

The Catholic Spirit. (St. Paul/Minneapolis)

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Finding God in the Show-Me state.

Priest bags spiritual experience while serving as guide on wild turkey hunt

Dawn glowed orange above the cattle farm near Washington, Missouri. A wild turkey hunter walked past some barns and into a pasture, pausing to take in the scene. Then, he prayed. It was a natural act for this priest who, for three days near the end of April, traded his clerics for camouflage. Father Joe Classen of St. Louis graciously had invited me to experience with him the scenic beauty of the Show-Me state. An avid outdoorsman, he has plied the woods and waters of Missouri throughout most of his 33 years in search of whatever bounty they would yield.

In this case, we were hoping the bounty would be a wild turkey — or two. Thus, one of his prayers on that beautiful daybreak was for a male turkey, called a tom or gobbler, to be fooled by his calls mimicking a female, or hen, and come within shotgun range looking for love.

The spring mating season is a special ritual both for the birds and the hunters. Father Joe discovered it 10 years ago, while I got my start in the early '80s, when Minnesota first started having a turkey hunting season. Missouri had become a turkey hunting hotbed decades before that and actually assisted Minnesota by negotiating a deal with our state to bring birds north for transplant into the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

I drove 10 hours south to suburban St. Louis April 22 to meet Father Joe and experience my first Missouri turkey hunt. I had heard and read many glowing reports and developed quite an itch to go. To me, turkey hunting in Missouri seemed like the equivalent of walleye fishing in Canada.

Anticipation builds

To be sure, there were birds aplenty. Father Joe had shared stories with me over the months and weeks leading up to the hunt about great numbers of birds stalking several farms he hunts for both turkey in the spring and deer in the fall. Then, to whet my appetite further, he e-mailed a picture of a bird he had shot on opening day, which occurred one week before our hunt. In Missouri, the law allows hunters to shoot two birds, so he had one tag left to fill with me.

This was a special bird for Father Joe — his first ever. After 10 years of near misses and heartaches, he finally harvested a yearling tom, called a jake. Any turkey hunter will tell you that the first bird is something to cherish.

Now, Father Joe was hoping to repeat his feat. We would start at a farm in Catawissa, located in Franklin County, and the place where he shot his first turkey. But, no gobblers came the next day as we kept silent watch in a small clearing in the woods. Song birds and other unidentified critters chattered continually, but the turkeys put a lid on their gobbling. When I asked Father Joe what a fruitless morning in the turkey woods can teach hunters like us, he replied simply, “patience and perseverance.”

Hunting for God

My attitude revealed lots of room to grow in those areas. After driving nearly half a day and dropping \$175 for a license, I wanted a bird to show for it. Father Joe did, too. But, he’s after more in the woods than a turkey. Ultimately, he’s hunting for God. In fact, that is the first line in the title of a book he wrote and published in the fall called “Hunting for God, Fishing for the Lord: Encountering the sacred in the great outdoors.”

(HuntingforGod.com) As the title of the book suggests, he expounds on ways one can draw closer to God while enjoying his creation. “I just love being out here,” he said. “It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other [whether a turkey comes in]. It’s just a blessing being out here to do it.” I struggled to come to the same conclusion. The lack of turkey response seemed like more of a curse to me, one that wouldn’t easily be lifted. Father Joe called some of his other hunting friends that afternoon and they experienced the same result as us — little or no gobbling.

Lunch is served

The next morning, we chose to hunt the farm of Glennon and Eugene Kopp, two brothers who provide the kind of hunting and hospitality that keep Father Joe coming back year after year. No matter how the hunt turned out, they would be preparing barbecued pork steaks for lunch. “They’re maybe the nicest people I’ve ever met,” Father Joe said. “They’re the prototype of what a good human being should be.” Well before dawn, we set up a blind at the far end of a cow pasture. This time, turkeys began gobbling as the sky lightened. We tried soft hen calling, but they would not venture out into the pasture. Instead, they went farther into the woods and clammed up. At about 8:30, Father Joe decided to head to a second piece of land the Koppes own down the road. I stayed put in the blind and eventually moved to the other end of their farm. Father Joe returned at noon from their other farm and shortly thereafter the pork steaks hit the grill. After filling our bellies with pork, we headed back to Catawissa, stopping at the other farm along the way so that I could take a look. This is where I would be the next day, while Father Joe would go back to the Koppes’ other farm.

Tough days in the woods

I stood on the edge of the field the next morning waiting to hear some gobbling as Father Joe stood at the other farm enjoying a prayerful sunrise. I jumped two birds off the roost and flushed two more on the far end of the property, but that was all. Like the first day, there was no gobbling. I’ve had tough days in the woods, but never a string of them as hard as this. To hear no gobbling on two of the three days was discouraging, to say the least. For me, anyway. Father Joe, on the other hand, brushed off the disappointment.

“I feel fine. I’m not down at all. I had a great time,” he said. “I learned my lesson years ago on that. When you focus so much on the end result, you end up disappointed.” That’s exactly what I had done. Fortunately, Father Joe helped me realize that God likely had different reasons for my trip to **Missouri** than bagging a bird.

Pondering the lessons

Looking back, it was a fabulous experience, from a spiritual perspective. Father Joe said Mass in the farmhouse twice while we were there. It’s the first time I’ve been the entire congregation. The experience was rich and deeply personal. My eyes filled with tears as we said the simplest of prayers in the humblest of settings. Then, to top it off, Father Joe heard my confession right after Mass. He packed up his Mass kit, housed in a converted handgun case, and proceeded to administer my second sacrament of the day. In the rolling hills of Catawissa, I found the forgiveness of sins. And, that’s worth everything.