the opportunity for a clear unobstructed throw. In several cases, respondents reported that deer were in atlatl range, but they were not able to get a clear throw because of obstructions or because they were spotted in the process of throwing.

I spent about 80% of the time in a tree stand, but only

saw one deer from there. It was a little 6 point buck that came into either a grunt call or rattled horns, since I was using both at the time. It came in behind me but I don't think I could have gotten a throw anyway because of the brush I would have had to throw through. If I remember right, I saw a total of 7 deer while hunting. Only 1 was out of range of the atlatl but was in easy rifle range. It was also the only one that I saw in the open. Most of my success in seeing deer was on the ground, then trying to get close and find an opening to throw through. I had several opportunities at two yearlings, but it would have been throwing through heavy brush or a "head on" throw which is a very low percentage shot. Because of that, I never did throw a dart at a deer. All the deer I saw were at one time or another, close enough for an atlatl throw, with the exception of the one that I saw in the open. (RM)

• When I was able to be within atlatl range there was too much brush for a good throw, or the deer spotted me before I could throw. I discovered that an atlatl hunting strategy must be developed which I found is different from a bow or rifle strategy.....it will take a lot of practice throwing from different positions, at different elevations, and in a woods environment (i.e., trees, brush, etc.). (CW)

• A doe was 20 yards away and the throw was on target, but the doe saw my throwing and bolted. (ES)

• A number of respondents expressed their hope that the atlatl will be designated for the archery season rather than the rifle season.

Due to cold I wish it could be held during bow season.



Justin Garnett shows throwing form with his replica prehistoric southwestern atlatl. Atlatl experiments improve our understanding of prehistory.

Even after much practice I just can't throw with a glove on. My hand got very cold. It would also allow more time in the field. (ES)

• I had an enjoyable time out hunting with the atlatl, but one morning, after a couple of hours in my spot I noticed a gun hunter nearby. This is a high pressure hunting season, and with a short range weapon like the atlatl it would be far preferable to have a longer, lower pressure season. I would like to see use of the atlatl moved to archery season, this would greatly enhance the experience and increase the likelihood of a harvest as an outcome. (JG)

• I would like to see this weapon legalized for the archery season as I feel that early foliage and less wary deer would equal more opportunity and success. (RP)

• It would be a lot easier to get a deer into my effective range if the regulations were changed to archery season! (BH)

• I think we should have atlatls as a legal method during bow season prior to rifle season. Once rifle season starts, deer spook a lot easier. Wearing the blaze orange is also a hindrance. Deer can see color if they get close enough and that's what ruined two of the opportunities I had for throwing. (CW)

• If we can get it included with archery, I think our chances will improve. (RM)

The Department of Conservation is considering legalizing the atlatl during the 2011 archery deer season. In addition to increasing the opportunity for hunters in Missouri we believe this change will result in an ever increasing number of Missouri hunters who decide to try the atlatl. Meanwhile, the Missouri Atlatl Association organizes a number of target and demonstration events in the course of the year. A calendar of atlatl events around the year can be found on the World Atlatl Association webpage at www.worldatlatl.org. Come see spear throwers in action and try them yourself. Everyone's ancestors used atlatls once!

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