

## GIVE FALL TURKEYS A

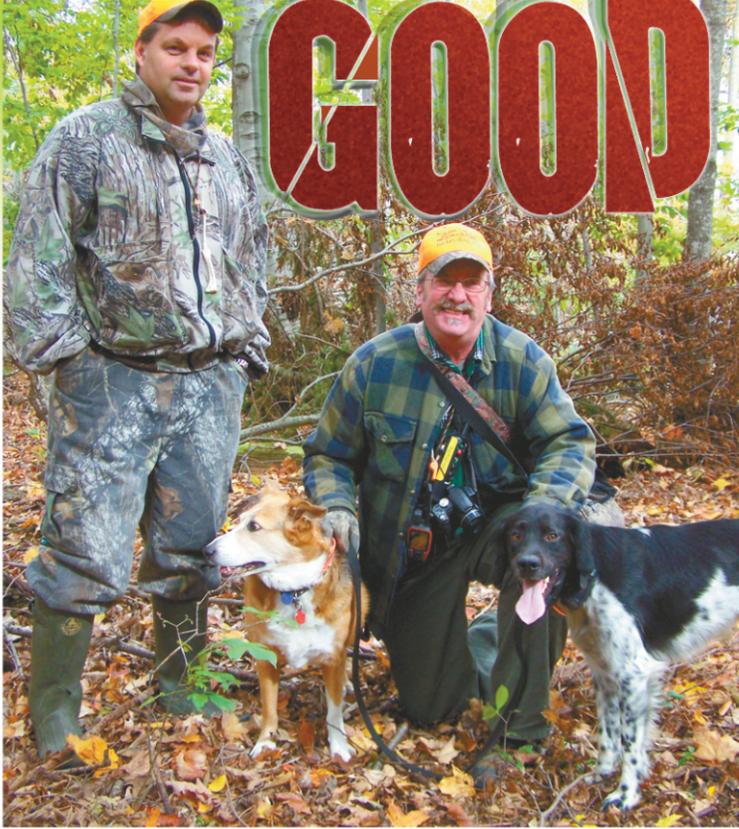
By Dan Small  
Contributing Editor

**W**hat do a fall turkey hunt and a game of pool have in common? In both cases, if you get a good break, you've got a fair chance to score. If not, you've got your work cut out for you.

Hunting turkeys during the fall is so different from spring hunting that it's sometimes hard to believe you're after the same bird. In spring, only bearded turkeys are legal game, so most hunters try to locate a lone gobbler and woo him in close with the calls of a lovelorn hen.

In fall, when any bird is a legal target, many hunters still try for a gobbler. Fall gobblers are a real challenge, however, because they lack the sex drive that makes them vulnerable in spring. Most hunters settle for any bird that comes within range.

At this time of year, turkeys – regardless of age or gender – are interested in just two things: getting enough to eat and avoiding predators. You'll rarely find a bird wandering around by itself. They seem to know there is safety in numbers, so they travel in flocks, usually grouped by gender and



Mike Brouchoud (l) and Jon Freis, both of Maribel, take a break with Freis's dogs Keena (l) and Lucky during a fall turkey hunt.

Photos by Dan Small

to legalize turkey hunting with dogs began about a decade ago when the DNR floated the idea on two consecutive spring hearings questionnaires. It was voted down both times, but a

and Lab and her sire a mountain cur/Walker cross. Freis attributes her intelligence to her collie blood. Keena will sometimes circle around a flock of turkeys and flush them toward the hunters.

Last year, Freis bought a second turkey dog, a spirited pup with Gordon setter, English pointer, and Plott hound blood he named Lucky. While not a registered breed, the combination is known as a Virginia turkey dog. Most dogs used for turkey hunting are pointer/setter crosses with some hound in them. Turkey dog breeders are pretty secretive. It took Freis numerous conversations to convince a Virginia breeder to sell a dog to a Yankee.

Training a dog to hunt turkeys is pretty simple.

"A bird dog that won't hold a point will usually make a good turkey dog," Freis said. "Take them out in August when the poults are as big as pheasants. Let them tree a few. They'll figure it out."

A trained turkey dog will scour the woods until it locates a flock then rush at them to scatter them. It should also bark at the flush to alert its handler. Keena will stay right where she flushed the birds. Lucky is still in training and barks excitedly when she flushes turkeys, then rushes off to find more.

Sometimes flushed turkeys will tree and sit tight, offering the option of an easy shot. Most will flush again as the hunter approaches. The classic strategy, then, is to set up where the birds flushed from and try to call one back within range.

This fall, a TV crew and I joined Freis and several other hunters on four hunts. On three of the four, we had plenty of action. On just one, a hunter shot a gobbler the dogs had roused.

On our first hunt, five hunters and five dogs converged on an 80-acre parcel from three sides, but did not find a turkey. On another, three hunters and two dogs surrounded a small patch of woods. Lucky broke up a flock, but the birds flew across an open field to woods we couldn't hunt. Our third hunt was successful, but the camera

handful of biologists and turkey-dog enthusiasts persisted, and a three-year trial hunt (2007 through 2009) was launched in nine southwestern counties. When those hunts did not generate any serious opposition, the Natural Resources Board legalized the practice statewide.

One of those enthusiasts, Jon Freis, of Maribel, invited hunters from Ohio and New York to participate in the trial hunts. He enjoyed the sport so much he bought a turkey dog, founded the American Wild Turkey Hunting Dog Association, and wrote a book on the subject: "Choosing, Training and Hunting Turkeys with a Dog," now in its fourth edition.

When Freis started the AWTHDA in 2004, only 22 states allowed turkey hunting with dogs. Today, largely because of his group's efforts, the practice is legal in 30 states.

"She is smarter than half the guys I went to high school with," Freis says of Keena, his first turkey dog. Like most turkey dogs, Keena is of mixed ancestry. Her dam was collie



Detlef Weiler, of Maribel, bagged the only turkey the group shot in four days of hunting. Jon Freis's dog Lucky covered 14 miles on this hunt, but stood still briefly for a photo.

age.

Adult hens hang out with their broods and each other, sometimes in flocks of 40 or more. Toms stick with other toms, usually in smaller flocks of a half dozen or so.

With so many pairs of eyes on the lookout, sneaking up on a flock is out of the question. Some hunters try to pattern birds and ambush them, but the traditional way to hunt fall turkeys is to scatter a flock and then call a bird back to you.

Both parts of this technique are easier said than done, and the "calling them back" part rarely works unless you did a good job of scattering.

This is where a turkey dog comes in very handy.

Turkey hunting in fall with dogs dates to Colonial times, whereas spring gobbler hunting started only in the 1950s when Southern states began to restore wild turkey populations and sought a way to hunt them, yet protect hens. Commonly practiced in the Appalachian Mountain states, hunting with dogs has slowly spread west.

Here in Wisconsin, the move

# GOOD BREAK WITH A DOG



Jon Freis wears his passion on his license plate.

was out of position to record the kill. On the fourth hunt, we encountered a small flock of toms, but they flew into thick cedars and eluded us.

"The bad news is we didn't get anything," Freis said. "The good news is we get to go again."

Freis admits that even with a dog, not every hunt is success-

ignored them. So much for that concern!

It's actually easier to hunt turkeys with dogs in Wisconsin than in the mountain states, Freis said, because we have fewer big hills, smaller woodlots, and a lot more turkeys per square mile. A wide-ranging dog like Lucky would certainly be an asset on a hunt in Wisconsin's Northwoods,



Jon Freis and his dog Keena wait in a reflective blind on a fall turkey hunt. Jon says of Keena, his mixed-breed turkey dog: "She's smarter than most of the guys I went to high school with."

ful, but half the fun is watching and listening to the dogs. The two most vigorous dogs – Lucky and Mr. T, a pointer/Brittany spaniel cross owned by Bill Roder, of Crandon – covered ground more thoroughly and quickly than a hunter ever could. Freis runs Lucky with a GPS collar to keep track of her whereabouts. She ran about 14 miles on each of our two longer hunts. Freis's GPS screen showed she practically blanketed the woods we were hunting. A single hunter on foot wouldn't cover a tenth of what she did.

Freis hunts mainly private land and has little trouble getting permission, especially from farmers who are concerned about crop damage and losses of cattle feed. He keeps tabs on local flocks and decides which land to hunt depending on where he has seen birds most recently.

Some bowhunters object to turkey hunting with dogs, saying they'll chase deer out of their territory. We encountered one bowhunter who was intrigued, but had no problem with what we were doing. We did jump several deer on one hunt, but they simply circled around us as we went through the woods and ended up right where they were to begin with. The best part was that the dogs

where there are fewer turkeys and lots of woods to cover. Even in the relatively small woodlots of Manitowoc County, however, the dogs proved their worth. We would not have seen as many birds without them, and it's unlikely we would have bagged a tom without their help.

For more information on the AWTHDA, visit [www.turkey-dog.org](http://www.turkey-dog.org)