**Showcasing the DNR: A biscuits and gravy mornin’**

*Heading afield for ducks and turkeys creates lifetime memories*

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“Well boys, it’s gonna be a biscuits and gravy mornin’!”

That was the phrase I first heard on a duck hunt at Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area near Columbia, Missouri in 2006, from a hunter in my party nicknamed “Wild Bill.”

That morning was one of the finest days afield I’ve ever had. We quickly reached our bag limit of 24 ducks – a rare accomplishment in the waterfowl world, especially since we did it before the sun had crested over the bluffs along the Missouri River.

Wearing his “Boonie” hat, Wild Bill let out a war cry when the last duck fell.

“Well boys, it’s gonna be a biscuits and gravy mornin!’”

“A what, Wild Bill?”

He explained to us that, in his 40 years of hunting ducks, there haven’t been many times that he can get a limit of ducks, slog out of the field and be back home before his wife is out the door for work so that she can make him a plate of her biscuits and gravy.

That saying is something that has stuck with me ever since.

There haven’t been but a couple of outdoor instances where I could let out the Wild Bill war cry to declare a biscuits and gravy morning. One of those times was in springtime 2019.

For years, I have reveled in taking some time to spring turkey hunt. It is one of my favorite times of the year, when you literally get to watch the world come alive before your eyes.

If you go out more than one day in a row, it is incredible to hear the different birds singing in the mornings, watch vegetation sprout that you swore wasn’t there yesterday and, if you are really lucky, stumble upon a morel mushroom or two.

However, one thing I never had the best luck at was bagging a turkey on my adventures. There have been lots of close calls, more early mornings than I can count, screw-ups on my part, times I should’ve been more patient and more incredible outdoor moments than I deserve.

I believe the last year I had gotten a turkey was 2009, but I have been out every year since.

I had talked to a few folks and told them how much I would like to go hunting with someone who really knows his stuff. The name Brandon Nutt from Ravenna came up a few times.

After getting in touch with him via the Internet far before the season opening, it was determined we would head out on some private land that he has and give it a shot on opening day.

In the two weeks leading up to the hunt, Brandon sent me updates frequently.

Pictures of toms, videos of birds gobbling in the dark on the roost, you name it. It was clear that he was very serious about turkey hunting and he was putting in some serious effort to help me end my dry spell, hopefully.

As he put it, “I can almost guarantee you we’ll have a shot at a mature tom. Now whether or not you hit it is another matter altogether, but that’s on you.”

The night before the opener was a very sleepless one. I kept waking up before my alarm, about every 30 minutes, to make sure I didn’t oversleep.

I got up and hit the road about 3:45 a.m. to make the drive over to Ravenna to meet Brandon. I had some good tunes going on the radio, some beef jerky, some strong coffee and a whole lot of optimism.

To say I was nervous and excited would be a great understatement. I arrived to meet Brandon about 5:15, and we immediately headed off to his hunting spot.

We slipped on in, in the dark, no headlamps, just guiding our way along field edges, using the moonlight to mark our way.

Brandon would stop every now and then to point out some tree lines in the dark where he had seen the turkeys before or where they may have roosted, or where a tom had fallen to a hunter’s gun in the past.

“Now when we get to that final fence row, we really have to go into stealth mode,” he warned.

I am not exactly the stealthiest person. I tend to kind of lumber along when outdoors and have been known, a time or two, to take a spill in the water, mud, et cetera. I was holding my breath as I took each step, hoping a stick wouldn’t crack or I wouldn’t flip over.

Surprisingly, I was successful.

It was about 5:45 when we got settled in. Brandon let me know where he had seen the birds the previous night. Turkeys roost in trees at night and stay almost motionless and quiet until dawn starts to break.

Generally, the songbirds start singing first, then just when you think there are no turkeys in your area, you hear a tom thunder off, waking you up more than any cup of coffee will.

Typically, this will start a good while before daylight, sometimes an hour or better. Turkeys will sit in the trees and start gobbling and talking to each other, figuring out what their game plan of the day is going to be, I guess.

Another thing that turkeys are known for, both while in the trees and on the ground, is “shock gobbling.” An owl hoots, turkeys gobble. A car horn beeps, they gobble. A crow caws, they gobble. You get the picture. Often, one gobble produces a domino effect where once one gobbles, they all go.

It seems the closer to daylight it gets, the crazier they get.

Legal shooting hours for Muskegon County began on this day at 6:21 a.m., but on most mornings you can expect turkeys won’t leave the roost and fly down until 20-30 minutes after that time.

That day’s trigger was a cow mooing. It was far away, but every time it mooed, they gobbled. It was very apparent that we had at least six turkeys very close, with two even closer – less than 60 yards away.

As the cows kept mooing, the turkeys kept gobbling. About 6:10, Brandon decided to do some calling, and that really got them fired up. Just as a hint of daylight came over us, we were able to pick out a tom sitting in a tree, gobbling his brains out, and pointing right toward us and the decoys that we’d placed out.

This seemed to go on for an eternity, which really was about 20 minutes. By 6:30, my heart was beating out of my chest. I thought, “Is one of those turkeys really going to fly down and come over to us?”

Just about then, the first tom pitched down out of the tree, followed by a second and a third.

“OK, Ryan, keep it together,” I told myself. I could feel my heart beating in my ears. My vision was swirling. I felt light-headed.

“Take some deep breaths,” I thought.

The toms all kind of meandered around looking, gobbling and probably wondering why the decoys hadn’t moved. The birds were out of range and seemed to be very intrigued by the live hens that had flown out of the roost and were headed in the opposite direction.

This is pretty much textbook for how a few of my hunts have gone. Just when you think you have those birds fooled, they throw you a curve ball and go the other way.

Brandon got more and more aggressive with his calling, and the birds started slowly our way. They then got a little faster, a little more still, before I thought to myself, “They are in range.”

“Just pick one out, let them get far enough apart so you don’t hit more than one,” Brandon said.

I acknowledged him and began trying to slow my breathing. I was holding the gun, trembling like a leaf on a tree, dry mouth, heart racing. I was a total mess.

“OK, I am getting the one on the left,” I said.

I clicked the safety off, raised the gun, slowly put the barrel at the base of the tom’s head, where you want to hit them, and pulled the trigger.

Bang! I saw a bird running like the Roadrunner, unscathed. I was in total disbelief – somehow, I missed this turkey at very close range!

I regained my composure, took aim at one of the other toms that was making his way out of there, and BANG, down he went.

The other two were making their way out of the spread and out of the field.

I completely forgot about Brandon and that he brought his gun just in case. Then I heard KA-BOOM. His big, 10-gauge shotgun sounded like a cannon going off – and down went his bird.

I couldn’t believe what just had happened. I not only ended my dry spell, but I just witnessed two toms being harvested.

This was something I always dreamed of. What’s better than being able to enjoy a hunting success moment, but to do it with someone else and share in mutual admiration, excitement and respect for the animal and for the outdoors.

I was rewarded with a beautiful, heavy tom with a 9.5-inch beard and just over 1-inch spurs.

Brandon has shot a lot of birds. I’m not sure how many, but it’s a bunch. From the excited look he had, you’d swear it was his first. My knees were knocking together. I was shaking. I was high-fiving him. I let out a holler.

Brandon ran out to the birds, and I said to myself, “I can’t believe it, a biscuits and gravy morning!”

I asked Brandon what time it was. He said 6:41 a.m. This was the kind of turkey hunt I always dreamed of. Done on the first day, done before the sun was up, with a beautiful tom turkey in hand.

Truly one of those moments in time I am never going to forget.

It is a joy to spend a day in the outdoors with someone who shares a mutual admiration for the pursuit and the harvest like I do – someone who is a consummate sportsman and truly gets what being outdoors is all about.

I’ll admit, a couple of times, I have been close to saying I was going to take the year off from turkey hunting and that I was slowly losing my drive for it.

I am very fortunate to have met Brandon, who helped reinvigorate that fire in me for those early morning adventures chasing wily tom turkeys.

I can only hope that when folks go with me duck hunting, fishing or on any number of other outdoor adventures, I can get them inspired as well. It’s never really about the harvest, but it sure is a nice bonus to an incredible experience outdoors.

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