

There's no better place to hunt turkeys



A New Year's turkey in 2011 with the author's hunting companion, Vic, a Vizsla (Hungarian pointer).

TIM BARTON

TAKE THE WISCONSIN SLAM CHALLENGE.

Tim Barton

Vic, my turkey dog, a Vizsla (member of the pointer group), and I begin our fall hunting adventure together, typically setting up where Vic scattered a flock of turkeys. Vic can usually be found lying next to my left leg with the look of happiness only a dog can express at a glance. As the scattered turkeys start their lost “kee kee” whistles looking for each other in order to regroup, we know that’s my cue to start lost yelping, or as some call it, assembly calling. In the case of scattered gobblers, coarse yelps and aggressive purrs can bring them back in to the gun.

I love it when the woods are filled with the sounds of turkeys whistling and yelping at each other and at us. Vic and I then become part of the flock, talking back and forth. As the conversation continues, Vic stiffens on a laying point towards the direction of the approaching turkeys. My gun will be up at the ready. There are two tags in my pocket and with a couple of gunshots I’ll be hoping to validate those.

Turkeys are not just another upland bird to be flushed and shot. You can certainly do that; it’s legal. However, to a traditional turkey hunter like me, gobblers are special birds that require finesse

to tag. After all, what other upland game bird can be called in?

And there is no better place to hunt turkeys than in Wisconsin. The combination of seasons, habitat and the fact I can take my dog along in the summer, fall and winter make it turkey hunting heaven.

The Wisconsin Slam

Summer turkey? Wait you can’t shoot turkeys in the summer. There is only a spring and fall season, right?

Most people think Wisconsin has two turkey hunting seasons; spring (April and May) and fall (mid-Septem-

ber through late December — though closed during the nine-day gun deer season).

But if you check the calendar, the fall turkey season dates overlap the official calendar dates of summer and winter. Summer officially runs about June 21 to Sept. 22, allowing one to bag a summer turkey in the fall season, and winter officially starts around Dec. 22, giving Wisconsin fall turkey hunters a 10-day opportunity to shoot a “winter” turkey.

It was about eight years ago when it dawned on me that Wisconsin hunters can shoot a turkey during each of the four calendar seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter.

Think of it as the “Wisconsin Slam” — taking a turkey in each season. Who do you know who has accomplished this? No trophies are awarded and there is no official recognition. It’s all about the personal satisfaction a turkey hunter, who understands turkeys and their year-round behavior, gets from this distinction.

Bar none, Wisconsin is a unique wild turkey hunting state, offering thousands of tags over the counter that in some units do not sell out by season’s end.

Why pursue a Wisconsin Slam?

The Wisconsin Slam is fun motivation to get out turkey hunting during a time when you might be distracted with

something else to do or hunt. The “summer” and “winter” turkeys are harder to bag and offer a fun challenge. The vegetation is thick in the summer making the turkeys more difficult to find. Winter season is the opposite — there is no vegetation so the turkeys are easier to find, but that means it is also easier for the turkeys to see the hunter and his dog.

This is a uniquely Wisconsin hunting opportunity that so many are overlooking. The spring season is the most popular but I’d like to see more hunters take advantage of hunting turkeys during the four seasons of the year. Need more incentive? Summer, fall and winter turkeys are more tender and taste much better than the spring gobblers who are the survivors of winter starvation.

Not only can you complete a Wisconsin Slam, but the state offers a variety of hunting flavors.

Want to chase turkeys in miles of forests? Head to the northern big woods. Want to try mountain turkey hunting? Wisconsin doesn’t have any “real” mountains, but western Wisconsin does have some mighty steep bluffs. Marshland and river bottoms across the state can provide hunting with the feel of southern swamp turkeys, minus the large reptiles. Don’t forget to try southern Wisconsin for some prairie turkey hunting.

I’d argue that no other state offers such myriad turkey hunting opportunities.

Turkey dogs

Another important dimension to Wisconsin’s wild turkey hunting happened when turkey dogs were legalized for the fall turkey hunt season starting in 2011. It is widely believed that hunting turkeys with dogs is a new method, how-



Vic, the turkey dog, on setup.

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ever, using turkey dogs in North America is one of the original turkey hunting methods that dates back to the founding of Jamestown in 1607. A small contingent of turkey hunters are now bringing the sport of turkey dogging back. I am one of those hunters.

In spring, gobblers advertise their location by gobbling. In fall, this is not normally the case which makes finding the turkeys more challenging. Thus, a turkey dog really comes in handy during the fall season. A turkey dog’s job is to find the turkey flocks, then flush them in different directions while barking or yipping to let his master know where the action is. When turkeys scatter in different directions it is easier for the hunter to call the turkeys back together while initiating setup with his dog at the point of the break.

Hunting with a dog in the fall brings excitement that makes spring hunting seem tame by comparison. When turkeys respond for gathering they do so with gusto, gobbling, purring, kee kees, yelps — you name the call and they do it. Many times a group of gobblers will not only gobble and purr, they’ll fight with each other as they come back.

Hunting with a turkey dog also extends the time of contact and interaction with wild turkeys. The first contact is when the dog is flushing or breaking up the turkey flock. This is particularly rewarding for the hunter who enjoys the flush of wild birds. The second contact occurs when the turkey answers your call. Yes, turkeys talk to you. Then of course, hopefully, the interaction brings the turkeys in close to you and your dog. A trembling dog close by your side adds to the excitement of the incoming birds as you know you have trained this dog with the skills required. It’s fun to share the excitement and there’s no better place to do it.

Tim Barton writes from Pepin, Wis. and blogs about hunting at charlieelk.com.

WISCONSIN’S TURKEY MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Wisconsin Wild Turkey Management Plan, a coordinated effort between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, key stakeholder groups and the public, is available on the DNR website. Visit dnr.wi.gov and search “turkey management.”

The Wild Turkey Management Plan will guide decisions regarding the allocation of turkey permits, the structure of spring and fall hunting seasons, the use of Wild Turkey Stamp funds, and many other aspects of turkey management in the state through 2025. The current plan reflects recent scientific research and changes in turkey distribution and hunting techniques. The management plan was guided in part by input received at 12 meetings held statewide in 2012, as well as an online survey.



A successful hunt in 2012.

WALKER WOLDSTAD