

2017 OHIO YOUTH PARTNERSHIP HUNT

I listened to the message in disbelief, replaying it several times. An unfamiliar voice congratulated me. I had been selected to attend the 2017 Ohio Youth Partnership Hunt.

Former National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) president Gene Goodwin organizes this hunt, an annual program unique to the state of Ohio. Volunteers and sponsors come together to provide an all-expense paid weekend turkey hunt to ten Ohio high school seniors. These young men and women are selected from the pool of NWTF chapter scholarship winners in the state of Ohio. According to Gene Goodwin, 2017 was the sixth anniversary of the program. Including this year's participants, 57 youths have attended the Ohio Youth Partnership Hunt in its short history. Goodwin explained his enthusiasm for the program, saying that "Today's activities are gonna forge the future of tomorrow." This hunt is designed to introduce young minds to the fun and challenge of turkey hunting as well as to emphasize the importance of conservation.

On the Friday before the April weekend turkey hunt, my mom, sister, and I drove several hours to Salt Fork State Park Lodge. After checking in, we drove to the nearby Deerassic Park Education Center for a welcome reception. Adults and youths in baseball hats walked across the gravel lot, passing under a bright colored banner into the building.

Once inside, I found my eyes bouncing



The ten 2017 Ohio Youth Partnership Hunt participants model their Mossy Oak turkey hunting clothes.

between the impressive displays of taxidermy and the many people milling around. Hardly a minute had passed before Mr. Goodwin introduced himself, welcoming me. Most of the other participants had already arrived. A row of rectangular tables stretched across the front of the large room, round tables sprinkled with NWTF flyers filling the rest. Each youth was paired with a guide and a landowner for the weekend. Brett Berry, a Zink pro-staffer, would be my guide for the weekend. We would hunt with Dave Zwick and his son Brock on some nearby properties.

After dinner, everyone traveled to their respective hunting areas for evening scouting. I left with Mr. Berry, Mr. Zwick, and Brock right away. We had an hour drive from the center to our hunting location and we wanted to be sure to get there before dark. I learned that turkeys roost in trees at night. It

is beneficial to find roosting locations so that one knows where to hunt the next morning when the turkeys awaken and come down out of the trees. We surveyed the area and Mr. Berry called to the turkeys, using some calls that he had crafted himself. I was amazed. I must admit that at first he rather startled me. If I had not been talking to him one minute earlier I would have been convinced that there was a turkey right next to me. I had never gone turkey hunting before so everything was new. All four of us listened, but no turkeys responded to the calls. As the sun set, we made plans for the next morning and went our separate ways.

Brett Berry picked me up at approximately 4:30 am in the midst of a heavy thunderstorm. When we arrived at the property, Mr. Zwick and Brock were already there. When the rain slowed ever so slightly, we grabbed our

gear and headed out, completely clad in camouflage. Mr. Berry called while everyone else, silent, listened for an answer. After a few minutes of fruitless calling, we headed down a trail into the woods. We found an area that looked promising for roosting sites and as the skies lightened, quickly set up a blind. We wanted to be sure to be waiting, quiet and still, before any turkeys would be active. I was surprised at how much more social turkey hunting can be than deer hunting. We could talk often, albeit quietly, inside the blind. While noise was not as much of a concern, one has to be far more aware of clothing color and movement while turkey hunting. While one can hunt deer wearing hunter orange or without gloves, such color and exposure will leave you next to no chance of taking a turkey. You must be completely camouflaged. I must admit though, it was nice not to have to worry about scent trails as I do during deer season. These observations further confirmed for me that hunting is a particular skill. Each type of hunting is different. One has to be aware of what he or she is hoping to harvest so that he or she can hunt a certain way.

The sunlight shone through the trees, bouncing off the raindrops that slid off the backs of the two decoys positioned just ahead of the blind. The entire woods seemed still. Every so often we would hear a squirrel rustling in the vegetation, but even this was infrequent. After several hours, I noticed that everyone was becoming restless. Deer hunting had taught me to remain quiet and still for many hours at a time, so I was not phased by our long wait. I used the time to think and to appreciate the beauty of my surroundings. I soon learned from the rest of the hunting party that turkey hunting involves much more movement than deer hunting. Thus far, this hunt was not representative of the typical turkey hunting experience. Thus, we packed up and wandered further down the trail. We saw some evidence of cows and I was delighted at the sight of a picturesque little cemetery situated atop a hill. No gobblers answered our calls there either.

With no indication of turkeys nearby, we walked without our facemasks and gloves back the way we had come that morning. Every few yards, Mr. Berry would stop and call. Brock was the first to hear a gobble. We immediately donned our gloves and facemasks and continued creeping down the hill. A turkey answered, but not in tandem with Mr. Berry's calls. It did not take us long to realize that the stubborn turkey



Brett Berry positioned two Avian-X decoys in front of the blind on the first day of the hunt.



A hunting party photo following the weekend hunt. (From left to right: Brett Berry, Serena Juchnowski, Dave Zwick, Brock Zwick)



Serena prepares for a shot as she hears a turkey approaching.

was not answering our calls but was in fact shock gobbling at thunder in the distance. Mr. Berry had told me of this phenomenon during our ride back to the lodge the night before, and I was thrilled to hear it for myself. We stealthily made our way through the woods towards the sound, finally locating the turkey in a large field.

By this time it was nearing noon; we had only half an hour left to hunt before hunting hours ended for the day. During the Ohio spring turkey season, one can only harvest a male bird within restricted hunting hours. Mr. Berry and Brock peered over the hill into the field first, and then signaled for me to move forward. After we had assessed the situation in silence, we headed back out of sight down the hill. Mr. Berry addressed me, telling me that I had two options. One, we could try to find an alternative route through the woods to get closer to the bird. I immediately ruled out that option, knowing it had taken us far longer than the time remaining to reach our current spot. I

kept quiet and waited for him to present the second option. Two, we could belly crawl through the field. I thought for scarcely a moment before responding, "Let's do it!" My enthusiastic response surprised my companions. I was on my first turkey hunt, and girls stereotypically are less willing to get dirty than boys. Having just met me the night before, they did not quite know me well enough to expect my answer. Brock and Mr. Zwick supervised as Mr. Berry and I crawled through the field. We would not have attempted it without someone to watch over us, to make sure that no other hunters would mistake us for game. I moved when Mr. Berry did, sliding my Remington 870 shotgun beside me on the grass but always keeping it in a safe direction. After belly crawling approximately one hundred yards, I could see the turkeys more clearly. There were two sizable gobblers and a hen out in the field, the former still gobbling at the thunder. By this time the rain had returned. I hardly noticed. I removed the scope caps from

my red dot scope and readied myself for a shot. Mr. Berry continued to call, folding his hand into a shape resembling a turkey's head and raising it above the grass as he did so. The gobblers moved closer. A small group of trees and brush occasionally blocked my view of the turkeys. I was on the side of a hill, looking down over the brush into the field. Finally, with only a few minutes remaining before noon, I clearly saw the head of one gobbler come into view. My guide told me that I could take him anytime. I pulled my gun into my shoulder and set my head on the stock, ready to take a shot. Peering through the scope, I could see nothing clearly. With all the excitement, I had not noticed that the rain and wet grass had soaked the glass on my scope. I used my facemask to clear away some of the water, this time seeing a dark shape moving up and down through the scope. I could still not see well enough to take a confident shot. I tried once more to clean off the scope, this time succeeding just in time to watch the turkey run out of range further into the field. I was disappointed, but not upset. As a hunter, it is my responsibility to only take shots I can be certain of. Even though I really wanted to harvest my first turkey that day, I was not willing to risk wounding a gobbler by taking a shot that I was not completely confident in. Wet and tired but still full of adrenaline, I unloaded my shotgun and we trudged back up the hill.

I was the last hunter to arrive back at the lodge, accidentally delaying the group picture as my dad, who had arrived that afternoon, helped me remove several ticks from my hair. My adventure proved quite the story and inspired several jokes over the course of the evening.

After group pictures, everyone reconvened at Deerassic Park for a special dinner. All of the hunters shared their day's experiences. Two successfully harvested turkeys while some missed or held fire. We heard from speakers from the NWTF and from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) and were presented with special certificates and box calls. A silent auction helped to raise funds for the next year's event. Some of my peers had already gone home to attend their high school prom, but a few other kids and I stayed for the dinner and to hunt the next day.

My dad came along the next morning. We met Mr. Zwick, Mr. Berry, and Brock at another property. The weather was much nicer, but the mosquitos were

far worse. We called in two hens and very nearly a gobbler, who came up to the foot of a hill next to us. I felt my heartbeat quicken as he approached, but soon found that he was to remain just out of range, stubbornly refusing to come up the hill. We spent the remainder of the morning walking, calling and scouting. It was much different than the previous day in the blind. Although this hunt also ended unsuccessfully, I had a wonderful time, having fallen in love with turkey hunting.

I learned a tremendous amount about turkey hunting and gained a greater appreciation for the NWTF and all of the good work they do. I am very grateful to all of the volunteers, guides, and sponsors who put on this hunt every year. In talking with several of them, I found that while some had been hunting turkeys longer than others, all of them shared the same love of it. NWTF Regional Director Shawn Dickey describes turkey hunting as his “passion” even though he did not hunt turkey from a young age. Today, he has a significant role in the organization of the hunt, “coordinat[ing] and pair[ing] the guides, mentors and landowners who allow access to their property for the weekend...[and] help[ing] with some small fundraising efforts to offset some costs of the event.” I truly appreciate his efforts and those of everyone involved. If it were not for this opportunity, I might never have started turkey hunting. I am already excited to go out this fall and am hoping to help with the Ohio Youth Partnership Hunt in the future. While I knew that outdoorsmen and women share a common bond, hunting with a group really taught me how unique the hunting sports are. Everyone is truly passionate about what they are doing and are more than happy to pass along whatever knowledge they can to help keep the tradition alive. I found it especially nice to have Brock along on the hunt, as I had never really hunted with someone as near my own age before. As a young female hunter, I am in a significant minority in my community. My experience has inspired me to introduce several members of my junior rifle team to hunting this fall, providing them their first opportunities to hunt. The Ohio Youth Partnership Hunt is a wonderful program that I think goes a long way in encouraging the next generation to either start or continue hunting. As Mr. Goodwin promised me in his initial phone call: “It will be a weekend you won’t forget.” He was entirely right.©



Shawn Dickey (NWTF Regional Director) announces while Gene Goodwin (hunt coordinator) and other volunteers help with the live and silent auctions.



Each participant was presented with a special certificate and custom turkey call courtesy of the ODNR and Guernsey County Longbeards chapter of the NWTF.



Hunters and volunteers gather at Salt Fork State Lodge following the first day of hunting. Emma Studer and Rebecca McCarty harvested birds.