



**IN EARLY APRIL**, a few weeks prior to the beginning of the Maryland spring turkey season, I received a phone call from Wildlife Refuge Specialist Cindy Beemiller at Eastern Neck Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is a 2,000-acre island located on Maryland's upper Eastern Shore, about six miles south of Rock Hall. Beemiller was calling to inform me that my 15-year old son, Nathaniel, was selected for an annual guided youth turkey hunt at ENWR. For

the past 15 years, the refuge has partnered with the National Wild Turkey Federation to provide a quality and educational youth turkey hunt.

I discovered this youth hunt opportunity on the Maryland Department of Natural Resource's website. The youth hunt is held on two Saturdays during the regular Maryland spring turkey season. Each year, dozens of hunters from across Maryland, ages 10 to 15, apply for the youth hunt at ENWR and only six lucky youths are randomly selected. The hunt is held on two dates with three hunters afield each day. Nathaniel was selected to hunt on April 19, the first date of the youth hunt.

As you can imagine, I was very surprised and excited for Nathaniel to be able to hunt wild turkeys at Eastern Neck. Wild turkeys are very elusive and can be an extremely challenging game bird for hunters of all ages, especially for a young hunter. Even though Nathaniel has taken several spring gobblers in the past while hunting with me, hunting turkeys on a wildlife refuge with an experienced guide is truly a hunt of a lifetime.

It was an even bigger surprise to learn that Nathaniel's friends, 14-year old Cameron Moneypenny of Frederick and his twin sister, Sarah were selected for the second date of the ENWR youth hunt. How three out of six youth from Frederick County were randomly selected, I do not know.

Prior to the hunt date, all selected youth with their parents or guardians are required to attend a mandatory safety briefing at the ENWR visitor center. A non-gun carrying parent or guardian is allowed to accompany their son or daughter on the morning of the hunt.

We made the 2-hour drive from Thurmont to the ENWR on Friday, April 18, the evening before Nathaniel's hunt.

Ted Capel, president of the Mid-Shore chapter of the NWTf explained that the refuge has a healthy population of wild turkeys with almost no hunting pressure. These turkeys are not hunted except for the two mornings of the youth hunt. He explained that each youth hunter usually has an opportunity to shoot; if a young hunter does not successfully bag a turkey during the youth hunt, it is usually due to the young hunter's lack of experience. A guide may be able to call a turkey into shotgun range, but it will be up to the young hunter to seal the deal with a good shot to the head and neck of the gobbler.

According to Capel, the success rate some years are better than others. In the past, five out of six hunters have scored. Yet, last year, only one out of six hunters was able to bring home a turkey. Again, having experience seems to be the determining factor.

At the orientation we met Nathaniel's guide, Bob Cooksey of Worton and formerly of Jefferson. Cooksey was confident that Nathaniel would get his chance at a big bird the next morning. I was confident that if Nathaniel had the opportunity to shoot, he would make a good shot, but I also know that with turkey hunting, there is no sure thing; anything can happen.

A tom might fly down from the roost and come right to your call, gobbling all the way. Or, a tom can sneak in silently and catch a hunter off guard, or a big gobbler might be preoccupied by real hens and not bother to wander far from their presence.

That evening, we stayed in Chestertown, about a 30-minute drive from the refuge. We returned at 5 a.m. the next morning to meet Cooksey. Gunner Gsell of Chestertown and Hunter Arledge of North East were the other two youth hunters. Each hunter and their guide had a designated section of the island to hunt.

The morning began with a chorus of more gobbles than I have ever heard coming from several directions. We moved as close as we dared before setting out a hen decoy and our guide began to call. In the distance we could see the birds flying down from their roost. Shortly after fly down, the birds went silent. The gobblers were flocked with the hens and it was going to be difficult to lure them away from the flock.

We waited a short time and decided to move to where we heard a lone gobbler across a field. As we approached, we may have spooked the bird because he went silent as well. In the distance we heard Gunner shoot. A short time later, Hunter

also shot. It was only 7:30 a.m. and the other two youth hunters already had their birds. The pressure was now on us to score. Cooksey was working hard to bring a bird to Nathaniel's gun, but we were not having the luck I had hoped for.

Around mid-morning, we decided to change locations and we were walking back to our vehicles. On a grassy road between overgrown fields, the guide spotted a pair of long beards. He told me to watch the birds and signal him with a text if they moved. He took Nathaniel and circled around to set-up in the opposite direction.

As soon as they left me, the two big toms started walking my way! I was lying on the side of the road, with my camera on video. The toms came within 10 yards and hung around for several minutes! I got great video footage of the big gobblers at close range. Eventually they moved into the brush to get around me. At this point, I could have cried! It seemed as if Nathaniel would not get a chance to shoot.

That was how our day was going. However, we weren't going to give up. The hunt closes at noon and we still had 90 minutes to hunt. Taking advice from guide Johnny Miller, we moved to a section of woods where he had heard birds gobbling that morning.

Cooksey made a few calls and we got a distant response. We quickly set up, continued to call and waited. It didn't take long before we could hear several toms headed our way, gobbling and strutting. Nathaniel made a fine shot at 25 yards, dropping a 21-pound bird! It was an exciting end to an exciting hunt.

Hats off to Beemiller and the Mid-Shore members who volunteer their time to make this a true hunt of a lifetime for the lucky young hunters.

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## **YOUTH HUNT**

How do you make teenage boys smile? Take them turkey hunting! These boys have been JAKES members since they were 10 yrs-old and their experience is showing. Saturday, I took the boys out for the 2014 Youth Hunt in western Md. The morning hunt provided no shooting opportunities but we didn't give up. It was late afternoon and near 80 degrees when I called this big tom in for the boys, luring the gobbler onto the managed hunting area from the adjacent private ground.



**Cameron Money Penny, Spencer Becker and Nathaniel Neuland**

Fortunately for Spencer, the bird was circling right up to him after almost a 2 hour wait with only an occasional gobble. Patience paid off big time with an impressive 3 yr-old trophy bird and a great start to the

spring season. We continued to hunt till dark, with no more action.

### **Eastern Neck Wildlife Refuge Youth Hunts April 19 & 26**

Nathaniel and Cameron were very happy for Spencer, but they are even more excited about the upcoming NWTF guided hunts on Eastern Neck Wildlife Refuge near Rock Hall that they will be participating in the next few weeks.



**Spencer Becker**



**Notice the pink bracelet made at the JAKES event**

Nathaniel was 1 of 3 youth selected for hunt on April 19, while both Cameron and his twin sister, Sarah will be hunting on April 26 at the refuge. The lucky JAKES applied and were selected randomly from youth hunters across Maryland. I will hopefully be sending more photos of successful youth hunters this season. The NWTf has helped foster so much interest in these young men and women who look forward to the JAKES events each year and the annual NWTf banquets. As a parent, I cannot tell you how much they have learned from members like Joe Mills, Bobby Dutrow and all the excellent mentors and presenters from the past JAKES events sponsored by the Monocacy Valley Chapter. They can't get enough!



**Spencer Becker**



**Spencer Becker**