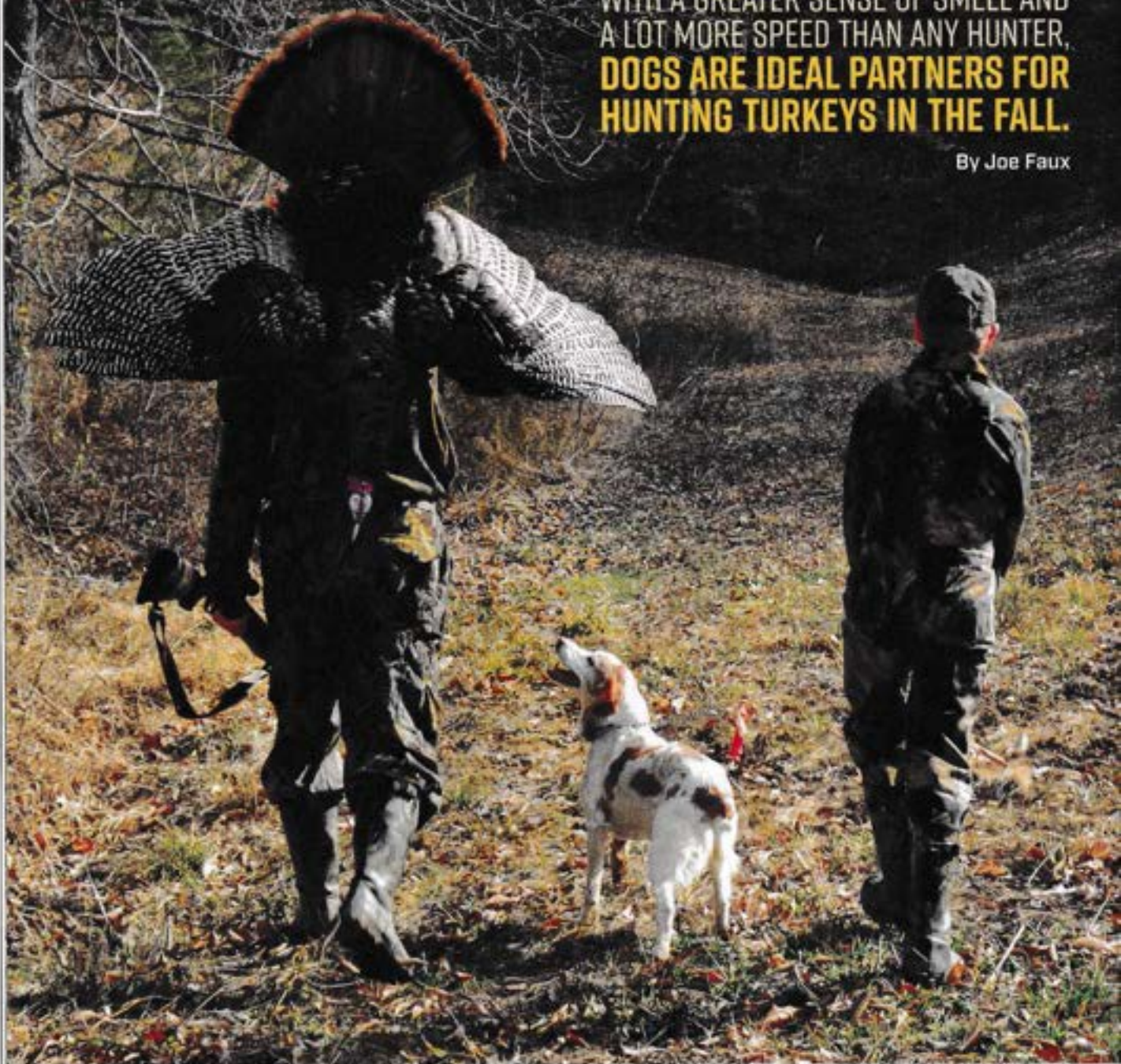


A DOG'S WORLD

WITH A GREATER SENSE OF SMELL AND A LOT MORE SPEED THAN ANY HUNTER, **DOGS ARE IDEAL PARTNERS FOR HUNTING TURKEYS IN THE FALL.**

By Joe Faux



While solo hunters tag many turkeys every fall, doing so with a dog (and maybe even a youngster) is often a far more enjoyable experience.

While spring gobbler season may be more popular, fall turkey hunting has been around for far longer. In some places—probably more places than you realize—turkey hunting with a dog is a time-honored tradition. While there's a whole chapter dedicated to it in Edward McIlhenny's book, *The Wild Turkey and its Hunting*, which was published in 1914, it's mentioned in even earlier publications.

Currently, 29 states permit the use of dogs while hunting turkeys during the fall, including New York, which has allowed dogs since the fall turkey season was first instituted in 1959. In contrast, it wasn't until 2007 that hunting fall turkeys with dogs became legal in neighboring Pennsylvania. Many who hunt this way consider it the finest method there is for bagging a bird. For these diehards, there's nothing more exciting in the fall woods than busting up a flock of turkeys and calling one back to the gun.

HUNTER'S BEST FRIEND

Generally, the challenge in fall turkey hunting is finding the birds. As they wander about trying to fatten up for the upcoming winter, they're not usually gobbling and giving away their location like they do in the spring. That's where a good turkey dog comes into play. While turkey dogs will certainly run turkeys when they see them, they're trained to locate birds and break up flocks by scent—which greatly enhances their usefulness. That means hunts don't usually start at the

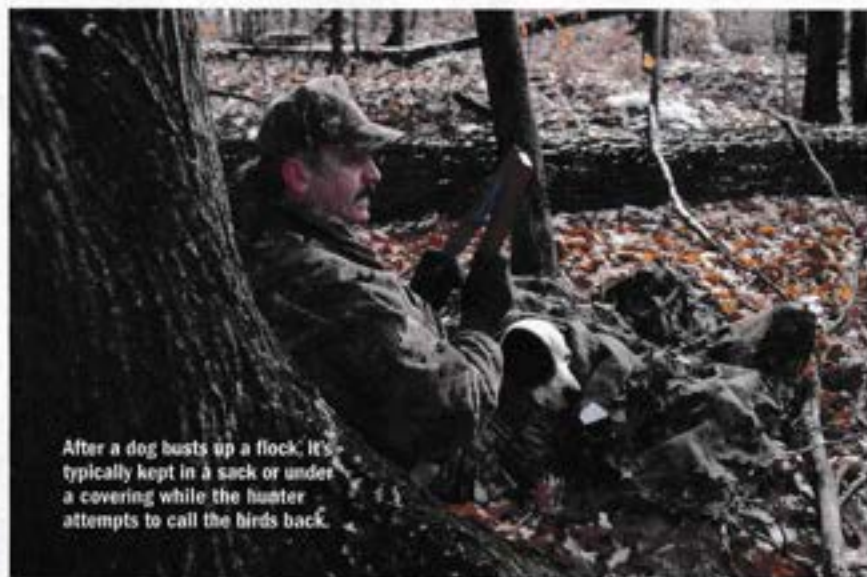
crack of dawn as they do in the spring. Mid-morning works well since, by then, birds have had a chance to mill around on the ground, leaving enough scent for the dogs to work.

Brett Berry from Ohio has been hunting with turkey dogs since 2004, usually in Pennsylvania as well as New York. Like many hunting dog owners, he shares a special bond with his four-legged partners.

"My dogs are my kids," says Berry. "Watching one of them perform is like someone watching one of their kids hitting a home run. They're trained to wind flocks—three of my dogs have winded flocks more than 300 yards away. They'll run right into the center of the flock and start barking to scatter the birds, and they won't stop till they've scattered all of the birds."

Berry notes that an efficient and complete flock breakup is critical to success. The dog's barking also helps him figure out where to set up if the break occurs out of sight. Then the fun begins. Berry marks the exact spot of the breakup on his GPS and sets up nearby, preferably where two or more cover or terrain edges come together.

"Flocks are different," Berry says. "Some are family groups of hens and poults; some might be bachelor groups of gobblers. How we call, and to some degree how we set up, depends on the makeup of the group. If it's a family group, the setup is usually at the initial scatter point. If it's a group of gobblers, often times a second breakup is critical for success."



After a dog busts up a flock, it's typically kept in a sack or under a covering while the hunter attempts to call the birds back.

After the breakup, Berry's dog goes into a camo bag and remains quiet as reassembly calling begins. Since the calls Berry makes to bring the scattered birds back together depend on the makeup of the flock, it's important to pay attention during the breakup. The amount of noise a flock of turkeys can make while reassembling is amazing. While the kee-keeing of a jake is often heard, there'll also be adult hen yelping, boss hen assembly calling and various yelping and clucking from the whole flock if it's a family group.

"If there's a boss hen, you have to call to that hen, or she'll pull all the other birds over to her," says Berry. "If you can't get her to respond, you might need another breakup to get her out of there. If it's a gobbler group, there'll only be the occasional and abbreviated gobbler yelp. Killing an adult gobbler in the fall is the ultimate challenge in turkey hunting. Very few hunters ever master the ability to do it on a consistent basis."

Berry scouts and practices calling year-round, a dedication common among turkey doggers. He's in the woods so much he can identify some turkeys by their calls.

"They all have different and unique voices that you can't really imitate, so when you call you have to relate to them like a stranger seeking an introduction," he says. "I listen to [recordings of] turkeys so I can get their vocabulary stuck in my mind."

SHARP SENSES

A variety of dog breeds are used to hunt turkeys, the common denominators being the desire to hunt and the willingness to bark to get the birds to fly. Many doggers reference John Byrne of Virginia, who began breeding and refining what he wanted in a turkey dog more than 5 decades ago. Initially, he crossed a cast-off Plott hound female with a lemon-and-white pointer, then he bred one of the resulting females with a field-trial English setter and got "Junior," a one-quarter Plott, one-quarter pointer, one-half setter cross. He was the stud dog that started the Byrne turkey-dog line.

Josh Hassinger of Pennsylvania has only been dogging for seven years, but he already recognizes the dedication involved. With a family history deeply rooted in turkey hunting, his interest

Fall turkey dogging success often depends on the dispersion of the flock. The more widely scattered they are, the easier they'll be to call back in.



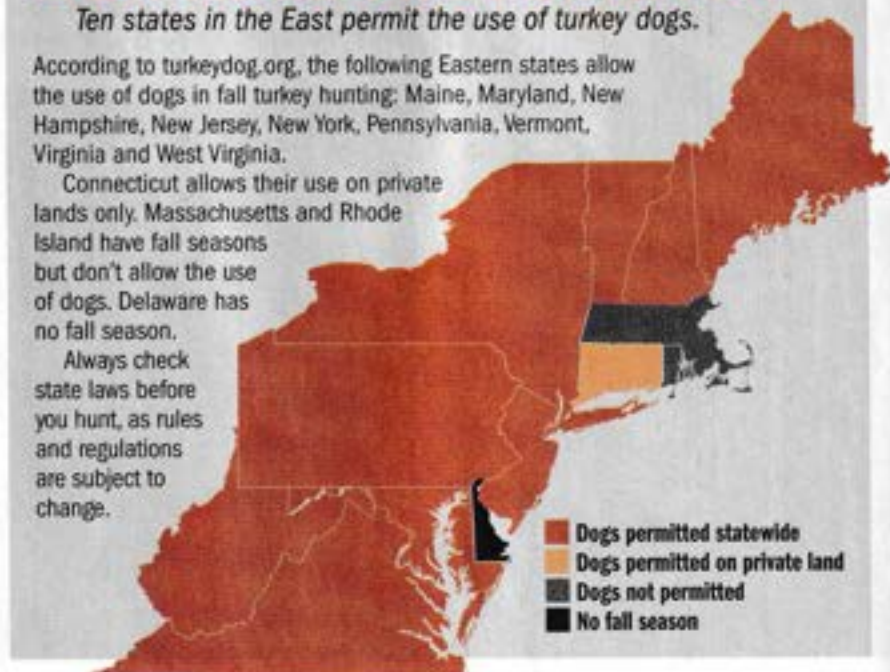
DOG REGS AT A GLANCE

Ten states in the East permit the use of turkey dogs.

According to turkeydog.org, the following Eastern states allow the use of dogs in fall turkey hunting: Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia and West Virginia.

Connecticut allows their use on private lands only. Massachusetts and Rhode Island have fall seasons but don't allow the use of dogs. Delaware has no fall season.

Always check state laws before you hunt, as rules and regulations are subject to change.





Fall turkey flocks primarily consist of hens and poults, though gobblers of any age might be in the mix. The key to calling is to mimic what you hear.

in and respect for the history and the tradition of turkey dogging is paramount.

"Over the years, I've hunted with a variety of dogs in a variety of situations," he says. "I'm definitely a dog man, but hunting turkeys with a dog is taking it to an all new level."

Hassinger hunts turkeys with a couple of droppers, "a pointer-setter cross with maybe a little hound thrown in," he explains. Like Berry, Hassinger enjoys a special bond with his dogs that gives him an advantage when hunting fall birds.

"It's one of the most symbiotic relationships I have ever been involved in," he says. "For the first part of the hunt, I'm constantly watching my dogs. They show me where the birds are coming from."

Rich Musser takes this element of turkey dogging a step farther when he hunts his Boykin spaniels in the mountains of northern Pennsylvania with his wife Kelly.

"I'm hard of hearing. I can hear the birds when they're calling, but if they don't call as they're coming in, I usually don't hear them," he says.

Musser relies on his dog for help. When he sets up, he puts his arm around his dog to monitor its heartbeat.

"When I'm calling, her heartbeat is normal and she'll just patiently sit there, but when her heartbeat increases, I know she hears a turkey. She's watching 5 minutes sooner than I'd be watching—if

I knew where to look. I watch right where she's watching; that's how I know where to look. She's saved my bacon quite a few times when I couldn't hear a bird coming in."

"Rich and I both got our slams by 2002 but didn't start turkey dogging until 2012," Kelly says. "The best thing about hunting this way is that it combines our two favorite passions—turkeys and dogs. We get to build a bond with our dogs and experience some great dog work."

SHARED EXPERIENCE

Ron Meek of New York was a turkey dogger for 20 years. His favorite dog, a cocker-golden-retriever mix, was also a house dog. That's another common trait among doggers: Their dogs are almost always house dogs. Several say they do it because it creates a stronger bond between the hunter and dog, but perhaps they do it just because they're dog people.

Meek is quick to point out what he sees as the difference between spring turkey hunting and fall turkey hunting. Because a breakup involves multiple birds, multiple hunters can be involved in the recall, and all of them can be in a position to shoot.

"Spring is an individual act," Meek says. "You've got the bird to yourself. You're not likely to share much intel with someone else as to where to find

birds or about some special way you call. Fall is a social gathering. It's a shared experience with more of a willingness to share hunting locations and secrets."

Pete Clare, owner of Turkey Trot Acres in New York, knows all about the social aspect. Established in 1990, Turkey Trot Acres has introduced many hunters to turkey dogging. While the lodge no longer offers this type of hunt, Clare has vivid recollections.

"Back when we were fall hunting with dogs, we'd have six to eight hunters in camp and we'd use three dogs. We always had our areas scouted and knew where we might find turkeys, and then we'd work the areas by having the dogs work sideways into the wind, since it was easier to cover more ground that way. With three dogs it usually wasn't long before one of them found birds. Then the bust was on and the fun began."

Clare is helpful with advice for anyone who wants to get into turkey dogging, and it starts by finding the right people. A great place to go is turkeydog.org, where a multitude of information about all aspects of the method is available.

"Ask around and find some doggers to talk with, and ask them to help you find a dog," Clare says. "There aren't any turkey dog trainers out there, so it'll be up to you. Just get a dog with the right genetics and get into the turkey woods as much as you can." **BT**