

On Wisconsin *Outdoors*

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Mentoring Miles...

12 year old enters the outdoor world

By Dick Ellis

Mentoring Miles; opening the doors to hunting and fishing and pushing him through in the beautiful farm country of Grant County was meant primarily to benefit the 12 year from Fennimore. Rewards though, when two days in April had been filed to the memory banks, belonged as much to the two mentors given the opportunity to show Miles O'Keefe the outdoor ropes.

Now, Miles didn't tag a turkey during the statewide youth hunt. He didn't catch a trout on one of southwest Wisconsin's God-painted streams. But he will. And he was introduced to generous landowners, a new sunrise, first gobbles, a team of strutting Toms and babbling, winding clear water. He was introduced too to the idea that as hunters and anglers, time and even mistakes in the field are often the dues demanded before a tag is fastened to a gobbler or a brown is slipped into a creel.

Miles didn't really need a push into the outdoors. Like so



Miles O'Keefe of Fennimore in Grant County shows off a bonus prize found while scouting for his turkey hunt in Grant County. The half rack shed was found on his grandma's farm.

many Wisconsin boys and girls, he was just waiting for someone to show him the way. Pam O'Keefe had laid the foundation by sending her son through a local Hunter's Safety course. I started the field education a week before the youth hunt. When a long-scheduled

family vacation collided with the actual hunt, Randy Rothenbueler took the mentor's baton at game time.

With my brother John and yellow lab Gunner, I met Miles in early April with an agenda. We would get to know each other, ask permission to hunt

from area farmers, scout the land, and tutor Miles sight-in session with my Remington .870. Miles is saving for a new shotgun, and my scattergun was a bit large for a still-growing youth. Despite the mule-like kick when he squeezed the trigger, Miles placed his first shot from the sitting position squarely in the kill zone of the target and was ready to shoot again.

We received permission to hunt from farmers Tim and Steve Scanlan and from Dennis and Ellen Conley. It all starts with the landowner. These people made Miles feel welcome. When we hit the fields, a stroke of luck made me look like more of an expert than I ever will be.

"Miles, don't be surprised if we find a shed antler," I said. "Let's walk on the southern facing slope in this tall grass where the sun shines. Deer will lay here and now is the time to look for their winter sheds."

Five minutes later, I picked

up the half-rack of an eight-point buck; a gift from nature that Miles now has in his Fennimore home. We had also watched a number of turkeys strutting on a field from 400 yards. At day's end, we left a camo clothing list for Pam of the items Miles would need for the hunt.

When I spoke with my long-time friend and veteran turkey hunter Rothenbueler that evening, the retired New Berlin police officer did not need to be asked twice to take over the apprenticeship. He returned on Friday before the weekend hunt to scout with Miles and his friend Hunter Blotz, meet the landowners, cut shooting lanes, and set the morning's plans.

"Dennis Conley thought it was great that Miles was getting into hunting," Randy said. "He asked Miles if that big 12-gauge had knocked him on his butt. Miles told him he was already sitting down when he shot. Dennis said 'Don't worry, when that bird comes in, you won't even feel the gun go off.' It was exactly what I had told him during the ride over."

With a natural blind in the pines bordering a strutting field readied and shooting lanes cut, Randy picked up Miles in the pre-dawn black. In frigid 32 degree temperatures, they made their way to the stand and settled in to watch the sunrise and a whole new world open to Miles.

"I told Miles that he had to be up and dressed with breakfast eaten by the time I got there," Rothenbueler said. "He said he couldn't sleep

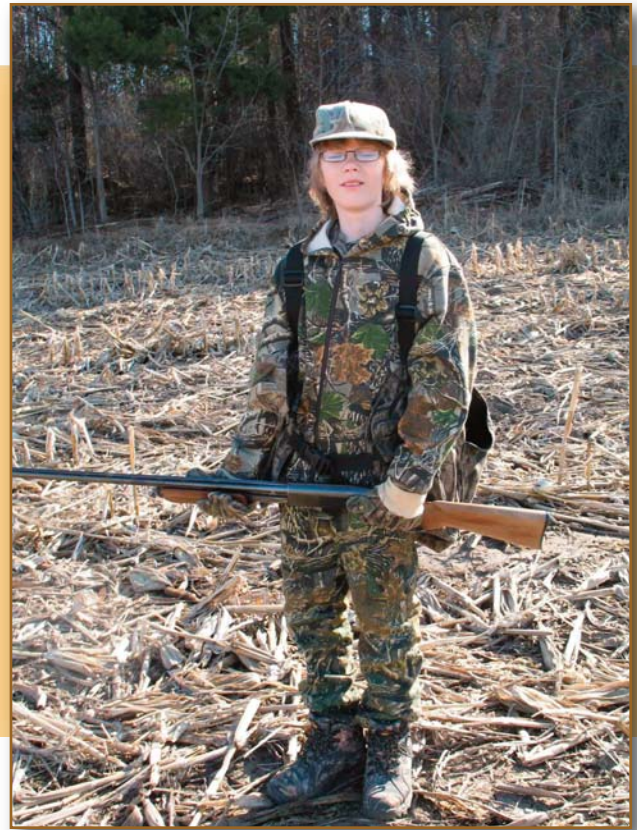
much during the night and I told him that I can't sleep either the night before a first day of hunting. We were out and ready to go nice and early."

A chorus of gobbles fell over the field as the sky lightened. Turkeys began to pitch down from their roosts. By 8:00 a.m., a congregation of birds including 14 Toms were scattered in groups across the field. Six gobblers strutted wing tip to wing-tip, a stunning sight Rothenbueler had never experienced in decades of hunting turkeys.

"We watched 32 different turkeys," Miles said. "I had seen turkeys strut but never in a group like that. Two hens walked about 10 feet in front of us inside the decoy. I couldn't move. I totally had fun. It was great. We didn't get anything but it was exciting and I learned a few fishing tips too."

Miles never had an opportunity to pull the trigger, but after breakfast in Fennimore, he did have a chance to work a beautiful Grant County stream restored by different chapters of Trout Unlimited with deep pools and beautiful scenery. He learned how to cast, and he learned a little about what it means to be a true Wisconsin hunter.

"If you go hunting thinking you're going to fill your freezer every time, it's just not going to happen," Rothenbueler said he told Miles. "But we saw a lot of exciting things out on that field. And we learned a lot. Miles was appreciative, and his sister and mom were too. That alone made it a rewarding experience for me."



Miles O'Keefe is wearing camo and enjoying the statewide Youth Turkey Hunt April 11 and 12. Although no bird offered Miles a shot, gobblers and strutting Toms just out of range made the experience with mentor Randy Rothenbueler memorable (photo by Randy Rothenbueler)

In her own words during an interview Saturday, Pam O'Keefe was extremely appreciative of the opportunity given her son. Like so many single mothers, she cannot do everything for her son in the field but had laid the groundwork for this introduction that she always hoped was on the horizon.

"I wasn't really comfortable having anyone take Miles hunting but after getting to know you over the years I was comfortable. If Miles was uncomfortable before he met you, when you and your brother brought the dog down after that first day he was to-

tally at ease; the same with Randy. After the first day, Miles was so excited to go the next morning."

"This is a big hunting culture down here. I always intended for him to hunt but didn't have anyone to take him. The few people I approached to take him just didn't work out. When you called and offered, it was like an answer to something he's always wanted to do. He went through the hunter's safety course never really knowing if he would have the opportunity to use it. I'm just so grateful. ^QW_o