

## RICHARDS' FIRST SPRING TURKEY

As remembered by: David McNeal

My youngest son Richard and his older brother David received their first shot guns when they were both preteens. They were old single shot 20 gauges that I had acquired cheap at a local pawn shop. Not long before that I had enrolled them in the Kansas Hunter Safety program (back then there was really no minimal age) and even though I wasn't required by State Law to have a Hunter Safety card myself I attended the classes with the boys and got my card.



David my oldest (an outstanding artist working in San Jose) loves to shoot and is a fine shot but he would rather shoot at targets and not game. Richard on the other hand loves both hunting and fishing and as a young man would often badger me to the point of parental murder until I gave in and took him either hunting or fishing. He always wanted to accompany me to the field and my long time hunting partner Tom Kirker and I often laugh about our memories of Rick in the field wearing boots two sizes too big and struggling desperately to keep up with us.

Well Richard grew up, got married, has three boys of his own, graduated from college, got a job and is generally too busy to spend a lot of time chasing me in the field anymore. That's life in a Cat Stevens' song *The Cat in the Cradle*.

I will say that he and I still get together occasionally but in reflection I miss those days when I was always too busy but he was always raring to go. Those days flew by and in a blink they were gone; so it is when we do get together these days the times are even more memorable and treasured.

On this particular morning back in May of 2008 we had finally decided that we would go after his first spring gobbler. That spring had been a cold one with April bringing cold early morning temperatures that would freeze your fingers and make your teeth chatter while waiting in the early pre-dawn hours.

I arrived at Rick's house around 4:00 a.m. and he was ready to go. By 4:30 a.m. he and I were set up in the corner of an open field where Tom and I had seen several big gobblers strutting just a few days before. I set a hen and a Jake decoy out, put up the burlap blind and waited for dawn. By 5:00 a.m. it was light

enough for me to start calling; there was no response. After an hour cold, miserable and still no response we decided to relocate.

We drove into the small city of Ogden to get warm and some coffee; a short break later and we were ready to give it a second try. About five miles down the road and east of where we had started I parked the truck just below an old wood cutting road that we would later dub *Turkey Alley* and Rick and I got out to investigate and see if we couldn't locate any signs that the birds had been in that area.

We had barely taken a dozen steps down the road when there in the mud was a fresh track of a large gobbler. The ridges of the toes were still visible. Rick and I exchanged glances and I commented, "That's one big bird and he passed through here this morning; let's set up and see if he's still in the area. Rick agreed and we headed back up to the truck to get our gear.

Just as quietly as we could we gathered everything together and moved down the road. The sun was well up and the morning chill had burned off; it was beginning to get rather warm. Eighty yards or so down the road we came to a beautiful little clearing; someone had somehow drug an old washing machine down into the clearing and abandoned it. Except for that eyesore it was perfect and clear with overhanging branches of hackberries, cotton woods and oaks. We set to work getting set up. I placed two burlap blinds side by side, a shooter's blind and a caller's blind. We set up one Jake decoy just off the road and one hen decoy almost in the center of the clearing about fourteen yards from the shooter. Finally Rick and I settled into our blinds; I looked at my watch it was almost 10:00 a.m.

About twenty minutes passed and the forest returned to its normal quiet and stillness with the occasional chirp of a wren or other small bird to be joined with the barking of a squirrel or the knocking of a wood pecker. I made my first call and was delighted to hear an almost immediate gobble. That old bird was out a ways but he had responded; I decided to wait and see if he was actively looking; a long couple of minutes ensued. Just as I was about to give in he gobbled; smiling to myself I answered and he responded obviously getting closer. I whispered to my son, "Rick that bird's coming in." and he nodded.

Almost five minutes passed and I gave a few putts and purrs this time when he responded I could tell he was very close and I decided not to respond with any additional calls but to keep my eyes open and see if I could locate him. It didn't take long; I caught a glimpse of him coming through the trees off to my left and as soon as he entered the road; saw the hen he puffed up like a balloon. I whispered to Rick, "Get ready son here he comes." Rick raises his big 12 gauge *Mossberg 88* and waits.

I honestly don't know who was more excited about what was playing out before our eyes me or my son. That old bird stayed puffed up all the way in; he picked up his pace and on he came, fifty yards, forty yards, thirty yards, in range now, twenty yards and I'm thinking, "shoot; shoot; shoot him" but Rick holds steady. I glance at my son and his eyes are as wide as the bright red sack on the front of that old bird and I whisper, "Shoot him son; shoot him." But Rick waits; he waits (what seems to me like an eternity) until that big bird is beak to beak with the decoy and now he senses something isn't right and he turns and sticks his neck way out; BOOM!

Like a balloon with a slow leak he just deflates and slops in place, a perfect shot handled by Richard like a pro; like he had been doing it all his life and this was just one more harvest. I give him a high five and he says, "Just like on television." Referring to one of the Primos Truth videos we had watched together.

My watch indicates 11:20 a.m. and we step out of the binds and move to investigate his first bird. It's an eastern and weighs 27 pounds with an 11 inch beard and one inch spurs. I tell him, "You know son I have been hunting these birds all my life and I have never taken a trophy gobbler like that and here you are first time out; it's just not right." Rick just smiles and I think to myself, "He's hooked."

They say that the only thing you can take with you at the end of this journey we call life is your memories. I can only hope that this particular memory is as special to my son as it was to me. We tag his bird, take some pictures, gather our gear and head for the truck with Rick lugging his heavy prize; I'll tell him later how he could have save himself about five pounds of lugging by field dressing the bird.

What a morning!