

Reflections on the Spring Turkey Season

By Ross Stevens

The spring Turkey season is just ending here in Vermont and it has been one of my most memorable hunting seasons, even though I never fired a shot. This year I introduced my nine year-old son Jed to hunting – and he loves it. Jed took the Hunter Education class this winter here at NorthWoods and was anxiously awaiting the Spring Turkey season in early May. I had never been Turkey hunting, so we enlisted the help of our friend Chris, who picked us up at 4:30 am on the first day of the Youth Weekend (April 26 & 27).

The first day was relatively uneventful. As we set up our decoys in the cool, dark morning we flushed a turkey out of a tree. Turkeys sleep high in the trees, safe from nocturnal predators (many hunters scout in the evening to find the birds' night roosts). The next day was one we will always remember and, in all likelihood, made Jed an avid, lifelong hunter.

We set up our decoys along the edge of a field with a view of the sunrise over Burke Mountain and the fog-filled Passumpsic River valley. Shortly after first light a hen started responding to our calls. Turkey decoys and a variety of calls are used to bring turkeys to within shooting range of the camouflaged hunter, who must sit as still as possible as turkeys have extremely good eyesight. Soon the hen was visible coming our way. Following the first hen was a tom in full display—tail fanned and head changing color from red to bright blue—and four additional hens. The first hen came within 5 or 6 feet, so close we hardly dared breath. And though the tom never came within range it would take a much better writer than myself to capture the excitement of a nine year-old boy on his first hunt. At a new spot we were able to call in a Jake – an immature male, distinguishable by its middle tail feathers being longer than the others. We got a shot, but unfortunately, missed.

We spent many other mornings, on weekends and even before school, out in the woods before light and saw or heard many turkeys. We also saw moose, deer, and numerous birds. Over the course of the month we watched spring take hold, from the first blush of green to full leaf out. We watched fiddleheads uncurl into full-grown ostrich ferns. Jed learned to identify the call of the pilliated woodpecker and the drum of ruffed grouse, in addition to the cluck, purr or chirp of a hen turkey. He became a hunter and though we both have a lot to learn about turkey hunting I am proud of how he did his first season and looking forward to many more.

I feel strongly that when young people are introduced to hunting they learn about the environment and, as a result, become life-long conservationists. They dedicate themselves to the preserving not only game species, but the environment as a whole. Hunting has connected Jed to the landscape of his community, as well as strengthening bonds with family and friends (he has been hunting with his grandmother, an uncle and a cousin, in addition to myself and Chris). Hunting is a rich tradition and part of the fabric of life in the Kingdom and instilling it in our local youth is worthy cause.