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Turkey Tales

New Hampshire's 2004 Youth Turkey Hunting Weekend was a first in the history of the state's 30-year-old turkey management program. The weekend gives hunters under age 16 a chance to hit the woods — in the company of a properly licensed, non-hunting adult — before the regular May gobbler season opens. During the 2004 youth weekend, the kids bagged 321 gobblers, or about 12 percent of the total season harvest.

On these pages, catch the spirit of this special weekend with two firsthand accounts from Fish and Game staff members Rich Tichko and Mark Ellingwood. Though the two stories have different outcomes, both show that the youth weekend offers a great introduction to hunting and more — in fact, the best part sometimes turns out to be those quiet moments when parents connect with their kids.

Roasted Ain't Roasted

BY RICHARD TICHKO

“Yes, I know it's real early... Just because we put these turkeys to bed last night doesn't mean it's going to be a cakewalk. You know the old turkey-hunting adage: roasted ain't roasted.” Brant gave me an unsure glance as he inhaled the last of a powdered donut.

It was the morning of the first-ever New Hampshire Youth Turkey Hunt, and my number-two son, Brant, was wound up tighter than one of those wind-up toys in a “Happy Meal.” His enthusiasm was fueled in part by last evening's scouting activities — when we heard several tom turkeys gobbling their fool heads off — and by the fact that his older brother, Parker, has accounted for several long-beards over the past three seasons. I could tell that Brant was giving in to a combination of sibling rivalry and first-hunt jitters.

I parked the truck and concluded my pep talk. “Relax, let the day take shape. We'll have a good time, no matter what.”

We suited up for the long walk to where the turkeys should have spent the night. “You ready?” Brant nodded. “Well then, let's go get us a turkey!”

Misuing success

As we weaved our way through the darkness, I thought about Brant; being only ten, he hasn't learned that hunting success is not measured by the weight of the game bag — but the sights, the sounds, the camaraderie. At his age, shooting a turkey is really important. As he gets older, he'll begin to understand that pulling the trigger is pretty anticlimatic — that when all is said and done, it's usually the least important part of any hunt. For now, Brant's head was filled with thoughts of magnificent long-beards and the

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success he so badly wanted.

I paused. “Brant, let’s owl hoot before we go any further, see if we can shock a bird into gobbling.” Brant nodded in agreement. I grabbed my owl call and sent the first “*who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all*” into the gloom.

As the sound of my owl call echoed through woods, my mind raced back over the past several months, when Brant and I spent time shooting turkey targets and checking the shot pattern of his 20-gauge shotgun, complete with extra-full turkey choke. We’d spent

hours on pre-season scouting, and listening to turkey-calling tapes so that Brant could make sweet turkey music on his new box call. Now, it all comes down to this: standing in the dark woods, trying to get a gobbler to give up its location.

“Dad! Dad! Nothing answered!” Brant’s urgent whisper brought me back to reality. I shot a second *who-cooks-for-you* across the flat, cupping the call with my hand to resonate the volume. This time a gobbler sounded off in the dark.

“Sounds like they haven’t moved much since last night. I think we should make our way toward that big red oak that borders the logyard.”

“Can we find it in the dark?” Brant wondered aloud. I was pretty sure I could get there without too much trouble.

“We might not end up exactly at the red oak, but we should be near enough to set up for the turkeys. Having roosted the birds last night, and hearing a tom sound off just now, at least puts us in the right zip code!” After a short walk, Brant was safely set up against a big white pine and I snuck out into the logyard to set up decoys.

“It’ll be shooting time soon”

We waited in the dark, each of us with our thoughts, when I heard the first songbirds start to stir. Suddenly, a gobbler roared off not 75 yards to our left. Another two let loose about 100 yards to our right.

“Dad, don’t you think we should call?”

“Not yet. Since they feel like talking, let’s let them go at it for a while on their own. Don’t worry, I’ll send them a valentine in a few minutes.”

So it went, every time a creature of the night woods sounded off, so did the turkeys. Finally, the growing daylight allowed us to see more of our immediate surroundings.

“It’s time, Brant. Let’s see if these boys want to come a-courting.” I pulled out a box call and a slat call, and I also got a diaphragm call ready. We put our face masks on.

“Ready?” I made a low tree call, which floated across the logyard towards the fallow field. In response, all three toms gobbled to say they heard me loud and clear. I did a mix of soft yelps and tree calls periodically, and they never failed to answer.

“Brant, let’s load up your shotgun. It’ll be shooting time soon, and I want you ready for fly down.” Sure enough, it wasn’t long before we heard the first of the birds leaving their roost to greet the day on the ground.

“Dad, what’s happening?”

“The turkeys are on the ground, keeping quiet until they’re sure there’s no danger. They’ll crank up again once they get comfortable.”

I gave another yelp — no response. The turkeys were on their own timetable, not ours. Finally, one of the toms let loose. From the corner of my eye, I could see a tom walking across the far right field edge; I knew he’d have to cut across the corner of the logyard.

“Brant, a tom on the right — too far away to shoot.” Brant and I watched the bird walk slowly by, eyeing the decoys. Then it disappeared into the woods. The other two birds slipped in behind us, gobbling loudly. This dance went on for nearly 15 minutes: I’d call, they’d answer. They’d call, I’d answer. Things were getting pretty intense, and I knew my son was about to explode.

“Dad. What’s going on?”

Before I could answer, a hen turkey came straight at us from across the field and entered the logyard.

“Don’t move. She might bring a gobbler with her.” The hen came to the decoys as if she had known them all her life. My son was glued to the spot, and the hen came within five yards of us as she passed the blind.

“Awesome!” exclaimed Brant. “Did you see that, Dad? I thought she was going to come in here with us. Boy, was she pretty.”

All camo’d up, Brant Tichko readies his decoys and gear for the hunt.



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Are hunting partner

We didn't see or hear another turkey for the rest of the morning.

At 11:30, I admitted to Brant that it looked like the turkeys were going to win this one. He was silent for a moment and started to turn my way, when he suddenly said, "Look, Dad — deer."

"Don't move, Brant. Let's see if I can call them in." I gave a series of cutts and yelps and, to our pleasure, the deer came single file towards the decoys. There were two adult does, a yearling, and three of last year's fawns. After a while, they wandered off.

"Dad, I guess we're not going to get a turkey today," Brant said. "Can we get a pizza?"

"You bet, son," I said. "What do you think of turkey hunting — good time?"

"Yeah," Brant replied. "But I want to get a turkey. Promise you'll bring me again?"

"Sounds like I got a new hunting partner," I said with a smile. Brant smiled, too.

We collected the decoys in silence, and vowed to return. Maybe next time, roosting will result in some roasting! And even if it doesn't, we know we can always look forward to more adventures together.

Richard Tichko is a Fisheries Biologist with N.H. Fish and Game. He recounted the experience of taking his older son on the Youth Waterfowl Weekend in N.H. Wildlife Journal in 2003.

Bagging Memories with My Kids

BY MARK ELLINGWOOD

John vaulted out of bed at 4:15 a.m. that Saturday like a man on a mission. This in itself was remarkable, as it routinely takes me three or four visits over a 20-minute span to pry him out of bed on school days. We were in the woods well before sunrise, sitting shoulder to shoulder against a large beech tree. During the astounding silence that precedes sunrise, John announced his intention to pass on jakes (1-year-old gobblers) this year, and to hold off for a "long beard" (2+ year-old gobbler). I was impressed.

As a father, I was pleased for the opportunity to spend additional time afield with my 15-year-old son in pursuit of good times and new memories during the state's first youth turkey hunting weekend. John and I had anxiously waited for this

special weekend to arrive. Actually, I was more anxious than John, who is preoccupied with lacrosse, snowboarding, video games, fooling around with friends, his part-time job and schoolwork — in that order.

For me, it's all about spending some quiet time in the woods with my son. It's when we trade telephones, e-mail, athletics, video games, honking horns and the routine hustle and bustle of a working family for a quiet retreat into New Hampshire's spectacular spring woodlands. Turkey calls, binoculars, bird and wildflower guides, hearty snacks, a compass, turkey permits and a shotgun pretty much cover our needs.

Turkey hunting is a chess game that pits your skills, knowledge and experience (that is, previous mistakes) against a million years of evolved turkey wariness, vigilance, curiosity and survival. Success is in the experience rather than the results. My fondest memories of turkey hunting with John have little to do with the actual act of hunting — they're about quiet conversations in the woods before sunrise, trout fishing during a mid-morning break, black bear encounters, moose crashing through dimly lit thickets, owl calls, 4:00 a.m. breakfasts, camp suppers, questions asked at critical moments and shots not taken.

Watching listening waiting

John is well-practiced in firearms safety and has considerable experience with shotguns. Nonetheless, he defers to my advice and direction, at times in hushed whispers, on what constitutes a safe and responsible shot. On this day, we were treated to three woodland wonders: cackling hens and gobbling toms flying down from roost trees in full sight of our position; the pure, penetrating and unrelenting counter-calls of two barred owls only 50 yards away; and the full display of several jakes and hens as they approached and examined our decoy, only 18 yards from our position. John passed on the jakes, with self-restraint born of growing maturity and blind faith. We spent sev-

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK ELLINGWOOD



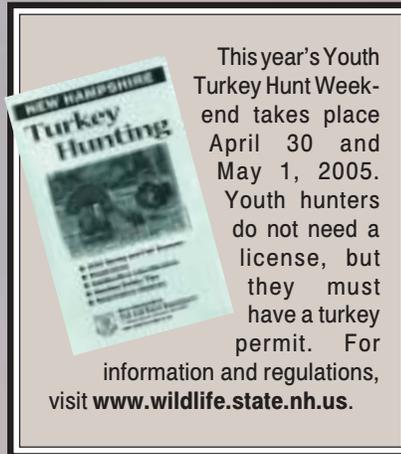
John Ellingwood and his dad Mark commemorate a successful hunt, posing with John's 21-pound gobbler.

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eral hours on our quiet hillside, after the owls went silent and the turkeys meandered off. As we departed the woods for home, we heard the distinct “gulluckk” of an American bittern calling from a nearby wetland. Such calls are seldom heard, and I for one was thrilled for the experience.

We were out again early on Sunday morning (electing to get our weekly dose of religion from Mother Nature for a change). We set up on a field edge, with big woods to our backs, and waited until we heard two gobblers call from their distant roosts. We made a few soft, seductive hen “yelps” in an effort to let them know we were “available.” To our dismay, several roosting hens chimed in and stole our thunder. The toms and hens flew down together, and spent an hour or so mingling in the woods nearby. It’s futile to stalk turkeys or to attempt to call toms away from hens, so we sat quietly, hoping they would come our way.



This year's Youth Turkey Hunt Weekend takes place April 30 and May 1, 2005. Youth hunters do not need a license, but they must have a turkey permit. For information and regulations, visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us.

Our patience was rewarded as this group meandered into the field in front of us. They came within shooting range, but their clumped grouping and continual jostling pre-empted a discriminating shot. The hens walked away from us, dragging the toms reluctantly along.

Our calling “tug of war” had apparently attracted the attention of two distant suitors. Minutes after the mixed flock drifted out of site, we

heard a distant but fast-moving gobbler headed in our direction. Some 350 yards across the field, two gobblers launched over a stone wall and rushed headlong in our direction. The bigger one was in full stride, intent on getting to us first! At 35 yards John excitedly asked, “Now, Dad, now?” I yelped and the 21-pound long-beard skidded to a stop at 10 yards. “Now!”

The next generation

John’s success during the youth weekend fulfilled my personal desire to chase turkeys for the 2004 season. For the low cost of a hunting license and two turkey permits, John and I had bagged lifelong memories. How could I improve on that?

John will be 16 for this year’s turkey season — too old to participate in the youth weekend. Hopefully, the allure of fast cars and high-school coeds won’t get the best of him, and we’ll get out during the regular spring season. To my delight, my 14-year-old son, Dan, recently asked if he might try turkey hunting. Dan loves to bass fish, but has never shown an interest in hunting; I’ve never pushed. He recently passed the shooting requirements for a Boy Scout riflery badge; perhaps that has piqued his interest. I’m excited about the possibility of sitting shoulder to shoulder with Dan, bagging some new memories this coming spring.

Meanwhile, my daughter Hannah (age 10) loves to fish, but currently frowns on our turkey-hunting exploits. Who knows what the future will bring? She may well end up vaulting out of bed at 4:15 a.m., to pursue turkeys, listen for barred owls or bitterns, or just to sit together in the quiet woods and talk in hushed tones about “important things.” That’s the hidden benefit of our youth hunting weekends — maybe they should call it Parents’ Weekend instead. WJ

Mark Ellingwood, Wildlife Programs Administrator, is a member of Fish and Game’s turkey management team. He and his family live in Hancock, N.H.

