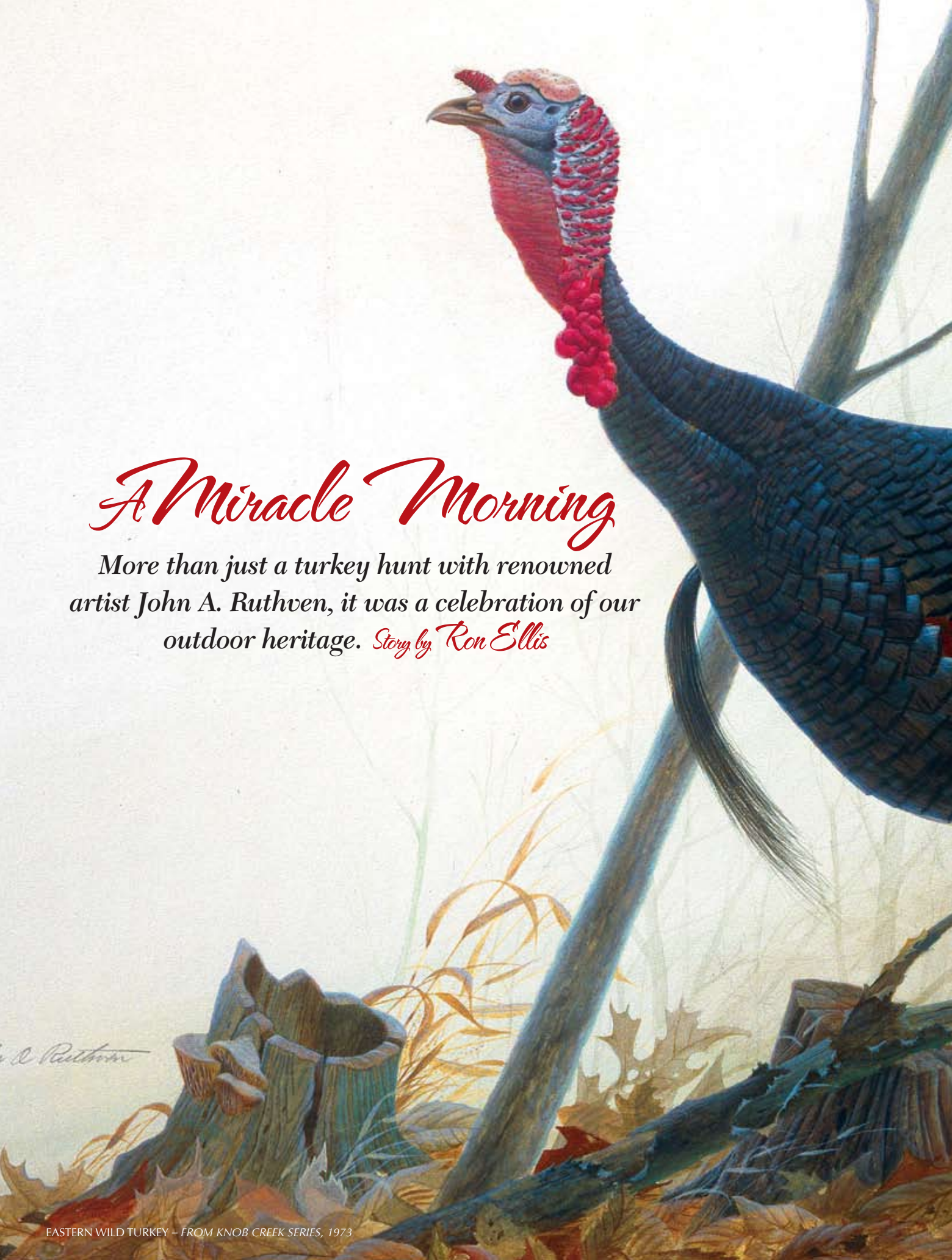

A Miracle Morning

More than just a turkey hunt with renowned artist John A. Ruthven, it was a celebration of our outdoor heritage. Story by Ron Ellis

EASTERN WILD TURKEY – *FROM KNOB CREEK SERIES, 1973*

As I cross the Ohio at four a.m., the river is washed with moonlight, in a way that reminds me of a painting I once admired on a calendar hanging in a country store not far from here. I have made this trip into southern Ohio from my home in northern Kentucky many times, but mostly in the fall and winter months to hunt grouse and woodcock. But on this last day of April, beneath a waxing moon, I am threading my way upriver toward Georgetown, Ohio, to hunt turkeys with my friend John Ruthven, the internationally acclaimed wildlife artist and naturalist. John has often been called "the Audubon of the 20th Century," a fitting honor that rightly persists into this new century, since the much celebrated John James Audubon was his earliest and strongest artistic influence while growing up in nearby Cincinnati.

John is generous with his invitations for me to hunt with him during his extremely limited leisure time. At 82, he still walks four miles each morning on his 150-acre farm – the place that feeds his soul and inspires many of his paintings – before going to his studio and gallery in nearby Georgetown, where he continues to paint "in the Audubon tradition," as well as accept commissions, speaking engagements and invitations to join a variety of expeditions, including recent outings to confirm the reported sightings of the endangered ivory-billed woodpecker. And so I feel fortunate to be heading out the Appalachian Highway toward my meeting with John on this moon-bright morning, sipping coffee and imagining strutting spring gobblers.

As I drive, I review my recent readings about Audubon, and how the threads of his artistic life and that of John Ruthven's seem intimately entwined, beyond the shared geography of the region. I know Audubon especially admired the wild turkey – he featured it in plates one and six of his monumental life's work, *The Birds of America*, and that one of John Ruthven's earliest paintings, *Eastern Wild Turkey*, which is featured in his 1975 "Initial Series," clearly shows the Audubon influence.

I also know that our hunt was occurring, purely by accident, on the exact date that Audubon resigned his position as a taxidermist at Cincinnati's Western Museum in 1820, as Audubon prepared for the river journey out of Cincinnati that would see him completing many of the drawings he needed to publish *The Birds of America*.

A little more than a hundred years later, John Aldrich Ruthven was inspired to paint all things wild, especially the birds he discovered while on frequent outings along the Ohio River and into the same country that had inspired Audubon. And it was not lost on me that Cincinnati's respected Museum of Natural History, the successor to the Western Museum, was where John also worked as a taxidermist – he often refers to this apprenticeship as a kind of "basic training for bird painters" – as he pursued his dream of becoming a wildlife artist. Strangely, I know, too, that the first date we chose for this hunt, and had to cancel at the last hour, was April 22, which is Audubon's birthday.

I sip at my coffee and drift from Audubon to a review of my recent hunts during the first sun-dusted mornings of Kentucky's turkey season. While all were hunts without luck, at least in terms of bagging a turkey, they were highly successful when one considers the benefits derived from just being out there – like that chorus of owls that serenaded me each morning in the still-dark woods; the distant yelping of coyotes (one of the region's newest symbols of wildness); the sharp tapping of a pileated woodpecker excavating a dead tree beside my favorite hidey-hole; the ascending, watery notes of mysterious bird-song, sounding as if they were being struck on a metal xylophone; and those

three whitetails easing toward me through the woods in a steady drizzle, their coats the color of the rain.

This reverie ends precisely at 5 a.m. when the exit I am to take appears out of the dark. At the end of the ramp, I follow Route 68 south toward the McDonald's in Georgetown where I am to meet John and his longtime hunting partner Allan Wright, who is the Brown County Wildlife Officer for the Ohio DNR and a pro-staffer for Bass Pro Shops' Redhead Division. Allan has graciously offered to be our guide.

I roll down the window and the cool night air drifts in, smelling of new grass and manure, an unmistakable sign of spring in this rich farm country. As I cross over White Oak Creek, a highway sign announces the town of New Hope, and just beyond, sitting in a church's gravel parking lot, is one of those portable lighted signs – the kind that often carries birthday greetings like "Honk Your Horn. Old Hank's Nifty Fifty" – bearing this message: "A smile is a curve that straightens everything out."

Immediately, I think of John's trademark smile (it's truly the first thing you notice about him) and how it's prominent even in an early photograph of him at age six, dressed for a hike and sporting a plaid shirt, a wide-brimmed hat and an even wider smile.

I reach Georgetown at 5:30 a.m. and as I pass the deer-crossing sign inside the city limits, I find myself following John's station wagon – the one with the "JR-ART" license plate – into the McDonald's parking lot. John pulls in next to me and steps out of the car dressed head to toe in camouflage. He has an apple in one hand and his smile is already shining out from beneath the bill of his cap.

"It's great to see you, my friend," he says, extending his hand and thumping me on the shoulder with the apple. "It looks like we have a great morning ahead us."

I drop the tailgate on the truck and we place our gear on it and wait for Allan. John talks easily, almost at a whisper at this early hour, as we speculate on the hunt to come. As I listen to his stories about this country and its turkeys (he's hunted them here since Ohio's first season), I am reminded of the numerous awards bestowed upon this grand gentleman during his long and distinguished career.

John served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and when he returned home, he enrolled at the Cincinnati Art Academy and, subsequently, opened a commercial art studio (it was during this era that he created the popular "Play-Doh" Boy for a client). In 1971 he founded Wildlife Internationale, Inc., a publishing company exclusively producing his limited-edition lithographs, and located it in Georgetown. His long list of achievements includes winning the Federal Duck Stamp competition in 1960, being named Ducks Unlimited's First Artist of the Year in 1972 and Trout Unlimited's 25th Anniversary Artist of the Year in 1984. In 2004 he received the coveted National Medal of Arts (the first wildlife artist to receive the award) in a ceremony at the White House.

John Ruthven, now 83, and the 15-pound jake he killed on his hunt with the author. Right: Ruthven's M.L. Lynch box call, now has 36 tiny notches carved into it. Opposite: The artist works on his painting of an Eastern gobbler, the first in a series celebrating North America's five subspecies of wild turkey.

Allan's red pickup swings into the lot and after we're introduced, we load our equipment (I always have too much) into the back of the truck and move out onto the dark highway.

Soon Allan turns off the paved road and eases along a gravel farm lane, eventually pulling into a vacant barn. We are careful not to slam the doors and move quickly to get ready. When we step out of the barn Allan takes the lead, followed closely by John, with me bringing up the rear. With our shotguns slung, we walk single-file into a stubble field, the dry stalks crunching beneath our boots. Just as I notice how the moon seems to ride off the tip of John's shotgun barrel, he stops and motions for me to go on ahead. In a moment, I look back and see him looking up at the moon, imagining, or so I believe, how he might paint it. When John seems ready, I hurry after Allan, who is in a race with the sun as he moves toward a distant inky-blob, which soon becomes the tree line where he placed a portable blind the night before.

John and I take our seats in the blind, while 25 yards out in the field, Allan adjusts a pair of "stuffers," which are fully feathered, mounted-decoys (they're legal in Ohio). When he's satisfied with their placement, he joins us and we get comfortable on our camp stools. Allan and I decide that John, despite his reservations, should take the first bird. Then Allan places his favorite calls on the ground before him and makes several soft calls that drift out sweet and inviting into the dusky first-light.

The artist depicted Spring Ritual *(2008) in a classic grouse setting, complete with morel mushrooms.*

At 6:15 a bird gobbles back from across the field, and by 6:30 a jake appears out in the stubble, followed by a hen that soon retreats. When the jake finally comes over the rise, he is alone, about 100 yards out, and still gobbling. He quickly cuts the distance to 75 yards, but stays off to the right of the decoys and gobbles a time or two before ballooning up and strutting, wings thrust downward and turning slowly in circles, as if showing himself to the artist.

"Look at him pirouetting out there," John whispers. "He's magnificent."

We watch as the bird grows disinterested and drifts away. Allan makes a few calls and the jake gobbles back, stretching his neck toward the decoys and puffing up again. Two hens come to Allan's calls from the opposite side of the blind, but they, too, snub both the decoys and the jake, and stroll away. The jake, silhouetted now against the sky, stands silent and headstone-still as he studies the disappearing hens.

"Do you think he made us?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Allan says. "We're hidden just fine, but a lot of guys do wear solid black clothing when hunting out of these blinds, because it's much harder for the bird to pick you out in the openings." As if on cue, we each fiddle with our camouflage face-masks.

Then Allan whispers, "If they could smell, nobody would ever kill one." John and I smile and agree, and then lean back into the darkness of the blind.

Allan decides to make a few more calls, and suddenly the jake responds and makes straight for the decoys. John kneels and slowly raises his gun and parks it close to the nearest opening. The bird walks on and seems close enough, but John wants to wait for him to reach a spot he believes offers the best chance for a clean kill. The bird hangs up long enough for John to get a severe leg cramp, which he manages to shake-off, and then the jake begins his walk again. When the bird reaches a tuft of spring-green grass, John leans forward and squeezes the trigger.

It is just 7:20 a.m. as Allan exits the blind and sprints to the downed bird.

"That load of sixes really did the job, my friend," John yells to Allan, while moving toward the bird. In the blind just before daylight, Allan had convinced John to abandon his usual 3-inch load of 5s in favor of the 6s, which Allan considers to be the most effective turkey load.

"He just dropped where he stood," I say, trailing John to the bird.

Out in the stubble we relive the hunt and celebrate the bird and Allan's fine calling before taking pictures and gathering our gear. And then we head quickly toward the truck, since we all have early afternoon commitments we can't avoid. Walking beside John, I ask if he saw the bird through an artist's eyes or a hunter's, or through both?

"Oh, through both," he says, without hesitation. "It's the only way I know to see."

Then I ask, "How much do you think he weighs?"

"I'd guess about fourteen pounds," he says, hefting the bird. Later at check-in we learn the handsome bird weighed exactly fifteen pounds. It is interesting to note that Audubon described the "ordinary weight" of a male wild turkey to range from "fifteen to eighteen pounds."

John shoulders the bird and looks off at the barns and farmhouses in the distance as a small group of turkeys scatters out of the field to our right. We linger for a moment and watch them go, before John says, "How wonderful it is to be out here doing this on such a beautiful morning. We're very fortunate to live in a country where we can still enjoy the sport of hunting as our ancestors did so many years before us."

Allan and I nod in agreement, as I know Audubon would, since his motto, "America, My Country," was engraved on his personal seal, which also included the wild turkey he featured on Plate I in *The Birds of America*.

By mid-morning we are back at John's 1830s farmhouse and he yells upstairs to his wife, Judy, that we are home from the hunt. Unseen, Judy answers back and asks how we did. Clearly, the sound of her voice brightens John's smile as he yells, "We had a miracle morning, Jude."

"How wonderful," she yells back. "A miracle morning!"

Later in the kitchen I ask Judy about the phrase "a miracle morning" and she tells me that she and John saw those words on a sign in a New York shop window, and so they adopted the phrase to describe the finest moments in their lives.

We move out onto the back porch to clean the bird, but before we do, I ask John about his turkey call, the one he had shown me earlier. He tells me it is a "Model 102" box call, which he ordered years ago from M.L. Lynch. John painted a turkey feather on its lid and then added his familiar signature. Over the years he's carved 36 tiny notches into this unique work of art, each representing a bird taken on hunts in five states. He killed his first gobbler in Alabama in the early 1970s; it was the first he called in with the Lynch and it was the same bird that inspired his first painting of a wild turkey.

With the bird cleaned, John heads to his studio to work on a commission and his new series of turkey paintings while I drive home with a handful of tail-feathers, half of the breast and a drumstick worthy of brandishing about at a Renaissance feast.

Once home, I marinated the breast in white wine and herbs and later that evening I roasted it over hickory. As my wife and I ate slices of it, paired with fresh asparagus (a gift from Allan's spring garden), some crusty bread and a chilled bottle of Tavel, I heard again Allan's sweet calls and saw the turkey strutting and whirling, and I knew then that John was right to call the bird's display a "pirouette," for it was truly an ancient dance performed on a wild stage before three passionate admirers, one of whom was intent on remembering every detail so that later he could render the miracle of it all in pencil and paint.

John Ruthven's Wood Ducks *(1982), the first Ohio Wetlands Habitat Stamp, is painted in a style similar to the bird portraiture of legendary ornithologist John James Audubon.*

RUTHVEN'S NEW TRIBUTE TO THE WILD TURKEY

This spring John A. Ruthven is issuing the first in a series of five limited-edition, signed and numbered prints celebrating North America's subspecies of wild turkeys, beginning with the Eastern, which will be painted life-sized in the Audubon tradition. It will be followed by the Gould's, Merriam's, Osceola and Rio Grande. Ruthven travels extensively to research his wild subjects, and he uses the same techniques as Audubon, making sketches to rigid specifications before painstakingly rendering the original painting in great detail. The prints and a limited number of remarques, along with the original sketches and paintings, will be available from the artist.

For more information, contact: John A. Ruthven, Thompson House Gallery, 203 E. Grant Avenue, Georgetown, Ohio 45121; 800-892-3586; e-mail: info@ruthven.com; website: www.johnruthvenart.com.