

Jim Casada Outdoors

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Jim's Doin's

The last few weeks have been a distinctly mixed bag. Locally, turkey season has thus far been an absolute bust for me. Some days I've heard distant gobbling, one morning I had an extended interchange with a gobbler but the fact that he had multiple hens as companions meant the skillet stayed cold, and on my most recent outings I've not so much as heard a turkey. Add to that the fact that for the first time in a decade morels have been almost non-existent and you get the picture of a hunter down in the dumps. On top of that we've had not one but two hard freezes since gardening season arrived, but fortunately the only things I had in the ground were cold hardy. I'll get tomatoes in this week and should be past the danger point.

On the flip side of matters, during a trip to east Tennessee to hunt with two staunch buddies who are die-hard (and highly skilled) turkey hunters, Fred Markland and Larry Proffitt, I had a wonderful time. Lots of turkey talk the first morning out, never mind that it was bone-chilling cold, and an hour and half into the hunt, after having watched a bunch of turkeys leave the roost in all directions, I killed what Grandpa Joe would have styled "a sho nuff golly-whomper."



The gobbler had one curved, sharp spur measuring a legitimate inch and a half. In an anomaly I've never seen, the other spur looked like what you'd find on a late hatch two-year-old – just a triangle of perhaps a half inch at best. It wasn't broken, which both Fred and I initially thought was the case; it just wasn't fully developed. Throw in an 11-inch beard and a weight Fred figured to be 23 pounds and you've got a fine gobbler.



Overnight it rained, the wind howled, and there was snow in the forecast at higher elevations. All in all the makings of a pretty miserable second day, but Larry and I persevered (and saw lots of birds on the roost). They left us at fly-down time and we saw nothing the rest of the day. Offsetting that, however, was lunch at Larry's family restaurant, the famed Ridgewood BBQ, where accomplished writer Mike Altizer and avid grouse hunter and reader Albert Mull joined us. It made for a convivial hour and a half, and my BBQ plate was enough to leave me sleepy in the woods AND with plenty left over for supper.

Last month also found me making a quick trip to Orlando for the mid-year board meeting of the [Southeastern Outdoor Press Association](#). It went well and as always, it was a delight to see fellow adventurers in the world of outdoor communication and to swap stories with folks whom I've called good friends for decades. Had circumstances been otherwise I would have been involved in an Osceola hunt as well, but at the time planning for the meeting was being handled I was uncertain about my wife's status and figured on being away from home no longer than absolutely necessary. As it was, I simply reveled vicariously in the pleasure of others – several turkeys were taken and they saw an eagle attack a decoy.

That's about it on the home front. **If you live in the Bryson City area I'll be there on Thursday evening, May 5 for a talk to the local genealogical society.** I'd love to have you attend. The event, which is free and open to the public, will basically involve me indulging in storytelling. My talk will focus on several of the individuals who will be featured in my upcoming book on mountain characters. If interested, [drop me an e-mail](#) and I'll provide full details on time, location, etc. for my presentation. Now, while I'm in a nostalgic mood, something that's increasingly a part of my life, let's turn to the subject of this month's newsletter – fond memories of a vanished friend.

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Missing Mr. Bob

When you reach the point of accumulated years I have behind me, your mind inevitably does some musing on things you miss and the vanished joys of yester-youth. These mental meanderings vary immensely, in my case ranging across subjects such as the innocence of boyhood when my thoughts focused on the next fishing trip, perhaps recollections of my girl friend of the moment, the first day Mom would let me go barefooted, catching spring lizards or night crawlers to sell to the local bait and tackle store, locating a prime patch of wild strawberries, or any of dozens of the simple things in life when you are young. They inevitably gave way to the more momentous considerations that come with passing years, but that in no sense diminishes the joys of those days or the pleasures of looking back on them.

Not only do I miss the simplicity of youth; I miss things once taken for granted – ridges in my beloved Smokies where there was no steep slope building (something that scars the mountains now almost anywhere you look); rabbits so plentiful that a party could go out on a Saturday hunt with realistic expectations of a collective bag of twenty or more cottontails; weekday trout fishing forays where it was unlikely you would encounter more than one or two other fishermen (if any); and Saturday matinee movies where a quarter would get you a rollicking Western, a cartoon, the latest installment of a serial, and a dope (what soft drinks were commonly called when I was a boy), and a candy bar. I also miss the boundless energy of youth, a time of so much optimism when everything seemed right and bright. More than anything though, I bemoan the long ago days when I truly enjoyed all that is implied by the word carefree.

My boyhood was indeed pretty much free of care, even though I now realize that the economic status of my parents was, at best, lower middle class. But almost everyone we knew – neighbors, classmates, extended family, fellow church members, and indeed the entire community, lived in similar circumstances. I never stayed in a motel until I was grown, was 25 when I first saw the ocean, probably hadn't eaten a dozen "sit down" restaurant meals by the time I went off to college, didn't really realize that there were actually people in the wider world with loads of money, and was incredibly naïve in countless ways. Truth be told, I greatly miss that innocence and that time of simpler days and simpler ways.

Those times included endless hours spent outside, and leisure time at this season of the year normally found me involved in one of three or four regular pursuits. I spent a lot of time playing marbles, a pastime which seems to have largely vanished. Fly fishing for trout obsessed me to such a degree that when I had a backcountry camping/fishing trip planned I would literally sleep on the floor as “practice” for bedding down on the ground beneath a tent. There was always some semi-aimless wandering where I looked for new patches of wild strawberries or blackberries coming into bloom, knowing they could produce pocket money when picking time came in late spring and early summer; gathering poke sallet for sale; and my own special type of bird watching.

Memory is a mirror that distorts, and distant reflections on childhood, filled with nostalgia and polished by the passage of the decades, are distorted most of all. I’ll readily acknowledge as much, and with advancing age my mind has, almost as if my persona had less than full control of it, become wonderfully adept at calling back the most magical and meaningful aspects of yester-youth. Yet I’m firmly convinced that for one such memory there is little if any burnishing, no gilding of the lily or romanticizing beyond the actual facts. That centers of what was for me once a simply yet supremely satisfying aspect of spring that has vanished like pine pollen driven away by winds and washed clean by the showers those zephyrs bring – the lovely two- and sometimes three-note call of the quail. It has been years since I’ve heard so much as a single “bob white” or “bob, bob white” ringing clear as a bell through the fields and woodlands of greening-up time.

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I realize that many, indeed most, of you who read these monthly meanderings don’t hunt quail. In many cases you aren’t hunters at all, while for those of you who are it’s pretty darn difficult to hunt something that isn’t found where you live except in the artificial circumstances of a shooting preserve. Yet if your years number more than fifty, and especially if they edge upwards another decade or two and if you grew up in the country or spending much time outdoors in auld lang syne, you likely once harkened to the lovely springtime song of Mr. Bob.

As a youngster the mating call of the bobwhite punctuated my springtime ramblings in a soothing fashion. Hearing the sound took me back to the covey rises of a few months earlier along with offering fair promise of bird hunts to come a few months down the road. Quail were almost family friends. Every little farm, every few acres of overgrown fields or farmed-out land gone to broom sedge held a “home” covey. I now know that my youth came in the final decade or so of the golden era of the bobwhite, and whether I’ll live to see that shining time in the sun – a period stretching from the 1920s to the late 1960s – return is problematic.

There is, to be sure, hope. Wildlife researchers, state wildlife agencies, and committed partners who share my passion



A hunter fires at a bird found in traditional pine and broom sedge cover.

for what everyone simple called “birds” in my youth have joined hands to form the [National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative](#), and they are taking steps we must hope will someday, some way call back a world we have to a considerable degree lost. Similarly, the conservation group, [Quail Forever](#), is busy working on habitat improvement, hunter awareness, and fostering of effective land management policies.

Meanwhile, as these laudable initiatives pursue a dream I once knew as reality, I thought this an appropriate time to take a longing look backward to a shining aspect of my past. **What follows is a sort of indulgence in nostalgia wrapped around the bobwhite quail, the literature of the sport, its special features, and what hunting birds has meant to me.** All of this came to mind over the last few days as I sat in the woods of spring trying to come to grips with turkeys and suddenly realizing that there was a real element of silence in spring (never mind that I am anything but an admirer of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which arguably for all its good intentions has been indirectly responsible for untold numbers of human deaths worldwide); namely, not a single note, much less a recurrent series of calls as a cock quail sought a mate, have I heard.

Perhaps no writer on that perky little prince of game birds, the noble bobwhite, has written with greater eloquence or insight than Havilah Babcock, whose enduring tales of quails are found in books bearing delightful titles such as *I Don’t Want to Shoot an Elephant*, *Jaybirds Go to Hell on Friday*, and *My Health Is Better in November*. Eminently quotable, as one might expect from a master wordsmith who doubled as a university English professor, Babcock blessed us with countless memorable quotations. **One of my favorites harkens back to the days of youth. “Boyhood improves with age,” he wrote, “and the more remote it is the nicer boyhood seems to become.”**

In the case of those halcyon days when we were brash, boisterous, and bullet-proof,



A brace of bobs.



A sight from yesteryear—a double and a brace of birds.

reminiscing is a mental exercise from which it is possible to derive an ample measure of quiet pleasure. Alas, indulging in longing looks backward to the days when quail were plentiful presents quite a different scenario. It means traveling a path marked by signposts of sadness. To me, it is almost tragic to think that youngsters of today cannot experience the splendid shock of a covey of two dozen wild birds bursting from underfoot; have no way of knowing the inexpressible joy of a nifty left-and-right on bundles of feathered dynamite which are rank strangers to a flight pen. **With such thoughts in mind, kindly join a fellow who is a tad long in the teeth and sparse in the hackle for a fond look backward as we take the trail leading back to the bobwhite's shining era in the sun.**



Sharing a special moment after a covey rise.

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As I have already suggested, the period when beavies of bobwhites were found in great abundance over a goodly portion of the American landscape embraced several decades from early in the 20th century into the late 1950s or early 1960s. In retrospect, we can readily perceive the circumstances which produced an incredible bounty of the saucy little patrician of peafield corners and briar-infested fencerows. All were, in one way or another, habitat-related, and all have disappeared like a milkweed seed caught in a September breeze.

It was a time of sharecroppers and small farmers, folks who worked the land by hand and with teams of horses or mules. The concept of "clean farming" was both impractical and unknown, and those staunch sons of the soil routinely left field edges and ditch banks in an overgrown state. They allowed worn-out land to revert to broom sedge and pines, and the practice of leaving field corners unharvested was commonplace. Raptors were shot on sight, with every hawk being deemed a "chicken" hawk. My Grandpa Joe would have had my hide for not shooting (or more precisely for the most part, shooting at) any hawk we encountered. Fur-bearing nest predators – possums, 'coons, skunks, rats, snakes, and foxes – were trapped, hunted for food or fur, or killed on sight. Snakes, except for black snakes which kept rodent populations under control around barns and corn cribs, were not only killed; they were displayed on fences as a sort of message. Coyotes were at that point unknown over most of the South, the heartland of the noble quail and homeland of the strongest traditions associated with the bird. Foxes weren't just hunted; they were killed. In other words, **an area encompassing tens of millions of acres was overseen by an army of unofficial, unpaid, yet highly effective gamekeepers.**

There were, to be sure, other environmental factors of note. Fire ants, a painful, prolific pest surely begotten by Beelzebub (I've always liked the old mountain variation, Be-hell-ze-bub), had yet to make their way across the Southland. Controlled burning was done as a matter of course over much of the quail's range before there was widespread concern about air pollution. Fescue, that grassy invention of the Devil and bane of bobwhites, had yet to be mistakenly hailed as a miracle grass. Monoculture featuring crops which were detrimental to quail was just coming into vogue.

Ironically, given the way that longleaf pines/wiregrass acreage with plenty of open areas underneath and practices of regular burning had been so beneficial to quail, dense pine plantations may have topped the list of developments inimical to quail. They provided wonderful cover for half dozen years or so and then suddenly became biological deserts shading out everything else.

Nor should the nature of those who hunted quail be forgotten in the overall picture of which it can truly be said, "those were the days." It wasn't necessarily a rich man's sport. Most any sportsman could afford a few shells to feed his inexpensive autoloader or pump and was capable of providing training and upkeep for a couple of "meat dogs," no matter how questionable their lineage. Hunters of this ilk (this writer came from such roots) lived close to the land and as a result had an instinctive understanding of management. They also realized the benefits to be reaped from occasional gifts such as a bag of citrus fruit, a brace of rabbits, or a Christmas ham to po' folks who let them hunt and carefully kept track of the "doings" of coveys on their land.

Most of those who hunted quail with a passion were what folks referred to, in my youth, as sporting gentlemen. They weren't necessarily affluent, but they appreciated ambiance and tradition. When these individuals ventured afield it was usually with vintage American side-by-sides bearing such proud names such as Fox, Parker, or a Winchester Model 21 cradled in their arm. It is no chronological accident that the heyday of these great American-made doubles almost exactly paralleled that of the quail. Partnered with these beautifully balanced guns were elegant canine companions. Duxbak clothing, now long gone, was *de rigueur* when it came to attire. Simply put, these fellows knew their stuff.

Most shot with an efficiency of the sort we equate with the likes of Nash Buckingham. They fully understood the importance of never, ever overshooting a covey, and so much as a thought of taking a shot at a bird which flew towards a companion's line of fire never crossed their minds. Appreciation of the breeding and training of fine bird dogs was likewise an integral part of their being. Theirs was a deeply rooted feeling for all the many manifestations of a true quail hunter, from the heady aroma of Hoppe's No. 9 in the gun room to a feast of fired quail flanked by cathead biscuits on the table or reliving the glories of a day afield when deliciously tired and comforted by some brown liquid. In their libraries you would find books by wonderful chroniclers who not only shot but shared the experience in incomparable fashion – Babcock, Bigelow, and Buckingham; Ruark and Rutledge; the Charley and Charlie boys (Dickey and Elliott). These were gentlemen hunters to the core.

No one, not even farsighted biologists throwing out the occasional cautionary word, really thought the golden age in which these men lived would ever end. Birds (and to anyone of my generation who grew up around quail that is the appropriate term) were pretty much taken for granted. After all, they were there and had been there for all the time within living memory. Other than occasional mutterings about the mysterious infusion of "Mexican quail," a vague, xenophobic term used to describe bobwhites which flew into trees or headed straight for the nearest hell hole when flushed, or the sort of "it ain't like it once was" conversations which have always been common coinage with sportsmen, all seemed more or less right in the world of the wild quail.

Then, in an amazingly short period of time – less than a generation – the noble little patrician was for all practical purposes gone. That time span happened to coincide almost exactly with my young adulthood. No longer did you hear mating calls from all points of the compass on balmy mornings in late April or early May. No more did the plaintive whistling of scattered coveys trying to reassemble punctuate the gloaming after a day ended with a sunset covey. Gone were those mesmerizing moments, ever heart stopping and never quite predictable, when a whopping covey suddenly took wing beneath one's feet. Sometimes that magic would be experienced 12, 15, or even 20 times a day.

Gradually those occasions declined and then they just disappeared. About all that is left are memories – the comfort of my well-worn Fox Sterlingworth or Dad's old Ithaca 12 gauge side-by-side that accounted for birds without number, an old Duxbak vest stained and ragged from years of hard use, and warm thoughts produced by realization that mine was the great good fortune to live in the final days of what was truly a wingshooter's shining era in the sun.

Will the sweet sound of whirring wings, the heart-stopping beauty of a sunset point, the timeless partnership of a man and a dog wise in the ways of wild birds ever return? Perhaps, and I would certainly encourage you, if you care, to become familiar with the efforts of the [National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative](#) and [Quail Forever](#), along with what specific programs to help bobwhite are in place in your state, and do your part to bring back Mr. Bob. For now, I realize just at how blessed I was to have been there and to have days to recall and dreams to remember, and in doing so I'm passing lonely. I miss Mr. Bob and what he meant to the world in which I grew up.

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Recipes

HAMBURGER TIME'S A-COMING

With spring finally here, it's once more time to think about firing up the grill and preparing all that wide array of wonderful main dishes that lend themselves to such preparation. It also isn't too early to begin making serious inroads on what was hopefully a freezer full of venison at the time your deer season ended. With those thoughts in mind, this selection of recipes is devoted exclusively to hamburgers. My burger happens to be venison, and that's pretty much the only ground meat I use, but these recipes, while geared towards venison cookery, will work perfectly well with beef.

BLUE BURGERS

1 pound ground venison
1 teaspoon Montreal Steak Seasoning (or your favorite)
4 tablespoons blue cheese crumbles, divided
1 ½ teaspoons olive oil
1 ½ teaspoons Worcestershire sauce

Gently mix ground venison and steak seasoning and form into four patties. Make an indentation in the center of each burger and add one tablespoon blue cheese crumbles to each burger. Carefully wrap meat around cheese, being sure to totally enclose it. Place burgers on a platter and drizzle olive oil and Worcestershire sauce atop them, then turn to coat well. Let burgers come to room temperature while the grill preheats. Grill 6-7 minutes per side over medium heat. Serve on toasted buns with condiments of your choice.

MEXICAN BURGERS

1 pound ground venison
¼ cup finely chopped onion
½ to 1 teaspoon chili powder (or to taste)
¼ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon finely minced jalapeno pepper (or to taste)
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper

Combine all ingredients well and shape into four patties. Grill or pan fry to desired doneness. Serve burgers on tortillas (cut in half for a better fit), pita bread, or hamburger buns with traditional taco toppings of your choice such as salsa, shredded cheese, sour creams, guacamole, or diced tomatoes. Goes mighty well with a Corona or two.

ITALIAN BURGERS

1 egg
¼ cup regular oats
2 tablespoons ketchup
¾ teaspoon dried Italian seasoning
1 garlic clove, finely minced
2 tablespoons finely chopped onion
¼ teaspoon salt
1 pound ground venison
4 mozzarella cheese slices

Lightly beat egg with a fork and stir in oats. Add ketchup, Italian seasoning, garlic, onion, salt and ground venison. Mix well and shape into four patties. Grill, turning once, until desired doneness is reached. Top with cheese and continue on heat until cheese melts. Serve on toasted buns with ketchup, lettuce, and tomatoes.

BURGERS WITH TOMATO TOPPER

1 pound ground venison

Handle gently and make into four patties. Grill until done and serve on toasted buns with tomato topper.

Tomato Topper

2 tablespoons olive oil
2 teaspoons lemon juice
1 teaspoon dried basil
Salt and pepper to taste

Mix ingredients with wire whisk and pour atop slice or diced tomatoes and red onion. Toss and serve atop burgers or as a side dish.

VENISON BURGERS WITH HORSERADISH SAUCE

1 pound ground venison
2 tablespoons steak sauce
½ teaspoon garlic salt
¼ teaspoon pepper

Gently mix ground venison with seasonings. Shape into four patties and chill burgers before cooking. Lightly oil grill top and grill over medium coals about 10 minutes, turning once. Serve on warm buns with lettuce, tomato, pickles, and horseradish sauce.

Horseradish Sauce

½ cup plain yogurt or sour cream
1 tablespoon prepared horseradish (or if you grow it, which I do, grind your own root)
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Blend in a small bowl and use instead of mayonnaise or mustard.

CAROLINA STYLE BURGERS

1 pound ground venison
1/3 cup uncooked oats
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

Mix ingredients and shape into four patties. Grill, turning once. Serve on buns topped with chili, cole slaw, mustard, and chopped onions. Pile condiments high and provide plenty of napkins.

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