

The Skrinking World of Parker Wheedon

By Angus Phillips
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Parker Wheedon hates people. He's the world's foremost antisocial attorney-at-law.

He doesn't hate all people -- just the ones who join together in clubs destined to ruin all the things he likes best in the world to do.

Group people.

Like the Bass Anglers Sportsmen Society. What do they call it?" thundered Wheedon in his Carolina-tinged basso profundo, garbling the name into an obscene, bass-ackwards spoonerism.

Wheedon is 54 years old. He has a great bear chest and long stick legs that carry him through the mountain woods in Grizzly Adams gait. When he was a younger man he discovered that one of the most satisfying things he could do was catch largemouth bass in a lake. Nobody else was doing it much, it was great sport and he was very good at it.

From Wheedon's home in Charlotte, North Carolina, it was a short drive to Santee-Cooper Reservoir in South Carolina.

He could go there any time and expect to catch a stringer of four-, five- and six-pound bass. The biggest one he ever caught -- a thrashing 12-pounder -- came out of Santee.

But he won't fish there anymore.

B.S.S.S. discovered it.

He blames it largely on an old friend who learned Santee the way Wheedon did -- by long, lonely hours on the lake, poring over topographical maps from before the closure of the dam and the flooding of the land, looking for places where bass would likely hide.

Then one day the old friend joined B.A.S.S. and became one of the stalwarts of the organization's fish-for-cash circuit. His name is Roland Martin, and Wheedon says Martin sold out.

"The first thing I knew he was putting together a book with all the places we'd worked so hard to find laid out for the world to see. They were our spots. Since that booklet came out there isn't a piece of submerged structure in Santee that doesn't have a plastic worm dragged over it at least three times a day."

Wheedon told Martin what he thought of the booklet, but it did no good. Now Santee is off his list.

Along with about every other decent-size lake in the East, all of them "discovered" by B.A.S.S. and its legions of jumpsuited anglers. These fishermen, many of whom Wheedon contends lack the ingenuity and patience to find good fishing holes themselves, are educated by B.A.S.S. newsletters and peer support. Big-money

tournaments lure the the best fishermen, the press and hangers-on to the fine bass lakes. In high season some of those lakes wind up lookig like the Beltway in rush hour.

Wheedon finally gave up. Now he only fishes rivers where the B.A.S.S. people's fancy high-powered boats won't go. He does extraordinarily well in some rivers, but he won't even tell his friends where they are.

His experience with B.A.S.S. gave Wheedon recurring nightmares. Something in the dark recesses of his psyche kept telling him that someday the same thing could happen to his other favorite pastime -- wild turkey hunting.

Wheedon is, plainly and simply, one of the finest turkey hunters there is. He's killed 132 turkey over the years. He doesn't just hunt the big birds; he studies them.

When he can't shoot because of seasonal restrictions he takes his tape recorder and his field glasses into the woods and he hunts that way. One Sunday a year ago he called up 10 hens and gobblers after scattering a flock. You can't shoot on Sundays, but he stayed and called them in anyway.

Wheedon trains turkey dogs to take into the woods and scatter the flocks. He had one dog named Peaches that could do nothing wrong. How did she get so good?

"Simple," said Wheedon. "I'd take her into the woods and work her on Saturday, which is my day. Then I'd take her into the woods and work her on Sunday, which was my wife's day."

Many's the night that Wheedon, hot on the trail of a wild turkey, would simply roll up and sleep the night away in the chilly woods so he could press on with the hunt before dawn.

But he kept having this nightmare, and finally it came true.

Enter the National Wild Turkey Federation, a new and burgeoning outfit whose principal aim is to expand the knowledge and numbers of wild turkey hunters. Which it does each year.

It drives Wheedon to despair. He says turkeys that never saw a hunter in the old days are now picked over and squawked at by hordes of nimrods. "You can't find a place where turkey hunters haven't been," he said, "and secrets it took me years to learn, they hold seminars and teach to people who'd never learn them any other way."

Wheedon used to find solace in his third-favorite amusement -- collecting arrowheads. But he says every fresh-turned farm field he visits these days has a guy with a satchel over his shoulder, picking through the tractor rows.

It may have Weedon down, but the barrel-chested Carolinian is decidedly not out. He's still chugging along, as he did last weekend when he drove nine hours to a little cabin in West Virginia, a base from which his host

promised wild turkeys were likely to be locatable.

He brought his young protege, Tommy Snodgrass, whom Wheedon is training to find the turkeys when he himself is too old to stalk the woods. "He'll find them and take me where they're at."

It rained buckets half the weekend and the hunting was fruitless, but Wheedon and Snodgrass took us hunting anyway. They brought their tapes and stories.

At night the rain pattered on the old tin roof and the river kept rising by the hour; the warming stove glowed with a crackling fire and coffee perked on the cookstove.

We sat in the warmth and listened to the reconstruction of great hunts from the little cassette recorder Wheedon carries into the woods with him.

"There," he said, his eyes darting from one to the next of us. "Hear that old gobbler? He's in the draw now and coming to me."

The tape emitted the high-pitched clucks of Wheedon's call and the vehement gobbling of a love-hungry tom turkey.

Sometimes the tapes ended in a great crashing gunshot and sometimes they ended in silence, when the big birds drifted back into the forest, their calls fading away in the trees. Which is how it goes in the wilderness.

The rain slowed things, but it didn't stop them. The hunters plied their damp trade anyway, and though they never scared up turkey No. 1, Wheedon wore a big smile when it came time to go home.

He's been two days in the woods. He hadn't seen the first turkey.

But he hadn't seen any people, either. And Parker Wheedon hates people.

 **Comments**