

Jim Casada Outdoors

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April 2012 Newsletter

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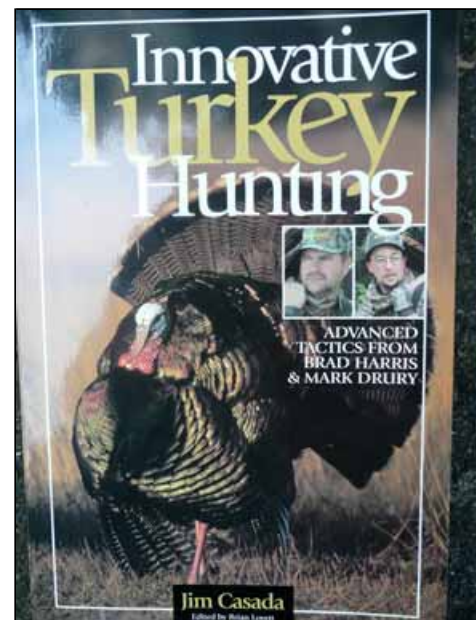
April—A Month of Promise, Renewal, and Angst

This month's newsletter is arriving a few days late, and you can place all the blame squarely on the shoulders of its author. For starters, it's turkey season, and for those of you who hunt America's big-game bird, that's really about all that needs to be said. One of my literary heroes, Archibald Rutledge, once suggested: "Some men are mere hunters; others are turkey hunters." As a card-carrying member of the latter clan, let me assure you that the sport is an addiction, an obsession, the stuff which keeps marital counselors in business, a tribulation, and an absolute delight. I'm never sure whether I'm more joyous when opening day arrives or when the rites of spring have come to an end, but I do know that I feel a compulsion to be in the woods rain or shine, feast or famine, hot or cold, and tired or flat-out exhausted.

Oddly enough, unlike most of the consuming passions in my sporting life, turkey hunting belongs strictly to my adult years. I never saw a turkey in the wild until I was in my early 30s, and I was in my mid-30s before I hunted the birds for the first time. Mind you, I've been busy making up for lost time and a deprive youth ever since. As for the deprivation of my youth, the explanation is simple. There were virtually no turkeys where I grew up, in North Carolina's Great Smokies, until well after I matured, married, and was gone from home. I heard Dad tell one or two tales of them, and Grandpa Joe harkened back to days when there were still a few of the elusive birds left in the high country. But then Grandpa had killed a cougar as a young man, and that's sort of an index to the state of turkey hunting as it existed in the mountains.

I would note that a grand old ridge runner and local sporting

This Month's Special Offer



Since we are squarely in the middle of the rites of spring, this month's special offer involves one of the books on turkey hunting I have written. Mind you, I don't for a minute think that turkey hunting has an exclusive monopoly on spring rituals.

While I'll acknowledge in this month's ramblings, the huge impact the sport has on my life, there are a bunch of other things about the season

legend who died just two years after I was born, Mark Cathey, hunted them. Uncle Mark is best remembered as a highly skilled fly fisherman who was a magician with a trout rod, but he was a sportsman for all seasons as is revealed by the dozens of bears he personally killed along with untold numbers of squirrels and grouse. Less is known about his turkey hunting, but he used a wingbone call (something which tickles my fancy, since I'm partial to the same type of call) and his efforts in the quest for gobblers are mentioned in at least two rare books which reside in my collection of Caroliniana.

I can't recall whether I've ever shared any of the many tales connected with Cathey's life in previous editions of this newsletter, and if so hopefully those of you who have followed me faithfully for years will forgive a bit of repetition. The tale which comes to mind involves a spring fishing trip to the Bryson Place, a fabled sportsman's retreat far up Deep Creek in the heart of what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The party of anglers rode in on horseback, arriving at their destination well on into the afternoon. Someone in the group mentioned a hankering for a mess for fresh-caught trout, and Cathey said he would take care of the menu essentials if the rest of them would set up camp and maybe take the time to gather a big bait of ramps and branch lettuce to go with the fish. That may sound like a mighty confident angler, but for Cathey filling a creel with wild trout was the essence of simplicity. He did what he had promised, and the party of six enjoyed a meal featuring pan-fried trout wearing cornbread dinner jackets, fried taters, cornbread, and a salad of ramps and branch lettuce "kilt" with hot bacon grease as a dressing. The mere thought of this mountain feast brings me joy.

which are deeply meaningful to me.

I'm a keen gardener and, I'd like to think, an accomplished one. At any rate I fill two freezers year after year, we dry a bunch of stuff, and there's always surplus to be shared with friends, neighbors, and family.

Similarly, I absolutely rejoice in observing wildflowers, take great joy in watching the family of bluebirds nesting in a box visible from our kitchen table going about the business of raising a family (the same box, made by my father, has been in use for almost two decades, and every year but one it has been home to bluebirds—that year sparrows beat them to the draw), love the chorus of bird song which greets each spring morning, revel in the earth-nourishing moisture of a gentle rain, identify with spring thunderstorms, and much more.

Enough of that though—**this month's offer is my book, *Innovative Turkey Hunting*, for \$12.50 postpaid.**

The 204-page book's contents are summarized pretty accurately in its subtitle, "Advanced Tactics from Brad Harris & Mark Drury," although I think it's fair to say there's a lot of me and my perspective there as well. *The offer will be good through the end of this month.*

For this offer I will only accept personal checks, cashier's checks, or money orders. Payment should be sent to me c/o 1250 Yorkdale Drive, Rock Hill, SC 29730.

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Of course once supper had become a delicious memory and the dishes were cleaned, someone felt a compulsion to bring out a jar of corn squeezin's (also known as tanglefoot, white lightning, mountain dew, and a host of other names). Uncle Mark had him two or three hefty snorts and then declared he was going to hit the sack. "The sack" consisted of a double layer of bunks running all along one wall of the rough cabin which was called the Bryson Place, and I was actually lucky enough to spend several nights there during my boyhood and before the Park tore it down (as they did almost any and all structures, never mind their historical or other value).

It so happened that only a few weeks before Uncle Mark had gotten a full set of false teeth, and the last thing he did upon turning in was to remove them and carefully place the dentures on an exposed two-by-four running alongside his bunk. In short order he was snoring, as was the occupant of the next bunk, Mack Gossett. As fate would have it, Gossett also had dentures, and it's easy enough to guess what happened. One of the n'er-do-wells in the group who was still awake surreptitiously switched the two sets of false teeth.

The next morning Mark got up and put in Mack's teeth, while Mack did the same with Mark's dentures. Amazingly, both men set down to breakfast twisting their jaws, fingering their mouths, and trying to figure out what was wrong. That was troublesome enough, but matters soon took a further turn for the bad in Mark Cathey's case.

Raisin bran cereal had just been introduced, and one of the members of the party had brought a box of it along. They also had milk, easily carried on horseback and kept cool in a nearby branch. The man who had provided the cereal asked: "Mark, would you like a bowl of this new bran cereal?" Cathey reckoned as how he'd try it and proceeded to eat the entire bowl using another man's dentures. As he ate the cereal, however, he would pause every second or third bite, turn from the table, and expectorate (a \$10 word for spit). Finally, when he had finished, he was asked: "Mark, what do you think of this new cereal?"

His reply was classic. "Well," he drawled, "it's right tasty but I fear the rats has been at it."

One final indignity remained, as somehow the party had managed to hold their mirth and the two sets of dentures remained in the wrong mouths. As soon as breakfast was over, Mark and Mack both headed out the only door in the cabin. Moments later the four other members of the party followed, to find the two grizzled old mountain men on opposite sides of the cabin, pocket knives in hand, and each trying to whittle the other man's dentures to shape.

That's a longish aside, but blame it on turkeys. Or, to put it another way, turkey hunters rank high among all tellers of tales, and unlike most, they seem to be given to accounts of missteps, mistakes, misery, and misses. Maybe that's because the sport presents so much frustration, and that overly large ration of misery is what makes it so marvelous.

I greeted our season opener a few days back in the most satisfying of fashions. By 8:30 a.m., after a fairly protracted conversation with a gobbler, I had tags on my first turkey on the season. The moment is always a bittersweet one, but in this instance such was more the case than usual. That's because just two weeks prior to opening day the man who was my mentor in the sport, Parker Whedon, died at the age of 86. He had been suffering from Parkinson's disease for several years, but he fought valiantly and almost to the end loved to "talk turkey."

When word reached me of his passing, my wife said: "You know, Jim, other than your father he probably had more influence on your life than any man." In large measure she was right, although Claude Gossett, the son of Mack Gossett (the man mentioned above), and my Grandpa Joe were huge influences as well. What Ann meant was that it was Parker Whedon who gave me my start as a turkey hunter, and now, the better part of four decades later, I am as entranced by the sport as ever.

Having him as a teacher was a blessing beyond measure, because Parker was a living link to the essence of the sport's history. He killed his first turkey in 1950, and over the ensuing years, most of them encompassing a period when the grand birds were far less plentiful than is today the case, he accounted for an additional 409 turkeys. The vast majority of these came in the Carolinas, although he did venture farther afield on a few occasions. Parker knew the icons of the sport—Tom, Inman, and Hunter Turpin; Henry Edwards Davis; Wayne Bailey; Larry Hearn; and a host of others. He came into possession of Davis's personal box call when the author of *The American Wild Turkey* died, and eventually Parker sold that call for a bit over \$55,000, the largest sum ever paid for a turkey collectible. He was a wizard when it came to training turkey dogs, an integral part of the sport's history, and Parker's callmaking skills when it came to crafting lovely, and lovely sounding, yelpers were second to none. He made the wingbone call I used to kill my opening day tom, and it is crafted from the bones of the first spring gobbler and the first fall hen I ever killed. Obviously it has immense meaning to me.

I wore that call around my neck while attending graveside services for Whedon, and when special moments and memories were being shared by some of those in attendance, one eulogy offered me just the opportunity I sought. As the tribute, which mentioned Parker's skill in making calls, came to an end, I lifted the call to my lips, clucked a couple of times and then offered a series of yelps to the heavens. Another man he had mentored joined me, and later a member of the family indicated that Parker had said, a couple of years before he died, that he hoped someone would yelp at his service.

The way we came to know one another is perhaps an appropriate way to end this month's chronicle. Parker was an attorney, and unlike most men of that ilk he always practiced alone, saying he didn't want to be tied to an officer when turkeys were gobbling. We were introduced by another attorney, who like Parker was a resident of

Charlotte, N.C., the late David Henderson. Those of you who are bird hunters or who cherish fine sporting literature may be familiar with his books such as *Sundown Covey* and *Covey Rises and Other Pleasures*. I had reviewed one of Dave's books and he said, "You've got to come up to Charlotte and meet me for lunch. There's a fellow I want you to meet."

Thus began almost four decades of friendship with Parker. A few months after that initial meeting he called in my first gobbler, and as we stood admiring the bird, in his typically pithy and pointed fashion he stated: "That's how it's done. You're on your own." His point was that the sport was not only a one-man game but also an exercise in ongoing education, with there being no substitute for learning in the school of hard knocks and miserable mistakes.

I didn't kill another turkey that season, although I had plenty of close encounters and a whole passel of mistakes. I would call Parker after each episode of misery and he would patiently pick apart my approach and suggest what I might have done. Of course I also saw him miss a bird that season, just as I later would be with him when he killed his 350th turkey. Gradually, with ongoing tutorials and considerable time spent hunting together, my skills improved. When I had despaired of ever learning to use a wingbone yelper with any degree of proficiency, he convinced me otherwise through the simple expedient of carrying along a tape recorder, starting it, and having me walk off 100 yards, the 200 yards, and yelp. The results sounded enough like a turkey to convince me that maybe there was some slight degree of hope for me when it came to calling.

What convinced him I was a pupil worthy of his time, however, only peripherally involved turkeys. On one of our first forays into the spring woods I started pointing out blooming wildflowers and made comments on a few of them (I'm not a trained naturalist but I do have a decent layman's knowledge of natural history). One such flower was sweet shrub, which is poisonous for cattle but has highly aromatic blooms. I noted that the old mountain folks called it "bubbies" because of the fact that women who didn't have the opportunity to bathe all that often sometimes would break off a flowering spring and stick it in their bosom (or boobies). Parker was greatly take by that odd bit of mountain folklore and from that point on was always asking me about any unusual plant we encountered.

I have no doubt I'll think of him, and on a regular basis, not only this spring but with each returning spring. Long ago I realized my great good fortune in having him as a mentor. Whatever my level of ability as a turkey hunter (and I reckon I'm somewhere in the advanced pre-school stage, closing in on kindergarten), much of it derives from his wisdom and insight. The last time I saw him, and I'll confess that when I said my goodbyes that day it was with realization I couldn't bring myself to visit again, he was quite weak but alert and eager as always to "talk turkey." In fact, he had been fiddling around with the tube inside a ball point pen with the idea that it would make a fine instrument for kee-keeing. He was a highly innovative callmaker and the wisest turkey hunter I have ever known. I'll miss him a great deal.

That's enough for now, although I will close with a bit of the philosophizing that seems to emanate from my mind with increasing frequency as I grow older. Sometimes we take our mentors—whether parents, teachers, those who guide our ways in our careers, or individuals who take the time to share their knowledge of hunting and fishing—for granted. Don't do so. Harken to their words and remember them with gratitude. Equally important, try to do your part to pass on the legacy which has been imparted to you. Few things will provide more quiet pleasure than helping a youngster unhook their first fish, seeing a budding Nimrod kill his first rabbit or squirrel, or being part of the "package" when you call in a hunter's first turkey to the gun.

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Spring's Bounty on the Table

WILD STRAWBERRY TRIFLE

Izaak Walton, somewhere in his writings, quotes a Dr. Boteler on the deliciousness of strawberries: "Doubtless

God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did." This is the month to note wild strawberries in bloom, and next month brings them to ripeness over much of the country. They are far better than their tame brethren, but if you don't have access to the red jewels in the wild, substitute their domestic cousins in this recipe.

1 yellow cake mix, baked according to directions
 1 quart wild strawberries (cooked slightly with sugar and a dash or two of Grand Marnier if desired)
 3 large vanilla pudding mixes (enough for 6 cups of milk) mixed according to directions
 2 large containers whipped topping (24 ounces total)

Cover bottom of large bowl or trifle dish with a layer of crumbled cake. Place a layer of strawberries over cake, followed by a layer of pudding and a layer of whipped topping. Repeat layers twice, ending with whipped topping and reserved fresh berries.

WILD STRAWBERRY SPINACH SALAD

4 cups washed and torn spinach
 1 cup hulled and washed wild strawberries (you can substitute tame ones)
 1 kiwi, peeled and sliced (optional)
 2/3 cup chopped macadamia nuts

Combine and set aside, then prepare dressing using 2 tablespoons strawberry jam, 2 tablespoons cider vinegar, and 1/3 cup oil. Blend jam and vinegar then add oil gradually as you continue to process. Use this to dress the salad.

TURKEY TENDERS

1 egg
 1 tablespoon water
 1 pound wild turkey breast, cut into strips (cut across the grain)
 1 cup all-purpose flour
 ½ cup canola oil
 Salt and black pepper to taste

Beat egg with water. Dredge turkey strips in flour, dip in egg mixture, and then dredge again in flour. Fry in canola oil in a cast iron skillet until brown and tender. Serve immediately.

If the turkey is not tender (and an old gobbler likely won't be), pound with a meat hammer before frying or else cover and steam a few minutes after you have browned the strips. They will not be as crisp with the latter approach.

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