



A Season of *Their Own*

The week-long youth turkey season gives young hunters an uninterrupted opportunity to hunt turkey

WRITTEN BY JOSH LEVENTHAL | PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS HARVEY

Jimmy Wright could not believe his eyes. As he peeked over a small hill, seven turkeys were lined up just 35 yards in the distance. These were the same birds that Wright and his two sons had spotted from the opposite side of this Jones County field an hour earlier, leading them to navigate through the woods in an attempt to set up on a better spot. It worked. Wright slowly and quietly rolled back down the hill to his boys, 12-year-old James and 9-year-old Colin, and alerted them to what awaited in the distance.



North Carolina's youth turkey season was expanded from a single Saturday to a week in 2013 as part of an effort to increase youth participation. Opposite: Allen Cain snaps a quick photo of James Wright after a successful morning hunt in Jones County.

Colin Wright, 10, is all smiles after making an excellent shot just hours after his older brother punched his own tag. Opposite: The Wright boys swap stories as their father, Jimmy, proudly serves as mentor and pack mule.

Each boy had their instructions as they set up on the hill: James would pick out a bird on the right, Colin would get one on the left. After a few calls from dad, James pulled the trigger first and dropped his gobbler, the first of his young hunting career. Colin, who bagged his first turkey the prior spring, shot seconds later, but missed as the turkeys scattered.

The boys had gone 1 for 2 on this early April 2018 morning, but the Wrights celebrated as one. James was thrilled to get his first turkey after trying the three previous years. Colin was almost as excited for his big brother while Jimmy was proud to see his boys successfully monitor a group of birds—a new milestone for the young hunters.

“This was their first real encounter with them out of the woods,” said Jimmy Wright, who had previously turkey hunted with his boys out of a blind. “They thought this was incredible.”

This marked the fourth year that Wright had taken his sons turkey hunting on this private parcel during youth season, a full week dedicated to hunters under the age of 18 that precedes the opening of the regular season and features a bag limit of one bearded turkey. Turkey is the only season with a full week dedicated to only youth, and Wright said it has been a game-changer in the development of his sons.

“It would be light-years different if they had been out during the regular season,” Wright said. “For them to know that it is about them, that it is youth week, that they are not tagging along with us but we are tagging along with them, has made a huge difference. For them to know that we don’t get to shoot and that it is all about them, it is a real special thing.”

Focusing on his kids afield, without distraction from other hunters or temptation to pull the trigger himself, is the highlight of having a youth season for Wright. Though he does still take his boys hunting during the regular season, he said that youth season provides more opportunities for instruction and mentoring.



“Youth season comes in and it’s fantastic if you’re a parent,” Wright said. “It’s just for them. It’s nice to have a week that you can designate for the kids.”

Expanding the Season

The Commission expanded youth season from a single Saturday into an entire week in 2013 as part of an effort to increase youth participation, believing that more time would create more opportunities to get youth involved in hunting.

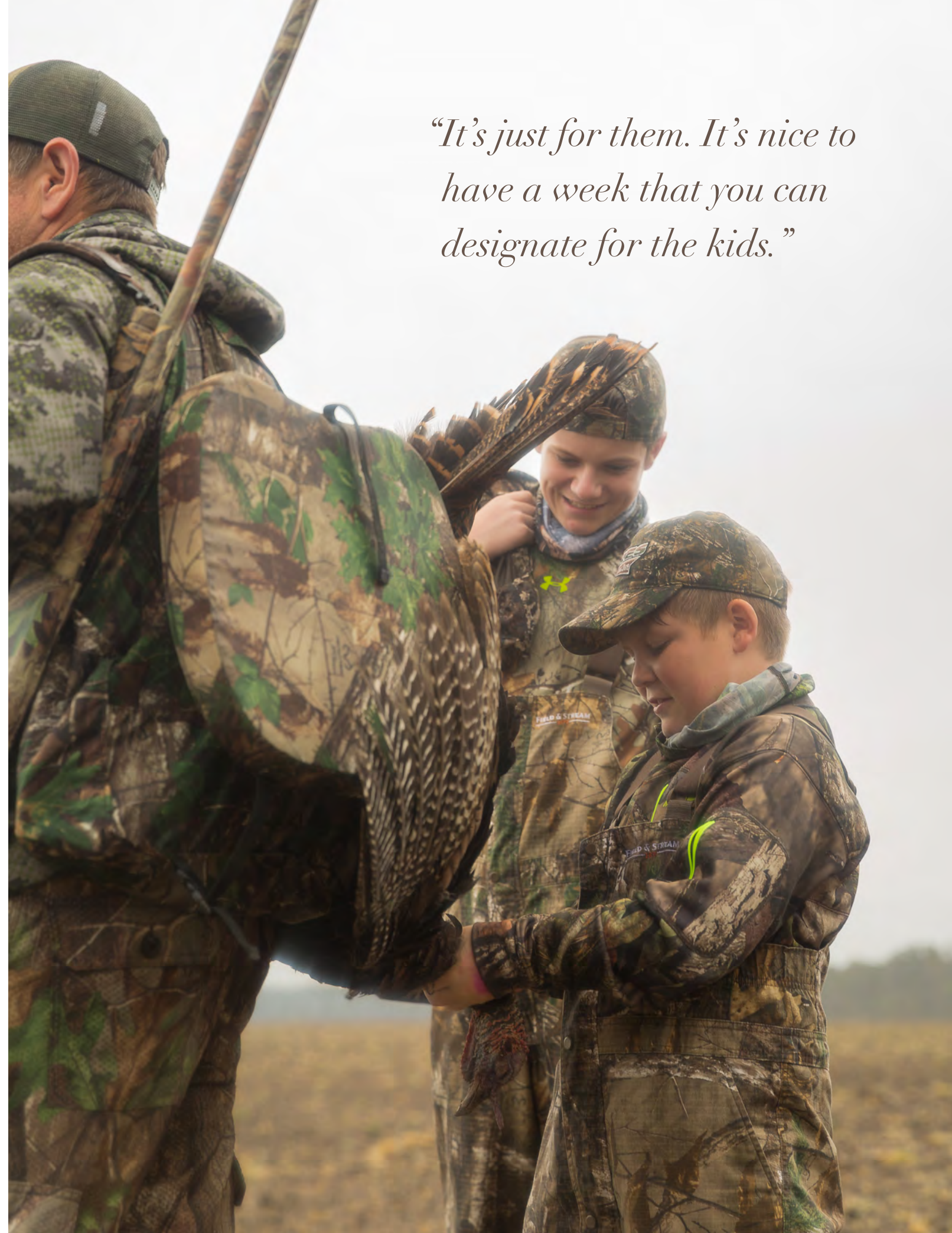
“With hunter recruitment as a major goal of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, we are continuously looking for ways to bring more youth into the woods,” David Cobb, who served as chief of wildlife management for the Commission at the time and now is the Commission’s director of research, said in 2013. “Adding these extra days to the youth season will give our newest hunters a

better chance of bagging a bird, and get more youths and adults into the field.”

Six years later, Cobb said that the youth season has been a success, with strong participation rates, steady harvest numbers and a growing turkey population. “We haven’t seen any downsides,” Cobb said. “We still get a lot of good comments. It’s popular with folks who have young children.”

Youth season harvest numbers have remained consistent over the years. In 2013, youth hunters harvested 1,193 turkey during youth season (18,409 total turkeys were killed during the overall hunting season). In 2019, youth hunters reported their largest harvest of 1,478 turkeys (18,730 total turkeys were killed last year). The numbers serve as another example of the success of the state’s restoration of the turkey population.

“Our turkey harvest has continued over the long term to increase,” Cobb said.



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With a couple of birds now under his belt, Colin Wright is a turkey-hunting fanatic.

“Certainly, now we have turkeys across the state in all 100 counties. It is a testament to the success of the restoration to be able, in essence, to add a whole week of the season and to be able to do it on the front end, which is when you have to be most careful.”

No Better Way to Learn

Having the youth turkey season during the first week of April, before the regular season begins, increases the odds for youth hunting success because, in part, birds have faced little pressure from hunters. It is also a delicate time of the season, for it comes at the end of the breeding season. Regular surveys carried out by Commission biologists continue to show a strong male-to-female ratio, leading biologists to believe that there has not been an overharvest of male turkeys.

“The timing of the harvest is something that we will continue to monitor,” said Chris Kreh, the Commission’s turkey biologist.

Despite the timing and lack of pressure, Kreh notes that youth season turkey hunting is not easy pickings for the kids. While there is less competition among hunters,

there are more hens active that serve as a distraction for the gobblers.

“There is no bad time to go hunting,” Kreh said. “During youth season, the birds probably have not been pressured. They may have been called to by some preseason scouting, but they have not been disturbed. The bad side is usually that first week of April is the time when hens have not started incubating nests, so those real hens might still be with the gobblers. So while you might not have to compete with other hunters, you might have to compete with other turkeys, so that can be real tough. Later in the season, hunters might not hear as many gobblers, but since hens are on a nest, they are much more likely to come to your call...My advice is to hunt both times.”

Cobb concurs, and notes that the youth season does not prevent a hunter from taking a child hunting later in the season. “Honestly, you could do it anytime. We made a bumper sticker [at the Commission] that said ‘Make Everyday Youth Day.’ There is always the opportunity for folks who have youth to take them out hunting. This [youth

season] made it concentrated and a special opportunity. Only the youth are allowed to [harvest] birds. It promotes that interaction between youth and adults. It promotes that interaction with family and friends. And it gives them that opportunity.”

One opportunity hunters should consider during youth season is a permit hunt on a state game land. The cost is \$8 to put in for a youth hunt permit with a deadline of March 1. There are a variety of great locations across the state that offer youth permit hunts, including Johns River, Jordan and Butner/Falls of Neuse. For more information about permit hunts, visit ncwildlife.org/licensing/permit-hunting-opportunities.

Wright said that he will be back in the field that first week of April with James and Colin, who are now 14 and 11, respectively. They wouldn’t dare miss it.

“They have decided that turkey is by far their favorite game to hunt,” Wright said. “When they were younger, I got a squirrel dog, thinking that this will open us up to some nice, easy hunting. And they do have a fantastic time with that. But turkey has been so instrumental for them because they are not sitting down. Do they want to sit in a blind or go sneak around? They want to look and listen for turkeys and try to close the distance.

“I’ve told them that now it is time for you to call for yourselves. I want to see you pull out the box call for yourself. I’ll be there for the safety aspect, but they’ll be doing the calling. That’s what we are working on now, and like any dad would want for their kids, I want to see them transition into full, confident outdoorsmen.” ♦

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For more information about GSOs, contact Walter “Deet” James, the Commission’s R3 Hunting Specialist at **919-707-0059** or walter.james@ncwildlife.org.