



2013 Fall Ozark Heritage Turkey Hunt

by Gary E. Johnson

My mind wanders a little as I try to sit motionless with my back against an oak tree on a ridge in central Missouri. To my left and calling, is my friend and world-renowned wild turkey hunter, Ray Eye.

I think about how an Indiana boy ends up here in a fall cathedral of color, above the scenic Piney River, with a flintlock smoothbore across his lap.

Over 33 years ago, I was encouraged to attend an Indiana Chapter of the Wild Turkey Federation seminar in Seymour, Indiana, by who would become one of my best hunting and shooting partners, Jim Farmer. Jim was the first in our neck of the woods to take up turkey hunting. I was invited to go to central Indiana with a group that could fit in a pickup truck.

There was a camp of hunters from other parts of the state that had met at Clark State Forest in previous years. One bird was taken out of that camp, and I got to call to some wild turkeys myself. This was my first taste of turkey hunting that would come to dominate my thoughts and efforts for years to come.

The Laughery Valley Fish and Game Club started encouraging the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to look at southeast Indiana as a release site for the re-introduction of wild turkeys. They had yet to release on private ground. The spring of 1983, I was able to take my first turkey out at the Jefferson Proving Grounds, a military installation that had a draw for hunting. I was one of six successful hunters. At this time the state's total harvest was still under 100 birds.

Our small group traveled to Missouri to chase turkeys. We ended up on DD out of Belgrade, near Johnson Mountain. It turns out that Ray Eye was raised and got his outdoor education at Johnson Mountain on his grandpa's farm. While we were not yet acquainted, our paths were beginning to converge. Before taking my second bird in Missouri, I had made a few trips to the woods with a 20 ga. flintlock trade gun.

We were making history in 1984, as we began to re-introduce turkeys into southeast Indiana. Biologists identified 19 sites in 7 counties. Our area biologist Ed Guljas asked if there

were five or so club members who would be willing to help. Jim Farmer, Bob Hughes, John Cummins, Mark Ginder, and I became the Wild Turkey Committee for Southeast Indiana. We set up an informational meeting regarding the re-introduction. It was an overflow crowd and confirmed the local interest in this project.

We started in Jefferson County, east of Madison on the property that now makes up the Splinter Ridge Fish and Wildlife area. Jefferson got three sites and Ohio County got two.

On a 20 below zero January day, we released turkeys in Switzerland County. The sites were to be "shot gunned." The chosen sites were to be no more than a few miles in between, so the birds could intermingle and fill the entire available habitat in a short number of years. Each site would consist of 11 juvenile and/or adult hens and 4 adult gobblers. This would be the seed of southeastern Indiana's turkey population. The bulk of the birds came from Missouri, but when the trapping became overly successful for hens, we had to shut them off until we could introduce gobblers in the already full hen sites. My home county of Ripley only got one release site and the 4th gobbler was introduced in the winter of 1985, along with the Fayette and Franklin counties that were not gotten to that first year.

We began hunting these birds after only three breeding seasons in 1987. While our group was the most knowledgeable about turkey hunting in our area, it was natural that we were conducting "Wild Turkey Seminars." First with local talent, then Indiana state chapter guys, and to keep improving, we began hiring nationally known speakers to improve our event. We filled a 600-seat auditorium. Also we had booths selling all manner of turkey hunting equipment. At our pinnacle, we got Ray Eye come speak at our seminar. His easy going, down to earth, "one of us" persona made him a club and crowd favorite. With 13 years of seminars, we had Ray speak three of those times. He was a hit at the pre-seminar parties we threw at the club on the Saturday prior to a Sunday Seminar. Thinking back now, that was risky business, but it all worked.

After a while, the stores were full of turkey hunting gear. Local wild turkey chapters were formed and seminars were taking off in adjoining states. We confined our efforts to local youth seminars conducted free at our club-



house facility. Ray Eye continued to support our efforts and any time he came to our area, a contingent of our guys would go out to see him.

We considered him a good friend that lived 500 miles away in Missouri. With email and cell phones, we kept up with each other's lives.

I got an email in the fall of 2013: "Johnson, what would you think about coming out for an Ozark fall retro-hunt?" It was Ray.

I asked, "What do you mean by retro-hunt?"

Ray answered, "Bring your smooth-bore and whatever clothes are appropriate for your time period. No camo, face nets or the like." Ray said he would be wearing bibbed overalls, an old fedora, and using his grandpa's double barrel caplock. He sent photos of a DuPont powder can with wire eyelets to hold a strap with a whittled plug stopper to use as a powder flask. There was Grandpa's Damascus skinning knife. Ray had grown a year old full beard for the occasion. It looked reddish to start and became more gray as it grew.

"Do you want to come to the Ozarks? I want to shoot you "with a camera" on a retro-hunt.

I couldn't get the word "YES!" out of my mouth fast enough.

Now I'm snapped back to the present by a turkey shaped snag on the edge of



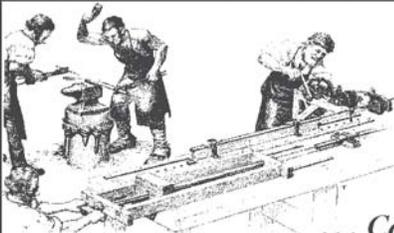
Ray Eye

what I can see. I stare at it until I am satisfied that it is not a turkey. The buggers will pop their heads up and take a look and disappear, many times without notice. I use one of the few techniques I that learned from a magazine years back, "Look to the forest curtain." Starting out as far as I can turn my head, I begin a concentrated search of every inch, for as far as I can see. Sometimes a big cedar tree blocks all distant vision, but I am careful to look under and around for as far as the underbrush will allow.

I continue to move slowly taking in every detail. Rarely can I get through the full rotation without something catching my attention and requiring further scrutiny. I think of how many deer I have found standing nearby with this method. I hear Ray moving and folding up his camera tripod legs. We are moving on.

We slip along the ridge-top path and come to a fork. Ray points to a ladder stand left from a previous deer season. This time I am directed to a Southern Pine to sit against. Ray takes up a position behind, looking over my right shoulder. We have done this dozens of times over the last three days. The woods have been like a slice of death with no wind, no birds chirping, no squirrels moving, and not much in the way of turkey talk, except for the calling from Ray.

We settle in, and Ray begins with a series of fall calls with a diaphragm of kee kee runs and low talk. It evolves into more aggressive gobbler yelps. His series of calls go longer than what I would do in spring calling. I assume this is an assembly call. Ray, somehow, broke the glass in his well-worn Turkey Witch call. I heard the mumbling, and when I understood what had happened, I pitched him my glass call that he had given me years ago. We are calling to the world again.



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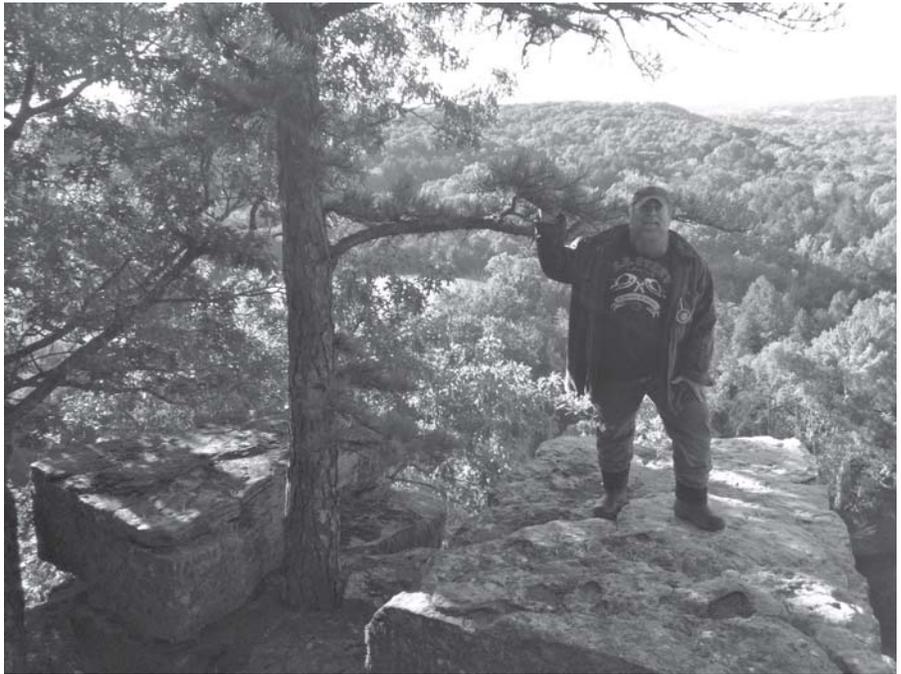
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I snuggle against the pine and am pleased the big plates of bark are at least soft enough to not dig into my back. I feel that I should check my head net, but alas we are not using such devices. I am dressed in two layers of hunting shirts and a dark brown rifle frock with a black silk scarf to break up the light colored shirts. My cocked black hat is adorned with a couple of Missouri turkey wing feathers that I've picked up over the last couple of days. I look down at my legs covered by elk skin leggings and notice one of my finger woven leg ties is missing. Jim Farmer's wife, Nancy, had made the set for me probably 30 years ago. Now one has been left to the Ozark turkey gods as tribute.

Since it was just at freezing this morning, I allowed myself a pair of gloves. I always cut the tips off the trigger finger and the thumb so I have real touch for operating the hammer and trigger. I open the frizzen of the Queen Anne lock and check the prime. Since it has been there for awhile, I blow it out and freshen it with new priming powder. Using a salvaged piano wire as a pick, I probe the touchhole, and as it shoved in, I can feel the 2F powder in the 12 ga. barrel. When it grinds as I pick it, I know it is dry and waiting for a spark. I look at the flint again, sure that it is tight in the jaws of the ham-



Ray Eye on the bluff

mer. It is on half cock and the frizzen returned to the closed position. "Lady Die" is ready for whatever comes.

This 12 ga. flint fowler was built for me by Arlin Blair. He was older than most of the guys I ran with. He was always quick with a prank and never failed to razz you if you messed up. Arlin's guns are cherished by those who were lucky enough to have one. I traded him

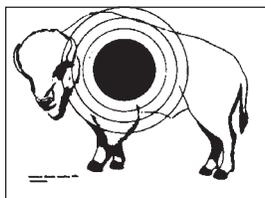
an overhead pickup camper for a .32 caliber flint Bean style rifle in 1982. I won my first National match with it and held a National Record for Rifle Frolic for several years. It was my first flintlock gun, and I never looked back.

In the fall of 1998, Arlin was in Friendship, Indiana at the NMLRA Championships. Arlin was buying gun parts with winnings from the gambling

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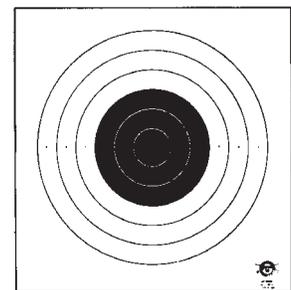
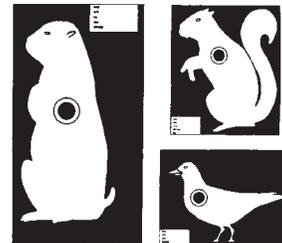
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boat on the Ohio River. He said he was going to build five or six guns that winter. I gave him a choked 12 ga. barrel and a good lock that I had won in a shooting match. I asked him to make me a turkey gun. I wanted a walnut stock and browned barrel and furniture, nothing shiny or fancy. He called that next spring. Diana and I drove 10 hours down and back to Pine Top, Kentucky to pick it up.

I killed my first bird with it in Boone County, Kentucky, in the new Adair Fish and Wildlife Area. Since then I have hunted almost exclusively turkeys with it. As a matter of fact, it came to this fall hunt with 15 birds to its credit. My goal is to kill a grand slam with it some day, but so far Easterns are my bread and butter.

Ray is on the move again! I gather myself and fall in behind him as we slip down the trail. The leaves that have fallen are not dried out yet and the moisture in them makes for quiet walking. I walk when Ray walks, stop when he stops. He made some soft calls without setting up this time. I saw him perk up, and as he made a step forward I heard one pop over the break of the hill. I moved up to him and touched his shoulder. I pointed in the direction of the sound and we picked out trees to get against immediately. I was on the turkey side of the ridge top trail, and Ray took up a position to my left on the other side of the trail. He was about 25 feet away. I saw him set up his camera and proceed to take some establishment film of the surrounding area. I rechecked my prime and squirmed into a comfortable sitting position with my left knee pulled up for a rest for my flinter.

It wasn't long before Ray was hitting them with calls. Almost immediately turkey sounds were emanating from under the hill. I saw a head poke up at about 40 yards out. Popping was more frequent and another and another head appeared. They moved closer and were joined by several more birds. I could see beards on each of them. One came around the left side of the group and fanned out for a bit and gobbled. This prompted several of the others to gobble, and we were in turkeys deep. Ray continued to challenge them, and they responded by moving closer. The air was electric with turkey talk. I was at the edge of what I considered my shot range and



wished they were just a bit closer. I pulled the hammer to full cock. Turkeys were two and three deep, and it appeared to be about a dozen. As the group started to spread out and move to the right, I zeroed in on one lone bird with his head held high.

My gun shoots a little low unless you pull a bead on the entire front sight. When the time comes and the trigger is pulled, the hammer holding the flint will fall. The flint being harder than the frizzen will shave pieces of metal off the frizzen in the form of sparks. The sparks will land in the pan with the priming powder, which will ignite with a flash. The flash of fire will travel through the 1/16th inch touchhole to the 80 grains of powder and it will ignite the main charge. The rapid expansion of gasses will push the column of over powder wad, felt wad, a half ounce of

one and one-half ounce of copper-plated #4s topped with an over shot card, out into space. The shot leaves the 42-inch barrel with a cloud of white smoke as it races to its target madder than a swarm of angry bees.

As they started to get itchy and nervous, I heard Ray's muffled voice say, "Can you shoot one?" It was like he pulled the trigger himself. The flintlock roared and through the smoke I could see my bird flopping. There were birds in the air everywhere and making a huge commotion. I'm not sure how, but my old bones got me to my feet, and I ran to subdue the feathered beast.

I had just killed a fall gobbler with a flintlock smoothbore on a traditional hunt with America's outdoor turkey hunting legend, Ray Eye, all captured on video. "Hey, it don't get no better than that!" **MB**