

Jim Casada Outdoors

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April 2013 Newsletter

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The Marvelous Misery which is April

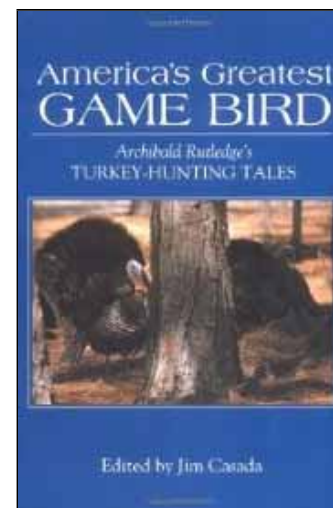
As this edition of my monthly newsletter is being written I'm behind of writing assignments, sleep deprived, burdened with a bunch of yard and garden chores which remain undone, batching it while my wife is at the beach with our daughter and granddaughter, and generally in the grips of a marvelous misery. For those of you who are fellow sufferers, you will readily understand; others will (with no small degree of justice) think me a fool. I am, of course, referring to the fact that turkey season has arrived.

That means, at least for me, a fairly extended period characterized by mistakes, misses (already had one this year), mischances, miscues, misery, and more. Nonetheless, all of it is sheer magic. Forty years ago, before I started turkey hunting, if you had told me a bird weighing less than 20 pounds as a rule, and sporting a brain about the size of the taw we used to use when playing marbles called a dough roller, could reduce me to a mass of quivering jelly and frayed nerves, I would have called you a fool. Yet I swear a gobbler can make the earth shake when 30 yards away, and if trees have leafed out when one gives voice they shake and shed some foliage. As for my reaction, twice so far this season I've had a longbeard gobbler directly behind me within 30 yards. Neither time was I previously aware the bird was there, and if I didn't levitate on the spot it was only because I'm carrying far too much surplus avoirdupois. I can also state that I didn't wet my pants, but it was a near thing.

Turkeys do that to you. As of yesterday I have now killed 285 of them over the course of my career, and I know the

This Month's Special Offer

Since it's turkey time, and given my mention of one of my all-time favorite outdoor writers, Archibald Rutledge, in this month's musings and meanderings, it seemed appropriate to offer a collection of his turkey tales which I edited, compiled, and wrote considerable material for (general introduction, bibliographical coverage, and commentary within the heart of the book).



Entitled *America's Greatest Game Bird: Archibald Rutledge's Turkey-Hunting Tales*, this is a 212-page hardback book with a dust jacket published by the University of South Carolina Press.

There are 34 turkey tales including great pieces such as "Fireworks in the Peafield Corner," "The Bishop Earns a Gobbler," and "Miss Seduction Struts Her Stuff."

precise number because from the first one I've kept the spent hull, written a little story about the hunt, and stuck the story down in the shell. The beard, unless it is an exceptionally wide one, also goes there. My mentor suggested this approach when I first started, saying that if I liked the sport as much as he thought I would, there would come a time when I couldn't remember every turkey. He did me a great favor with that recommendation, because I can go back, pull out a shell, read the story, and instantly be transported back to a moment of wonder.

It is normally \$29.95 + \$5 shipping and handling. The special offer has it at \$25 postage paid.

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Now 285 turkeys may seem like a lot, but in truth it is primarily testament to a woeful addiction, lots of paying my dues in terms of feet on the ground, and an ongoing education which will never end. One of my favorite writers, and the individual whose work is this month's featured special offer, Archibald Rutledge, offered this comment after killing his 339th turkey. "I think I may have reached the kindergarten stage." For my part, I'm still in the pre-school ranks, but that's what makes the sport so much fun. The learning curve climbs ever onwards and upwards, and it is filled with so many foul-ups that turkey hunters have to be reckoned, as a breed, special gluttons for self-administered misery. I know more than I once did, but I also recognize how little I really know. One thing I have learned though, and it's an infallible rule of the sport. The only absolute in turkey hunting is that there are no absolutes.

This year my obsession, as usual, finds me at with the Brits call sixes and sevens. I'm already on a roller coaster ride. A hunt in Florida saw me experience the worst thing that can happen to a hunter. I crippled a turkey which escaped only, with almost certainty, to die at the hands of a bobcat or coyote. I followed that up with a flat-out miss, with two folks watching to share my screw-up, of an Alabama gobbler at 25 yards. If you know much about turkey hunting you probably know the rest of the story—I failed to get the wood of my stupid head down on the stock of the gun. Since then the season has opened here in South Carolina. I killed a fine bird on April Fool's Day (the opener) and another one two days later. I've always thought it appropriate that the season opens here on All Fools Day, because turkey hunters fit the description.

Tomorrow, after a day's respite (taken because today has been characterized by a cold, driving rain from first light), I'll be at it again. In a few days I'll head to South Dakota, where the forecast calls for lows in the 20s every day and two days with appreciable snow accumulation. Still, I've bought my plane ticket and made my arrangements, so go I must. Maybe things will get a bit better as that trip ends in Wyoming and Montana, to be followed shortly thereafter by Oklahoma and Texas.

In other words, life for the next few weeks is a glorious mess. I've written, more than once, that about the only deprivation of my childhood was one I didn't know of at the time—growing up in a world where there were no turkeys. Of course my family's economic circumstances were modest, at best, but I didn't know that. Likewise, it didn't (and doesn't) bother me that the first time I saw the ocean was at the age of 25. After all, my Grandpa Joe never saw salt water, and I reckon that by most measures his simple life was a good one. Nor am I troubled that I didn't own a car until after I finished college, that I was pretty much a stranger to anything as large as a \$5 bill until after I finished undergraduate school, or that I only possessed two guns and a single fly rod until I was in my 30s. That wasn't a problem, but by golly I regret coming to the world of His Majesty, the wild gobbler, rather late.

Look back as opposed to being enmeshed in that glorious addiction which is turkey hunting, April provides plenty of fond recollections. It was a time of blooming wild flowers at their best (the Smokies where I grew up have the greatest biological diversity found anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, and the blooms of spring are a time of glory), the opening day of trout season, a mess or two of polk sallet (which in addition to being delicious was a purgative that, in Grandpa Joe's description, would "set you free"), enforced spring tonic in the form of sulfur and molasses AND sassafras tea, "kilt" ramps and branch lettuce on camping trips into the backcountry, and the sheer joy of being out and about in a natural world going through its annual rebirth. It was getting in potatoes, early peas, lettuce, and other cool weather crops as soon as the ground was dry enough to

work, and how I loved the old black man who came around each year with his team of horses to do our plowing. I would watch, fascinated, as he maneuvered the equines with a skill born of long practice, and each “gee,” “haw,” and “whoa” tickled my fancy. Incidentally, as was the case with so much mountain property, plowing the lower garden would have been a non-starter for modern equipment. It was far too steep, but horses and old Mr. Powell handled matters quite nicely.

April also brings back memories of what was quite possibly the most enjoyable school task I ever undertook. My 10th grade biology teacher was an affable fellow named Clifford Frizzell, and at some point early in his career he had come up with a stroke of sheer pedagogical genius. The major project for the spring semester was to venture into the hills and hollows of the high country and find as many different plants as possible. You were expected to “press” a leaf or flower, give the plant’s common and scientific names, and extra credit could be earned through describing any uses the plant had for humans. For a youngster who cherished every minute he was outdoors, the assignment was a godsend.

I don’t remember how many plants I gathered, but the total ran to many scores of them. Even today, more than a half century later, I recall the scientific names of a surprising number of them (and this was my one and only formal exposure to biology at any educational level). I particularly enjoyed learning about the human uses of plants, and of course Daddy and Grandpa, both of whom were first-rate amateur naturalists, were of great help. There were foodstuffs aplenty—all the wild fruits, nuts, and berries; wild vegetables such as those mentioned above along with lamb’s quarters, dandelions, and a bunch more; medicinal plants such as yellow root and ginseng; and every tree had one or more practical applications. Even non-timber trees such as dogwoods (for slingshots and a perfectly serviceable wedge for splitting wood), elderberry shoots (pop guns, blow guns, whistles, and turkey calls), and Osage orange (bows, yokes) had their applications.

Daddy made me a nice binder with varnished wooden backs to hold the pages, each with a pressed leaf or flower along with the necessary write-up, and even though I could have been a better scholar than I was, in this particular case I outdid myself. On top of that, Mr. Frizzell had the great goodness, on several occasions over the years, to compliment me on my trout fishing. He lived right alongside Deep Creek, my “home” creek, and in late spring and summer would often watch me for a few minutes. Obviously I remember him with great fondness, and a teach who implants an impression of the sort I’ve just described is one who has made a meaningful mark.

April also meant the first night crawling (late in the month after a shower when the weather was fairly warm these giants of the worm world would show up above ground at night), lizard catching, and seining. All were highly desirable fish bait which brought in something I had precious little of—cash money. I also earned a quarter every time I gathered a poke of poke sallet (I’m not confused here—in the mountain vernacular a poke is a paper bag), and April brought the first opportunities to caddy for local golfers. It was, in short, a month for getting a little jingle in the pocket, because the lean times of winter extended to a dearth of lucrative work.

These days my Aprils are rather circumscribed, what with turkey hunting, but I’m not so obsessed that I don’t notice other things. Just this morning I gathered the first morel mushrooms of the season, and if you’ve never enjoyed this delicacy you have a gaping hole in your life’s culinary experience. I also take note of the whereabouts of any blackberry patches I come across, and the same is true for persimmon trees and pawpaws. It’s just a force of habit born of a lifetime of close connection to the good earth. Throw in courting song birds, the countless sounds of daybreak on a clear, crisp morning, and the sheer joy of “greening up” and I have to reckon that April is, always has been, and always will be one of my favorites.

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RECIPES

SAUTEED MORELS

Morel mushrooms are a great delicacy, and I have three favorite ways of preparing them. In each case, soak the mushrooms in salt water and then clean thoroughly. Dab dry with a towel or paper towels and slice in half. It is

hard to beat introducing the mushroom pieces to simmering butter in a pan, sautéing until they begin to brown, and eating them right from the pan. Another approach is to beat up a couple of eggs and dip each mushroom piece in the eggs before putting in hot butter to cook. Finally, crumble up saltine crackers, use the same egg dip, but follow with a coating of crushed saltines and then cook. Whatever your choice, it's food for the gods.

POKE SALLET

Poke shoots are easy enough to find over much of the country. Just be sure to get tender young shoots only three or four inches above the soil's surface. Clean thoroughly and then bring to a rolling boil in a sauce pan of water. Drain, rinse, fill the pan with water again and repeat the process. Only after two times of cooking and draining are you really ready to get down to business (the plant, without this approach, contains an unhealthy amount of Vitamin A). The third time cook in boiling water yet again, drain, and this time salt and pepper to taste and dig in. Mountain folks often place chopped, boiled eggs atop the sallet or place the cooked greens in a frying pan and scramble eggs with the greens.

WILD TURKEY MEATBALLS

If you throw away the legs and thighs, you might want to reconsider, and here's a perfect use for the dark meat.

1 ½ cup ground wild turkey
 1 cup finely crumbled cornbread
 ¼ cup chopped, toasted hazelnuts or pecans
 1 large celery rib, finely chopped
 2 tablespoons finely chopped onion (cook it a bit in a microwave to soften)
 ¼-1/2 teaspoon Italian seasoning
 1 teaspoon dry mustard
 ½ cup chicken (or turkey) broth
 1 egg, beaten

Place all ingredients except broth and egg in a mixing bowl. Add broth and egg, being careful to mix well. Preheat oven to 375 degrees while you form meatballs. Shape into 1-inch diameter balls and place on a 15x10x1-inch baking pan which has been sprayed with cooking spray. Bake for 20-25 minutes or until meatballs are browned and done in the center. Meanwhile, place sauce ingredients in a large skillet.

Sauce

1 16-ounce can whole berry cranberry sauce
 1 tablespoon brown sugar
 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard with horseradish

Bring to a boil over medium heat and introduce cooked meatballs. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 5-10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve as an appetizer in a chafing dish or slow cooker.

RANCH TURKEY STRIPS

Talk about turkey made easy, this is it.

1 teaspoon of a packet of Ranch Original Dry Salad Dressing Mix
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 ½ pound wild turkey breast strips

Combine Ranch dressing mix with olive oil. Marinate turkey strips in it for 15 minutes. Grill for 10-12 minutes in a frying pan, grill pan, broiler, or on an outdoor grill. Serve immediately. Serves two, but recipe can be doubled (or re-doubled) for more.

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Books Read

If you enjoy reading related to the outdoors, you might want to start looking at "[Sporting Classics Daily](#)." I'm contributing a book piece roughly once a week, and you'll find lots of other interesting stuff. It's all free.

Books marked with an asterisk (*) are ones I think others might find enjoyable.

1. *Bobby Cole, *Moon Underfoot*. This guy works for Mossy Oak, and this is the second book (the first was *The Dummy Line*) he has written. Both have a solid outdoor setting and are first-rate reads.
2. J. A. Jance, *Hand of Evil*. I enjoy all of Jance's work and the often intricate plot with interacting characters and scenarios.
3. J. A. Jance, *Trial By Fire*.
4. *Archibald Rutledge—As I work on my biography of Old Flintlock, I am going back and reading all of his books again. I've started with *Fireworks in the Peafield Corner*, compiled by his son, Irvine; *We Called Him Flintlock*, written by Irvine; *Days Off in Dixie* and *Those Were the Days*.
5. *John Sandford, *Shock Wave*. I like Sandford not only because he tells a good tale but because he weaves outdoor-related material into most of his books, including this one.
6. *Wilbur Smith, *Those in Peril* (actually a re-reading, since I long ago devoured everything this great African novelist has produced). If you haven't read him, I highly recommend his works.

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