

## The Smile Says It All

*By Dave Gustafson*

WHEN I MET Andy the last thing I ever expected is that he would become a hunter. A Materials Scientist with a PhD from MIT just didn't fit the hunter stereotype in the mind of a guy born and raised in McKean County who had been hunting his entire life.

Born and raised a "city boy" near Syracuse, NY, Andy and I met through a high school friend, Damon, who attended college with him. He started coming to the wilds of McKean County around 2001, and was soon intrigued by our pursuits of the deer and turkey that roamed the wilds of northern PA.

In 2005 Andy decided to take the Pennsylvania Hunter-Trapper Education course so he could give hunting a try. Some friends of mine then outfitted him with appropriate attire and a rifle, and that fall, Andy went deer hunting for the first time. Even though he didn't get a deer, he seemed to have become hooked on the outdoors and hunting. After living on the West Coast for a few years, Andy moved back to New York in 2008. A few more attempts at hunting deer had proved unproductive but, nonetheless, Andy was undeterred.

On May 20, 2011, a group of my friends gathered in McKean County for the baptism of Damon's daughter. Damon told me that Andy and his wife would be coming to town from Albany, New York, and that Andy would be excited to try turkey hunting. Because he would be busy organizing the weekend's events, Damon asked if I could take Andy out. I was a bit apprehensive because I knew Andy had no turkey hunting experience, and because turkeys are one of the most challenging animals to hunt in Pennsylvania. But knowing Andy's zeal for the outdoors, I decided I would get Andy set up with the appropriate camouflage, Damon would lend him a proven turkey gun, and I would take Andy out for his first spring gobbler hunt.

After a restless night's sleep, thinking of how to proceed with a rookie in the turkey woods, I arrived at Damon's cabin to pick up Andy. The time was 4:30 a.m. I don't know if Andy ever got up that early before, but he met me in the driveway with a look on his face that could be rivaled only by a 5-year-old on Christmas morning. He was brimming with anticipation. After a few moments reviewing some basic safety rules and a quick practice sighting the gun, taking off the safety, and where to aim on a bird, we jumped in the car for a short ride to the valley across from the cabin.

As we walked through the fields on the way to the woods, I pointed out the call of the woodcock in the predawn fog. The audible "peent" seemed to be all around us. We got to our listening location on an old logging trail at the point of a hill where we could hear multiple small valleys. I've hunted this area many times, and taken several gobblers right on this old grassy road in the past. I thought it would be perfect. As the light began to come up, the fog hung heavy in the valley. At about 6:15, after not yet hearing any gobbling, I decided we would start walking the old woods road, calling as we went, in search of a responsive bird. We had gone only about 200 yards, when Andy heard something respond to my calls. It was a hen. "She sounds just like you" he said.

That type of a comment is a real confidence booster, even for a seasoned veteran turkey hunter. We inched our way up the logging trail a little farther, and then I heard a wing flap really close. We froze. I spotted the hen not 50 yards away, still on her roost. She was nearly eyelevel, so I instructed Andy to stand perfectly still. The hen seemed nervous, but she couldn't quite pick us out in the fog. For the next 10 minutes, she cut, cackled and yelped from her perch. In that entire time I never heard a gobbler respond. After she flew down to the field, I told Andy it was time to cover some ground.

Now almost 7 o'clock, the birds would be on the ground for sure. We headed back into the valley, calling every couple hundred yards, trying to provoke a tight-lipped tom. On the walk, Andy noticed a sound off in the thick brush. "Sounds like a helicopter trying to take

off," he said. I told him what he heard was a male grouse drumming, trying to bring in a female, as it was breeding season for grouse as well as for turkeys.

After circling the entire valley and not hearing any gobbling, I decided we would head back to the car to try another spot. On the way down the hill, we flushed a hen turkey from some thick briars. I guessed she had a nest in the brush, so we looked around a little bit to see if we could find it. That's when Andy discovered the carcass of a deer that had fallen victim to some type of predator. All that remained was the spine and the jawbone. Andy was intrigued, so I showed him how to determine the age of the deer by the wear and replacement of the teeth. We also happened upon some Indian cucumber flowers, and I introduced Andy to the world of wild edible plants.

Back at the car we headed out to try to find a gobbler that would play the game. After trying a couple different places, I sensed Andy getting a little disappointed that we hadn't even heard a gobbler. Damon had built me up as a turkey hunting expert, and now I was feeling the pressure to produce. Andy assured me he was having a great time, but I knew I had to pull out all the stops to make his first turkey hunting experience a good one. We were both wet from the knees down after trudging through the dew soaked fields, so I suggested we return to camp and change our socks, grab a cup of coffee, and try it again after an hour or so. By then I figured the sun would have burned off the fog and that the birds would be active. After all, with the extremely wet weather we had been having, they hadn't seen the sun for a week.

As we were heading back to the cabin I was driving by a friend's Christmas tree farm that I knew had some turkeys hanging around. I asked Andy if he wanted to try one more spot before going back to camp. He replied that he was willing to try anything. After a quick phone call to the farm owner, we pulled up to the farm and got out of the car. I didn't grab my vest or gun; I just walked up the farm road a few hundred yards to see if I could hear anything. I let out a series of cuts and yelps from a mouth call. Andy's eyes told me that my ears didn't lie.

A gobbler gobbled back right on top of my calls, and he was close. We ran to the car, grabbed our guns and gear, and started out through the pines to try to get to a good calling location. Once we set up and Andy was ready, I called again. The gobbler responded immediately. I thought for sure he was on his way, but after about 10 minutes I heard him gobble again, but farther away and then again even farther. He would respond to my calls, but would not come in our direction. I explained to Andy that I thought he had a hen with him, and that he would be a difficult bird to hunt. Undaunted, Andy said he was willing to work hard to try to get him.

Over the next two hours we set up three different times, each time trying to move around the bird. And each time he would respond, come within 100 yards, and then move away. Finally, at about 11, I told Andy I thought I knew where he was headed. There was an old pasture field about half way up the hill, secluded in a little cove in the woods. I knew the turkeys on this hill liked to use that field for strutting, and the old tom was going that direction. I led Andy up the hill, skirting around the gobbler's path and trying to get to the field before him.

At one point, along a muddy trail, we stopped to look at the tracks of a sow bear and cub that had used the same trail only hours before our arrival. Their footprints told the story, with a small paw print centered in that of the larger one. I wondered if we would run into the bruin, and how Andy would react. I quickly changed my focus back to the task at hand, and hustled up the hill toward the field.

When we got near the edge of the field I told Andy we'd better stop and call, in case the gobbler had beat us there. In my first series of yelps the old gobbler thundered back, cutting me off again. He was already in the field, although from our vantage point we couldn't see him. I explained to Andy that I didn't dare move any closer for fear of the bird seeing us. He agreed. We set up right where we were, about 30 yards from the edge of the field, back in the shadows of the big sugar maples that guarded the gobbler's hideaway.

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I called softly and sparingly, and it wasn't long before Andy whispered that he could see the gobbler strutting in the field. Then I spotted a hen, and then a jake. I told Andy we needed to wait them out. As a force of habit I glanced at my watch. It was 11:45. I was beginning to think we wouldn't get a chance at this bird because the noon hour was soon approaching. And then I remembered that it was May 21, and this year we could hunt all day after May 16. I breathed a deep breath, and told Andy to be patient. I made that comment probably more for my benefit, as Andy didn't seem to have any problem with patience, but I, on the other hand, have never been known for that particular trait.

It wasn't long until the gobbler was slowly working his way into range, with the jake and the hen leading him right to us. A couple times I told Andy that I could shoot the gobbler, as he was in range for my gun, but I didn't think Andy could get the clear shot he needed. I backed off, thinking I would never forgive myself if I shot this bird. I knew if we just waited, Andy would get a chance.

Before long the jake and hen passed within 30 yards, right along the edge of the woods line. I could see the gobbler following behind, only 20 yards or so, trailing his lady friend. As Andy tried to swing the gun ever so slightly for the shot, the old tom saw something he didn't like. He didn't "alarm putt" or run away, he just changed direction and started toward the opposite side of the field, keeping some brush between him and us, preventing Andy from getting a shot.

That's when my attention switched back to the jake. He had seen the gobbler change direction, and was now acting nervous himself. I asked Andy if he wanted to try to get a shot at the jake, and I could see in his eyes he was already locked on to the young gobbler and making ready for the shot.

When the jake cleared the brush and offered a clear shot, I whispered to Andy to take a deep breath and to make sure he had the bead on his neck. When the 12-gauge roared I saw the jake take a nose dive straight into a multiflora rose bush. As Andy and I headed back to the car, his first ever animal slung proudly over his shoulder, he recounted all of the day's events. It was only then that I realized what had transpired. A hunter was born. He had experienced in one morning more than some hunters get to experience in a year. For me, it was my first experience bringing a new hunter into the sport. What Andy had the opportunity to experience that day will no doubt live in his memories for a long time. I know it will in mine.