

# Hunters gobble up wild turkey

## Dusty Rhodes says store-bought just isn't the same

By Lindsey Erdody Published: November 21, 2012 9:45AM



Dusty Rhodes looks down the sight of his compound bow that he uses for hunting Tuesday afternoon at his home. (Dylan Buell/dbuell@state-journal.com)

At the top of the stairs on the second floor of Dusty Rhodes' home is a small room he calls his man cave.

Animal artifacts cover the walls and bookshelves, but it's obvious his obsession is wild turkeys.

There's a stuffed wild turkey mounted on the wall with its wings spread — it's the first one he killed with a bow and arrow. Underneath the mounted bird, multiple turkey beards are piled on a bookshelf.

On the opposite wall, five mounted turkey fans surround a mounted deer head. The dark brown feathers of the bird are spread out, and the beard hangs below on a wooden plaque.

It's not about the kill, Rhodes says, even though he loves to eat the wild turkey meat. It's about being outdoors and enjoying an "addictive" sport he's been involved with for 18 years.

"People say, 'Why don't you just go to Kroger and buy (a turkey)?' Well it's not the same," Rhodes said Tuesday from his home in Frankfort.

"Why do people go to UK basketball games instead of watching it on TV? Well, because it's not the same."

Rhodes, a retired probation officer, rarely hunts wild turkeys in the fall, but in the spring, he's outside every day during hunting season, searching for what he calls a beautiful, majestic animal.

And Rhodes isn't alone in his passion for hunting wild turkeys. As of 2011, there were almost 3 million wild turkey hunters and more than 7 million wild turkeys for them to capture, according to the National Wild Turkey Federation.

### PURE MEAT

When Rhodes sits down for dinner on Thanksgiving, he'll eat store-bought turkey like many other families, but that's only because he's run out of meat from the three turkeys he killed in the spring.

"Turkey doesn't stay around very long," Rhodes said. "It's gone pretty quick because people like to eat it."

He gives some of the turkey away, and his wife cooks what they keep. He said some hunters deep-fry it, some smoke it and some fry it like chicken — like his wife does.

"There's not any way you could fix wild turkey that's not good," Rhodes said. "There's not a wild taste to it."

Tom Hughes, assistant vice president for conservation programs with the NWTF, said most wild turkey hunters eat the meat from the birds they kill.

A common misconception, Hughes said, is that wild turkeys are all dark meat. The legs are dark meat, but the breast is white.

"The difference in eating them is that wild turkey is generally a lot more lean," Hughes said.

He described the taste of wild turkeys as exotic and said there are plenty of recipes to enhance the flavor.

Hughes said he smokes his turkeys for six to seven hours, and his family eats the wild bird every Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“In my house, not a scrap is wasted,” Hughes said.

#### THE HUNTING SEASON

A month before the spring hunting season begins, Rhodes is outside scouting different areas to hunt.

He'll go out in the morning and sit quietly with a black spiral journal and jot down notes about what he hears.

In the spring, hunters can call to gobbling turkeys. It's one of the reasons Rhodes prefers to hunt in the spring rather than fall.

He's traveled across the U.S. looking for good spots to find turkeys, but he said the best place to hunt them is in Kentucky because they adapt well to the terrain here.

In 18 years of wild turkey hunting, he's killed 62 total in Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Tennessee and Mississippi. He's also gone to Alabama but hasn't had luck there yet.

“They're very smart animals. If they could smell like a deer, you'd never kill them because their sense of sight and hearing is unbelievable,” Rhodes said. “They're very difficult to hunt — fun to hunt, but difficult.”

Hughes said many people think turkeys are dumb animals, but that's usually just domestic turkeys, not wild ones.

“It's a real challenge to hunt them,” Hughes said.

About two years ago, Rhodes hunted one turkey for three days straight. On the third day, he finally got the bird.

“I finally killed him on a Sunday morning, threw him in the cooler and went to church,” Rhodes said. “He drove me nuts for three days.”

The most he's killed in one season was six. Last year, he killed three — two in Kentucky and one in Tennessee — but made many trips to Tennessee without having any luck.

“For as many times as I went to Tennessee last year, I could have bought a lot of turkeys,” Rhodes said. “I didn't have a very good year in Tennessee last year. Let's just say this: I was the turkey.”

He usually hunts with a 12-gauge shotgun, but has killed a couple of turkeys with a bow and arrow.

Hughes said hunting turkeys with a shotgun is the easiest way because drawing a bow and arrow is more noticeable to the bird and gives it time to get away.

He said when trying to kill wild turkeys, hunters will find a flock, scare the birds away, get in a good position so the birds won't notice anything and use turkey calls to bring some back.

Using too many calls makes the turkeys suspicious, but using too few won't interest them enough, Hughes said.

“You're actively doing everything you can to influence the outcome,” he said. “The uncertainty of the pursuit, I think, is what makes it so interesting.”

Rhodes has hunted other animals like deer, elk and bear before, but hunting wild turkeys is his favorite.

“Turkey hunting is my number one love,” he said. “There's just something about looking at that majestic animal coming to a turkey call.”