

On Wisconsin *Outdoors*

With the Dick Ellis Experts

May 24, 2010

A Jake in the Hand

Slate call ends season five hunt

By Dick Ellis



Conservation Congress Dodge County delegate and Wisconsin Hunter Todd Cook scores with a Jake during the season five turkey hunt in Zone 1 near Fennimore in Grant County.

Todd Cook's sweet talk on the slate call had riled up Tom in the woodlot east of our ambush in a narrow finger splitting newly planted crops to our backs and an untilled field of grass ahead. Cook would say "Hello Thomas" with a raspy, nasty scratch of stick on slate, and the gobbler would answer. Occasionally, another Tom to our left chimed in to let this "hen", we'll call him Todd Marie for story purposes, know he was also eligible and ready for a date.

Todd Marie, alias Cook, a Dodge County delegate to the Conservation Congress and long-time friend from Beaver Dam and I were hunting Grant County during season five of the six, split 5-day Wisconsin turkey seasons May 15th near Fennimore (did you follow that?). Hunting, once again, had offered an excuse to rekindle friendships left idle too long. We rendezvoused

in Madison during the wee hours, and traveled southwest with Todd giving me his low-down as a CC delegate on Wisconsin deer and bear numbers, preliminary season structures and other things Wisconsin hunters banter on.

The hunt is really so much more than that. It's camaraderie and travel and breakfasts in small town restaurants and acknowledging generous landowners and watching stars fade to orange and blues and then it's trying to fill the tag. I would find all of that out again personally a few days later while hunting my own Zone 4, Season 6 tag in Barron County in Wisconsin's great northwest. But that trip would also include crossing paths with the wild things of the field, camera at the ready, that as an outdoor writer I find considerably more precious these days than the filled tag. You'll have to wait a few days for that tale.

As the weeks traveled by through the first weeks of the season, the success and failure stories began to filter in from friends hunting Tom across Wisconsin. One thing is certain. Turkey hunting in Wisconsin is not a sport today where the southern hunter has an advantage. Northern hunting is incredibly good and will continue to improve. The wild turkey has shown its resiliency in a steadfast migration to the northern counties, fooling even the wildlife experts who at one time believed we would never see the bird north of Stevens Point due to harsh Wisconsin winters.

Todd Marie Cook continued his seduction. As an observer and cameraman with camera at the ready and Cook positioned down the fenceline 10 yards to my left, it was my responsibility to occasionally keep tabs on any birds that might be approaching from the rear, and in my partner's blind spot. A subtle turn of the head found two jakes in the clover at 30 yards, locked on the decoy and spellbound by the love song. "Todd," I called in the mother of all quiet whispers. "Two jakes behind you."

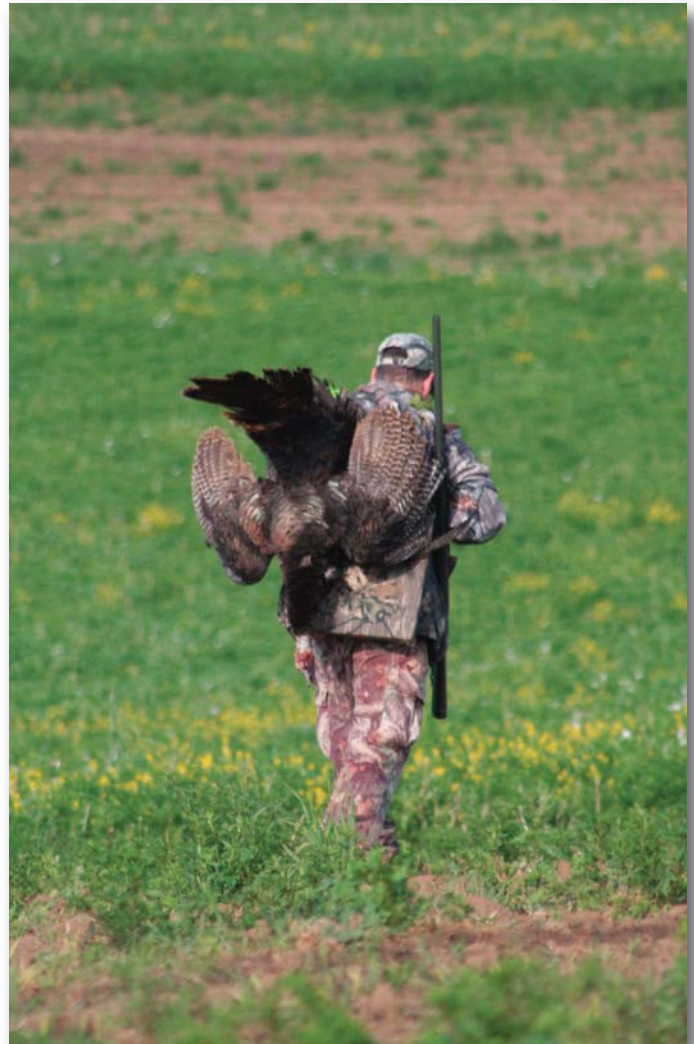
I was uncertain if my partner would be able to pull this victory off, not to mention even hear my warning. Against us, the turkey has the keenest of eyesight even when not alarmed. These birds were on high alert, with two sets of eyes seeking out any signs of trouble...or maybe just a kiss. In our favor, we had an experienced

hunter with no reservations about tagging an immature but tasty juvenile Tom. It didn't hurt that the juvenile Tom, or Jake, also has the intelligence equivalence just above a Chicago Bear fan nine beers into a fourth quarter.

Using the large tree to his back as a shield, Cook moved with monotonous patience to take one knee, snuck the peek behind to locate the turkeys, then lowered the scattergun when the birds finally moved forward. After waiting until the jakes moved far enough apart to ensure he wouldn't hit both, Cook chose his target and ended the hunt with one well placed shot of number-5 lead.

I watched as the Jake who lost this mini-lottery for another day of life was recovered and tagged. Like any deer kill, for me the moment of the turkey kill is the intended conclusion but also the bitter-sweet end of any hunt. Preparation, knowing limitations, correct shotgun loads and patience combine to make the kill quick and the satisfaction long-lasting. Eventually, I worked the camera as Todd walked the rolling croplands of Fennimore, the shortbeard and pack slung over his shoulder and gun in hand. The fields of greens decorated with goldenrod and fields of browns painted by the plow faded to distant farms and distant pastures. Todd eventually faded in the distance too, and I hurried to catch up.

There would be break-



The Grant County landscape provides all the scenery turkey hunter Todd Cook needs as he heads for home with a Jake in the bag during a season 5, Saturday, May 15 hunt. The bird fell to Cook's slate call.

fast in Fennimore, registration of Todd's turkey, purchase of a case of beer at the grocery store, and a proper thank you delivered to the farmer who had given us permission to hunt. Sometimes the gift is sausage, occasionally morel mushrooms. The landowner's generosity is the hunter's most valuable possession, far beyond the finest firearm or treestand. Without him, we are se-

verely restricted. We best treat him well.

Cook and I left the dust behind in an old truck sporting a four on the floor transmission. We pointed it northeast toward Madison. There was more banter to pursue. We'd be back. This is, after all, is Grant County. It will lay gentle on a Wisconsin hunter's mind. *Wo*

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