

# JIM CASADA OUTDOORS

## April 2015 Newsletter

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### Of Turkeys, Fools, and a Magnificent Obsession

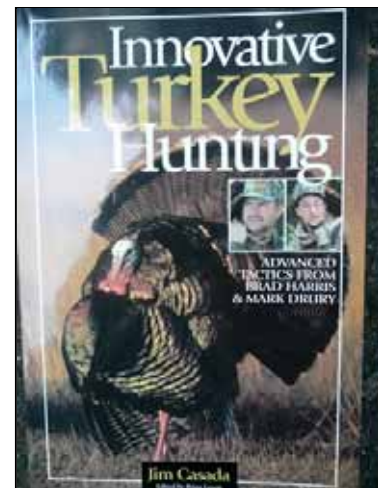
As I write this All Fool's Day lies just around the corner. I like to use that old-fashioned term for April Fool's Day for two reasons. First, because I've always been someone about as rooted in the past as I am in the present. Second, on the local scene the arrival of April marks the opening of the spring turkey hunting season, and anyone who pursues the grand birds with my single-minded avidity has to be reckoned something of a fool or at the very least a person whose priorities are a bit catawampus. In other words, what my good friend and noted writer on all things turkey, Tom Kelly, calls the Tenth Legion might well have another name. Calling the vast army of die-hard turkey hunters a Legion of Fools wouldn't be too wide of the mark.

The nature of April for me, year after year, is pretty much the same. I can scarcely contain myself as regards anticipation of the arrival of opening day. About the only thing that can compare that "can't wait" attitude is my focus on the arrival of the last day of the season. By that time I'm so sleep-deprived, so behind in garden and yard work, so arrears in my writing endeavors, and generally so out of sorts that I want to shout: "Hallelujah! It's over for another year." In other words, the life of a turkey hunter is a grand mixture of magic and misery, mystery and mishaps, mistakes and missteps. None of that bothers me in the least. I savor the sweet of spring, occasionally kill a turkey or two, and go on my way realizing as I do so that I long ago lost a corner of my soul to the wild turkey.

For present purposes, suffice it to say that I'll greet dawn in turkey woods come April 1, and I'll repeat that greeting most every day of April. The only exceptions will be a couple of travel days, and even then, I suspect I might try to get in a couple of hours in the prime time of early morning before hitting the road. The first week will see me roaming my home

#### This Month's Special

Some years back I wrote a book entitled *Innovative Turkey Hunting*. It was based on the accumulated wisdom of two highly experienced and skilled hunters and callers, Mark Drury and Brad Harris, and also featured a seasoning of my own thoughts on the sport.



It has been out of print for some time, but I have enough copies remaining to offer it to you folks as long as my stock lasts (I think there'll be enough to meet the response).

I'm offering it at \$12 postpaid (retail is \$19.95) to you loyal readers.

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turf, then come a few days in upper east Tennessee where I'll see a longtime friend and master turkey hunter (and reader of this newsletter), Larry Proffitt. I'll hunt a day with Larry and one with a good friend of his who has become a friend of mine as well, then spend the weekend at my undergraduate alma mater, King University. There I'll enjoy the school's annual "homecoming," known as the [Dogwood Festival](#), see some folks I haven't seen in decades, participate in a meeting of the Alumni Advisory Council of which I'm a member, offer a fly fishing clinic to anyone who might be interested, and generally try to call back yesteryear for a day or two.

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Then I'm off to Alabama for the annual mid-year board meeting of the [Southeastern Outdoor Press Association](#). We always meet at the location where our fall conference will be held, and this year that takes the organization's members to Eufaula. After the board meeting Pam Swanner, one of those dandy folks you meet in the outdoor industry, has arranged for those of us who are interested in turkeys to hunt for a couple of days. Pam handles public relations for the [Alabama Black Belt Adventures Association](#) in stellar fashion, and I know that our hunt at Great Southern Outdoors Plantation in Union Springs will be a dandy. Turkeys may or may not gobble, and triggers may or may not be squeezed, but I have total confidence that the arrangements will be first class and that and our hosts will do a topnotch job.

There will be a tincture of sadness along with this month of turkey-hunting gladness. Just over a week ago I got a phone call well into the evening from the wife of a lifelong friend, Bill Rolen. He was my boyhood trout fishing buddy and we also did a fair amount of small game hunting together as well. I've never had a stauncher friend and the times we enjoyed together just being boys in the world of the outdoors remain some of the finest times of my life. One of his final requests had been that I deliver his eulogy, and I was greatly honored to be asked. I hope my attempt to call back some of our many magical moments together did him justice, but I doubt that was the case. Rest assured that as I sit in the turkey woods, a grand place for pondering and quiet reflection, he'll be in my mind. We aren't blessed to have many "friends of a lifetime," and for me he was one.

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## Gardening

Of course there's another side of the April equation, and that's gardening. At this point I'm behind, not so much because of being slack but rather thanks to an unusually wet period in late winter and early spring. Other than putting in some horseradish roots, cutting up some Kennebec seed potatoes for planting, and ordering a bunch of seed from [Sow True Seed](#), I haven't done much. It's simply too wet to plow, and right now we have one of those steady rains that are both a bane and a blessing (depending on whether you want to plow or if crops need water).

We had a really hard freeze night before last (22 degrees when I got up Sunday morning), and it did a number on most of my flowering shrubs. I also suspect considerable damage to the blueberries, even though they were only in bud, not in bloom. Tender stuff just can't take six or eight hours well below freezing, not to mention a heavy frost in the bargain. I'm just a gardener, albeit one who goes at it on a pretty grand scale, and you have to feel for farmers in situations like this. It's all part of living close to the good earth, and no one who ever farmed or lived off the land would suggest for a moment that it is an easy life or one of sweet security. Still, those who love the good earth wouldn't so much as think of swapping their connection to it for those human buzzards circling endlessly along avenues of asphalt while pursuing their mindless daily routines.

As for April and gardening, circumstances permitting this month I'll get a great deal of stuff in the ground (some of it which should have gone in two or three weeks ago). Among the seed crops to be sown are lettuce, kale, mustard, spinach, chard, and leeks. I'll also plant potatoes and onion slips and nestle broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower plants in the ground. Add to that tomatoes to be started in flats and lots of chores in forms such as

getting up support for my Nantahala runner beans and climbing crowder peas, along with trying my latest measures in an endless (and losing) battle against deer, and there will be plenty to fill my hours away from the turkey woods.

As is always the case with my gardening efforts, spring brings the opportunity to try a few new vegetables. This year I'm reverting back to boyhood with plans for October beans, and I'm also going to try some mountain half runner beans. I doubt seriously if they'll be any better than the Nantahala runner beans given to me by my good buddy Ken Roper several years ago (he can trace the seed back for over 100 years), but I'm always up for something new. Other newbies will include a try at Black Krim tomatoes and raising candy roasters. When I mentioned the latter in this newsletter back in the fall, not one but several readers very graciously shared seed with me and, in one case, even arranged for a mutual friend, Tipper Pressley, to deliver me some mature squash. That's my kind of folks!

I'll close my thoughts on gardening by noting that it is one of the most peaceful, satisfying pursuits imaginable. A local woman once called me an "old dirt dauber," and I don't know that I've ever been paid a finer compliment. Put me on my knees with a trowel in my hand and dirt under my fingernails, and I'm happy as a hog at a trough just filled with slop. If you are a gardener, you know what I mean. I would also encourage those of you who do garden to save seeds and study the importance of growing foodstuffs (and flowers) which haven't been genetically modified to the nth degree. I worry about the predominance of the huge agro-chemical folks like Monsanto, and during my lifetime I have seen quantum changes in the nature of our garden plants. That's why I'm mentioning Sow True Seeds (and there are many similar companies devoted to preservation and perpetuation of old-time, proven plants).

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### **Nature's April Bounty**

The arrival of spring brings pleasures beyond gobbling turkeys, singing and mating birds, earth's renewal, and the joys of gardening. Two distinct sources of enjoyment which have always been of special note to me involve wildflowers and edible delicacies from the woodlands and fields. Although wildflowers reach their peak of bloom in this part of the world in early May, there's beauty aplenty to be seen in April. Redbuds and dogwoods lead the color parade, but in the forest understory, along fence rows, on banks, and indeed most anywhere the observant eye turns you'll encounter pure delight. Bluets and dandelions are already in flower here, as are redbuds, and the first hints of white have begun to show on dogwoods. When I take to the woods I'll find pawpaws in flower (I always note them because of their promise of a pawpaw pudding months down the road), and soon blackberries will show the first hints of white. With that, more likely than not, will come what I've variously heard described over the years as blackberry winter, catbird squall, dogwood winter, or simply a late "cold spell."



Bluets

Three things I associate with spring are prime edibles, and rest assured that the two of them to be found locally occupy some of my time and attention at this season. These items are ramps, morel mushrooms, and poke sallet. Ramps don't grow locally but are abundant (if you know where to look for them) in the high country of the Smokies where I grew up. Just the other day I read a comment from some citified fellow reckoning that ramps didn't have anywhere near the smell often mentioned in connection with them. Quite simply, the guy is either an idiot or his smell apparatus needs recalibrating. While it's true that when cooked ramps lose their pungency, a raw ramp (which is delicious) will redefine halitosis to the nth degree. By way of comparison garlic is a sissy.



Pawpaw

When I was a lad, anyone who came to school after having consumed raw ramps would unceremoniously be sent home immediately. The odor would permeate a classroom and leave students gasping and purt nigh gagging. A similar situation would develop in a backcountry campsite. Fortunately there's an easy answer. Once you eat a bait of raw ramps you won't smell a thing. Incidentally, they are mild to the taste and flat-out delicious when served in a salad featuring branch lettuce along with the ramps and a dressing of hot bacon grease and bacon bits to make a "kilt salad." The grease wilts the lettuce and the bacon adds flavor in a wondrous way.





Bowl of Ramps

While I can't avail myself of ramps in nearby woods, there is poke sallet aplenty along ditch banks, in old clearings, on rural roadsides, and the like. Finding poke is no problem, but it's morels which captivate me. They are elusive, pop out suddenly during warm spells (often after rain), and can be quite difficult to find. Yet the 100 or so acres I own produces a good crop of them year after year, and rest assured as I hunt turkeys there my eyes are also constantly searching for morels. Once located, they are of sufficient meaning to make me forget all about turkeys for a time. Indeed, I know of at least two occasions where my obsession with morels has cost me turkeys. But turkeys can be hunted for a month; morels are only around for 10 days to two weeks.

That's about it for this month other than to wish those of you who are turkey hunters all the best and those of you who garden bountiful harvests. I'm adding some recipes focusing in part on foods I've mentioned, and come next month I'll try to remember to give you a report on how things have gone for me in the turkey hunting woods.

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## Recipes

### SAUTEED MORELS

There are numerous ways to prepare morels, and I enjoy them in virtually any recipe I've ever tried. However, this is the way I always prepare the first batch of the spring.

Clean and rinse morels thoroughly after having let them soak in cold water for 15-30 minutes. Inspect carefully because critters like to crawl inside them and there's always a bit of dirt with which you need to deal. Slice in half lengthwise and then pat dry with towels.

Put a few pats of butter (the real McCoy) in a large frying pan and melt it before adding the sliced morels. Simmer until the morels are cooked. They will shrink

quite a bit and, thanks to the fact they hold considerable moisture, you'll have lots of a juice/butter combination in the pan. You might want to save this flavorful broth to use in a morel soup or chowder (see below) or I like to dip toast points in it.

Eat the morels piping hot as an appetizer or as a side dish to scrambled eggs.

### MOREL CHOWDER

2 cups morels, cleaned and sliced  
 ¼ cup chopped onion  
 1 cup peeled, diced potatoes  
 ½ cup finely chopped celery  
 ½ cup finely chopped carrots  
 4 tablespoons butter  
 2 tablespoons olive oil  
 1 tablespoon flour  
 2 tablespoons cold water  
 2 cups chicken broth (or use the broth left from sautéed morels in combination with chicken broth)  
 ½ teaspoon salt  
 ½ teaspoon black pepper  
 1 cup whole milk  
 ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Clean and slice mushrooms; chop vegetables. Melt butter and add olive oil. Add onions and sauté until tender. Add mushrooms, potatoes, celery, and carrots; cover and cook on medium for 15-20 minutes or until vegetables are tender. In a small bowl, thoroughly combine flour with cold water and slowly stir into vegetables. Add broth, salt and pepper until heated through. Add milk and Parmesan cheese and heat; do not boil. Serve immediately topped with additional Parmesan cheese and paprika.



Morels



Cooking Morels

### KILT RAMPS AND BRANCH LETTUCE SALAD

This is a salad I've never eaten anywhere except in the wilds, and given the pungency of raw ramps maybe that's best. However, so long as you aren't going to be out in public, and provided other members of your household indulge, there's no reason not to have this delicious dish at home.

Gather a batch of ramps and branch lettuce (saxifrage) and clean thoroughly. Cut the roots off the end of the ramp bulb. Some folks also cut away most of the ramp leaves, although it is edible. Chop up the ramps and tear the branch lettuce leaves into pieces. If by chance you have water cress available, it is a nice addition to the salad as well. Stir lightly to mix lettuce and ramps.

Dress with a "kilt" bacon dressing. To make this, fry a few strips of bacon until crisp, remove and crumble while reserving the hot grease. Reintroduce the crumbled bacon to the grease and pour over the ramps and lettuce. If you happen to be so fortunate, this goes quite nicely with a mess of morels and some pan-fried, freshly caught trout.



Water Cress

### POKE SALLET

Gather a mess of tender poke sprouts (they are best when 3 to 5 inches high) and rinse thoroughly to remove any dirt. Place in a pot and bring the water to a rolling boil, then cool to a simmer before pouring the poke sallet and water into a colander to drain. Repeat the process at least once and preferably twice. The reason for doing this is that poke weed is exceptionally rich in Vitamin A, so much so that it can be toxic unless you use this cook and drain process to remove some of the vitamin.

Next place the drained poke in a skillet with a bit of melted butter or bacon grease. Heat until piping hot, add salt and black pepper to taste, and serve immediately. Some folks like to garnish with chopped boiled eggs or to break a couple of eggs into the greens when they are added to the skillet and stir until the eggs have cooked.

A pone of cornbread or cathead biscuits goes mighty fine with poke sallet.

### FRIED TURKEY TENDERS

Cut half a wild turkey breast into one-inch strips, making sure you cut across the grain. Then beat with a meat hammer until holy (in other words, pound the hell out of the strips). Marinate for an hour or two in buttermilk. Dip strips in flour, and then dip in beaten eggs before flouring a second time. Fry in piping hot canola oil until golden brown (make sure the oil is hot before you add the strips). Serve immediately.

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