

# Doggin'

# Fall Turkeys

ADDING A CANINE  
TO YOUR OCTOBER  
HUNT CAN BE AS  
EXCITING AS IT IS  
REWARDING

BY JIM LEE

**T**he idea of a hunting dog has changed slightly in Wisconsin in recent years.

For example, a mountain cur might have been viewed by most Badger State sportsmen as just a mongrel dog a few seasons back. But now, thanks to sportsmen such as Oneida's Jon Freis and his mountain cur, Keena, that dismissing characterization has changed.

Part Walker hound, part Labrador retriever and part tri-color rough collie, 4-year-old Keena doesn't look like your typical hunting companion. Yet, while his pup's heritage might be a bit confusing, Freis explained that this polyglot parentage is exactly what he needed in a hunting dog.

"She comes from a breed of Southern dogs used to herd cattle and even hunt black bear or boar," Freis said.

But Freis, 56, didn't obtain Keena for any of those purposes. Freis wanted Keena for a specific task unavailable to Wisconsin hunters until the fall of 2007 — to hunt fall turkeys.

And this is a pursuit at which the strange-looking dog excels.

"They say the recipe for a good turkey dog is a bit of Lab, then add a little hound and terrier," Freis said.

"You want the hound for its nose and the ability to track, the Lab for its natural interest in birds and the terrier for its bark. So that when the turkeys flush, the dog will bark and let you know when the birds have flushed and where, because you want to sit down where the flock split up."

## BADGER STATE "BIRD" DOGS

There are many ways to harvest a fall turkey but busting up a flock, waiting briefly, then calling in hopes of intercepting a straggler as the unit tries to regroup is considered one of the most reliable methods.

Any hunter who has ever raced through thick brush and fallen timber in an attempt to get close enough to a flock of running turkeys to scatter them into the air will readily appreciate a turkey dog.

Yet, until the 2007 fall season, hunting turkeys with a dog was illegal in Wisconsin — a situation Freis toiled for years to change. His efforts came to fruition a year ago when the state Legislature approved a three-year test. Turkey hunting with dogs was allowed in nine counties, with the season opening delayed until Oct. 1.

## FIRST SEASON

Freis opened the 2007 fall season in Monroe County. He was accompanied by Jeremy Berna, of Pulaski, along with Marlin Watkins of Summitville, Ohio, and Gary Evans of Salem, Ohio.

Anticipating the challenge, Freis contacted landowners months in advance to obtain hunting permission.

"Gaining landowner permission was a lengthy process, especially when you're not from the area," Freis acknowledged.

Watkins, a veteran of fall turkey hunting in several states, brought his own hunting partner — Kee-Kee, a so-called "Appalachian turkey dog," sporting a heritage that includes Plot hound and pointer.



"This dog comes from a line that has been bred for 40 years specifically for hunting turkeys," Watkins said.

Freis had invited Watkins and Evans on the hunt, hoping to benefit from their dog handling and fall turkey hunting experience. Watkins is also known as an excellent turkey caller.

The expertise paid off opening day as Berna probably became the first hunter in recent Wisconsin history to legally take a fall turkey while hunting with dogs.

"We scattered the birds about 7:15 a.m.," Freis recalled. "Marlin and Gary did a lot of the calling. They used a lot of yelps and kee-kees."

Berna killed the first bird about 8:30 a.m. Then, after he picked his bird up, the hunters kept calling.

"About 15 minutes later I shot a second bird," Freis said.

## FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Berna and Freis weren't done, though. Berna had purchased an extra over-the-counter tag and I joined the foursome as an observer the second day of their hunt.

I arrived just as a flock of about a dozen turkeys was spotted coming out of a plot of standing corn. By the time we readied the dogs, the birds had moved into an adjacent field of alfalfa, and by the time we approached within viewing range the birds had disappeared.

Watkins and Freis unleashed their dogs, and the disparate pair raced into the field. The dogs immediately picked up turkey scent, followed the unseen trail into the woods and quickly began barking ... then returned to the field.

"They've scattered the flock," Watkins said. "The dogs will lead us back to where the turkeys flushed. The birds will attempt to regroup. Let's see if we can get into position to take advantage of it."

The flock had taken off from the top of a timbered ridge, a fact that worried Watkins.

"This is the worst terrain in which to scatter a flock of turkeys and hope to call them in," he explained. "When the birds take off from a ridge top and sail over a ravine or valley, they can see each other in the air and often adjust their flights so they land close together."



Dogs like Jon Freis' mixed breed named Keena are bred specifically to have all of the favorable attributes for turkey hunting.

## NO GUARANTEE

The best scatter is a dispersal that sends birds in all or at least opposite directions. A hunter who sits in the middle of the flushing zone might find several turkeys coming to his calls.

"The dog is helpful in scattering turkeys," Freis said. "Then it's all about the calling. You need to get the right cadence to talk like a hen or talk like a gobbler. You need to know what to say and when."

The five of us spread out near the bottom of the ridge in two groups, about 50 yards apart.

Watkins and Evans kept up a near-constant patter of yelps, cutts, purrs and cuts, halting only briefly to listen for possible responses from approaching turkeys.

Unlike spring turkey hunting, when pursuers listen for the unmistakable, penetrating blast of a gobbler, fall hunters attune themselves to subtler sounds. Lonely clucks and spare, soft yelps are often the only indication a bird is approaching.

Yet, within 10 minutes of initiating calling, we had responses from turkeys in three directions. The birds moved toward our location tentatively and unseen.

Eventually a pair of jakes silently appeared within shotgun range of Berna and he quickly had a tag on his second turkey of the season.

Continued calling nearly succeeded in bringing a bird to Evans' gun but the turkey turned back just as it was about to step within range.

In four days of hunting, the four-

some tagged four turkeys. They flushed other flocks but were unable to successfully work the birds.

"A dog doesn't guarantee you're going to get a fall turkey," Freis said. "But having one along sure can be helpful."

## TRAINING A TURKEY DOG

Watkins has been turkey hunting with dogs for 18 years. He initially converted his German shorthaired pointer to break turkeys but ultimately obtained a proven breed of "turkey dog" from John Byrne, a veteran Virginia hunter.

"I've always hunted with dogs," Watkins said. "Ducks with labs. Pheasants, grouse and quail with setters and pointers. It's in my blood."

"When I learned you could use a dog to break fall turkeys it was just a natural move for me to get involved."

Watkins said upland game hunters will be tempted — as he was — to utilize their bird dogs on fall turkey.

"Using a retriever or pointing dog to flush turkeys is fine," he said. "Many people do this in other states where fall turkey hunting with dogs is legal."

But keep in mind, Watkins cautions, that traditional bird dogs were bred for tasks that did not include turkey hunting. Retrieving breeds can be trained to sit quietly while a turkey hunter calls but remaining motionless can be difficult for a pointing dog.

Both Watkins and Freis recommend dedicated fall turkey hunters obtain a dog bred to accommodate that purpose specifically.

Many hunters use an open, wood-colored, small suitcase or "bag" to hold their dog while calling. It camouflages the dog and keeps it quiet as turkeys approach. Others might cover the dog with camouflage fabric or place the dog in a position where it is partially hidden. The key is training the dog to sit still.

"Kee-kee was 8 weeks old when I brought her home," Watkins said. "I trained her to lay in a bag by holding her and petting her each evening in a bag on the couch."

"I worked her with turkey wings

and let her chase any bird we saw — geese, crows, pheasants and, of course, turkeys, when the poultts were big enough to fly well.”

As a puppy Kee-kee had to be shown turkeys to break them.

“The second year she still did not hunt as well as I liked and we had to get within smelling distance of birds for her to go and break turkeys. This year (the third year) she hunts on her own and finds birds we would not know were in the area.”

## FALL CALLS

Calling isn't any different than after a traditional human-induced scatter.

Watkins utilizes a variety of devices, including a paddle box call, mouth yelper, slate and a trumpet call similar to a wingbone yelper.

“I run through them and see what I get the best response on,” he said. “What I have found is that you can call for 30 minutes with one call and the very first note out of a different call gets a response.”

This is especially true when going

from a mouth call to a paddle call.

“The trumpet seems to be at its best when leaves are off the trees,” he added. “In winter, I'll take a trumpet over all calls.”

Watkins likes to start out loud and go soft as the birds near.

“However, on windy days I've killed many turkeys calling loud right to the gun,” he said.

“When birds have been harassed by man or predators, they call less and softer. They generally call softer if you break them late in the day and they call softer or not at all if you break them in very heavy cover.”

Gobblers demand less calling. Even one cluck and a couple gobbler yelps every 15 minutes can be too much.

“I've had gobblers gobble 200 to 300 times in the course of three hours, but for the most part, less is better,” Watkins said.

## HELPER AND COMPANION

Calling to dispersed turkeys after a fall flock is broken up is as close to spring turkey hunting as a hunter can

get in October. It is the most opportune time to expect a response and to develop vocal interaction between turkey and hunter.

A dog makes that first step — finding and flushing turkeys — easier and more likely to occur. Yet, just as in spring, the arrival of a turkey within shotgun or bow range is never assured. Variables abound that might influence the situation.

However, when pursuit is successful, there is no more satisfying turkey hunt or prouder pair than hunter and his turkey dog.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts in the training of a turkey dog.

“My advice to a hunter is not to attempt training a dog unless you are committed to it,” Watkins said. “Training a dog is a lot of work.”

“Contrary to this, if someone is dedicated and puts in the work, it is the most enjoyable turkey hunting they can expect.” **woj**

*Jim Lee is WOJ's Central Region field editor.*

# Your One-Stop Shop for Non-Stop Fun

There's one place to stop when you want a toy for outdoor fun - your Bombardier Recreational Products dealer. You'll not only get a great vehicle - a SkiDoo snowmobile, Sea-Doo watercraft or Can-Am ATV - you'll get a passion for powersports you won't find anywhere else.



**ski-doo**  
BETTER RIDES. BETTER RIDERS™



www.can-am.brp.com



**can-am**  
THE ULTIMATE RIDE™



## LEN EBERT & SONS

N8495 Hwy. 45 • Clintonville, WI 54929-9743 • 715-752-4428 • www.lenebert.com

© 2007 Bombardier Recreational Products Inc. (BRP). All rights reserved. ®, ™, and the BRP logo are trademarks of Bombardier Recreational Products Inc. or its affiliates. In the U.S.A., the products are distributed by BRP US Inc. \*Based on internal BRP testing. BRP reserves the right, at any time, to discontinue or change specifications, prices, designs, features, models or equipment without incurring obligation. Some models depicted may include optional equipment. BRP highly recommends that all ATV drivers take a training course. For safety and training information, see your dealer or, in USA, call the ATV Safety Institute at 1-800-887-2887. In Canada, call the Canadian Safety Council at (613) 739-1535 ext. 227. ATVs can be hazardous to operate. For your safety, always wear a helmet, eye protection, and other protective clothing. Always remember that riding and alcohol/drugs don't mix. Never ride on paved surfaces or public roads. Never carry passengers on any ATV not specifically designed by the manufacturer for such use. Never engage in stunt driving. Avoid excessive speeds and be particularly careful on difficult terrain. ATVs with engine sizes of greater than 90cc are recommended for use only by those age 16 and older. BRP urges you to "TREAD LIGHTLY" on public and private lands. Preserve your future riding opportunities by showing respect for the environment, local laws and the rights of others when you ride. Make sure that all laws, regulations, and BRP's warnings/recommendations for ATV passengers are respected. Ride responsibly. Outlander MAX ATVs: These ATVs are recommended for drivers age 16 and older, and passengers age 12 and older only.

110281-01