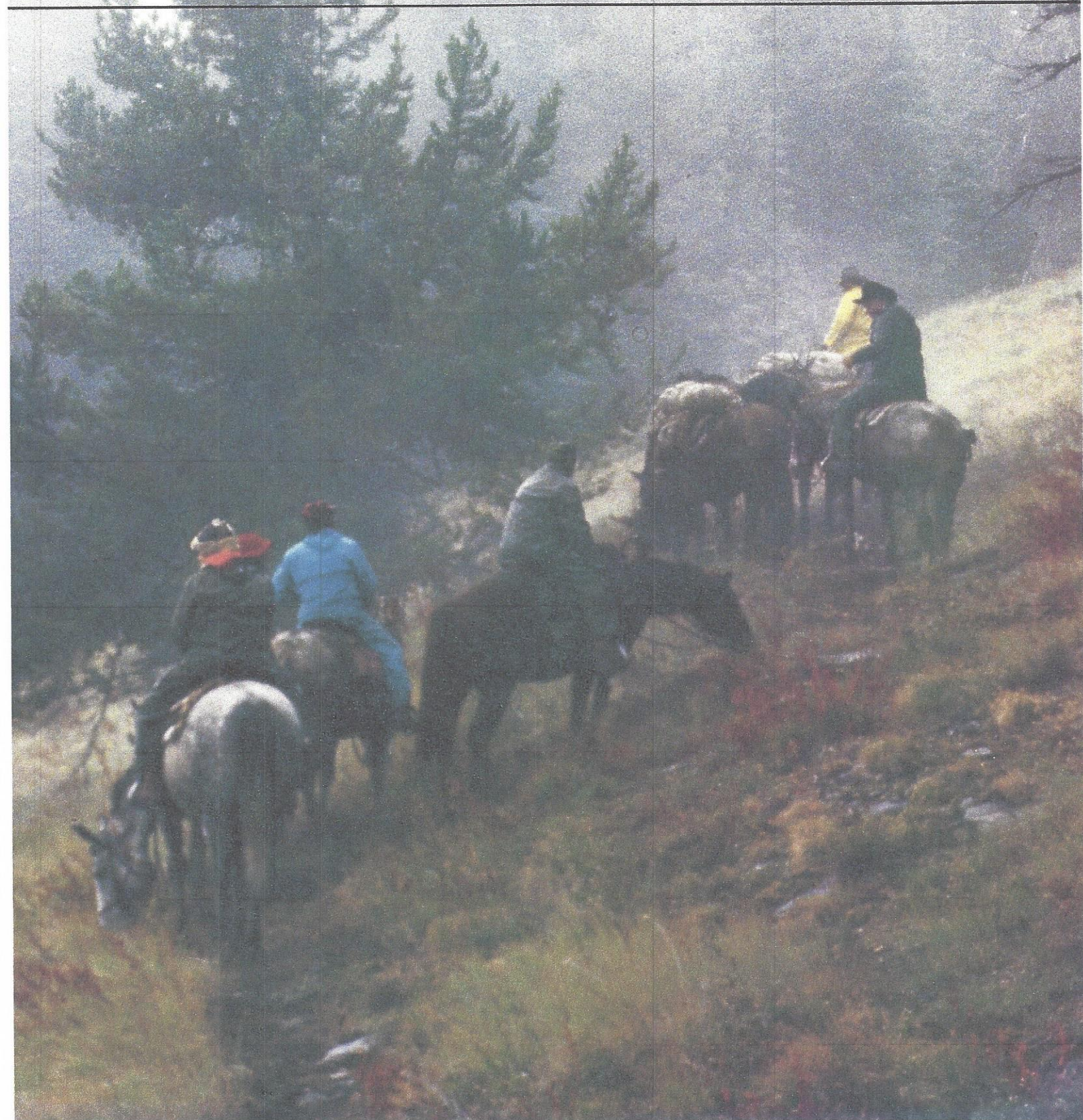


# **THE CHRISTIAN** **OUTDOORSMAN**

MAGAZINE

JULY-AUGUST 1988





# *If you shoot first, don't answer questions later*

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

**I**t was 10 years ago when, Mickey Evans, a tough-talking, tender-hearted cowboy-preacher, who runs an alcohol rehab center near Indiantown, first invited me into the Big Cypress Swamp bordering the Florida Everglades. Mickey killed an eight-point buck and I shot two wild boar on that trip. Since then, every December, Mickey and I have spent five days hunting on 2,000 acres of leased land just north of the Big Cypress in a place called the Devil's Garden, southwest of Lake Okeechobee.

Guy Strayhorn, from Ft. Myers, owns the remote cabin and a huge swamp buggy with oversized airplane tires — necessary to squish through the swamps in order to get us to our deerstands.

Other “regulars” on the annual hunts have been Peter Lord, pastor of Park Avenue Baptist Church in Titusville; Harvey Hester, a psychotherapist in my town of Melbourne; Stan Elrod, a contractor from Charlotte, N.C.; and my two married sons — Bruce and Tim.

Each year we always pick up one or two others. Last year it was one of America's most notorious jewel thieves, Jack “Murf the Surf” Murphy.

Murf had been released from prison just the week before the hunt. Although his parole conditions prohibited him from handling firearms, he brought along his violin and played it at night while we grilled venison over an open fire. My sons, in particular, were deeply impressed as he spoke in detail, far into the night, of his powerful conversion experience.

The water was high last December. We were up at 4 a.m., drinking coffee, pulling on our clothes and checking rifles and shotguns.

At 4:30 a.m., almost two hours before sunrise, we would climb up on Guy's swamp buggy and head out through the dark swamps to the deer stands.

I wanted a turkey and on the last morning of the hunt I got my chance.

I had crawled out of my sleeping bag early, since it was my turn to fix the early morning coffee. Peter Lord sat sleepy-eyed on the edge of his cot, watching me stuff a dozen 12-gauge shotgun shells into the slots in my hunting vest.

“Are you sure those old shells will still fire?” he asked in his dry, Jamaican accent. “I've seen those same shells down here for the last seven years.”

Murf the Surf, standing in front of the

# FIRST

stove, laughed so hard he spilled coffee all over his boots. Peter was right, that box of shotgun shells had lasted me for several years. Before the morning was over, however, I would have proved that even old shells have killing power.

Stan Elrod and I were in tree stands on opposite sides of a “head,” or “hammock” — a large stand of oaks and palms clumped on higher ground in the swamp. Just before dawn I had climbed down from my stand to walk quietly through the woods to a turkey feeder, a 55-gallon drum with axe-slashes in the sides and filled with cracked corn.

Standing silently at the edge of the clearing, I waited as the first light crept through the tops of the tall trees. Suddenly there was a thrashing in the branches over my head. I looked up. Silhouetted against the dim light of early dawn I saw a huge bird spread its wings, preparing to fly down from its roost. I flicked off the safety of my shotgun and slowly brought it to my shoulder. Just as the bird lifted off the roost, I fired. It crashed into the dense woods about 50 feet away.

Photo by Jim Ferguson





# LIGHT, FIRST TURKEY



Moments later I saw Stan enter the clearing. We searched for the downed turkey.

Most mistakes are recognized only after the fact. My mistake was not that I had shot a huge, black, foul-smelling buzzard instead of a turkey. Any hunter shooting at first light can make that mistake. Many, I suspect have. Only they never return to camp and confess.

My mistake was enlisting Stan's help. Had he not been there I could have done what all hunters do after they shoot a buzzard they thought was a turkey. I could have left it in the woods and told my friends, who doubtlessly heard the shot, that I had killed an attacking cottonmouth.

As it was, the story was told not only back in camp (more hilarious laughter and spilled coffee), but was told in front of my grown sons who could hardly wait to get home to tell their mom, their wives, and my grandchildren — not to mention people in the church.

Thanks, also, to Peter Lord and Mickey Evans, it has been told in pulpits around the world.

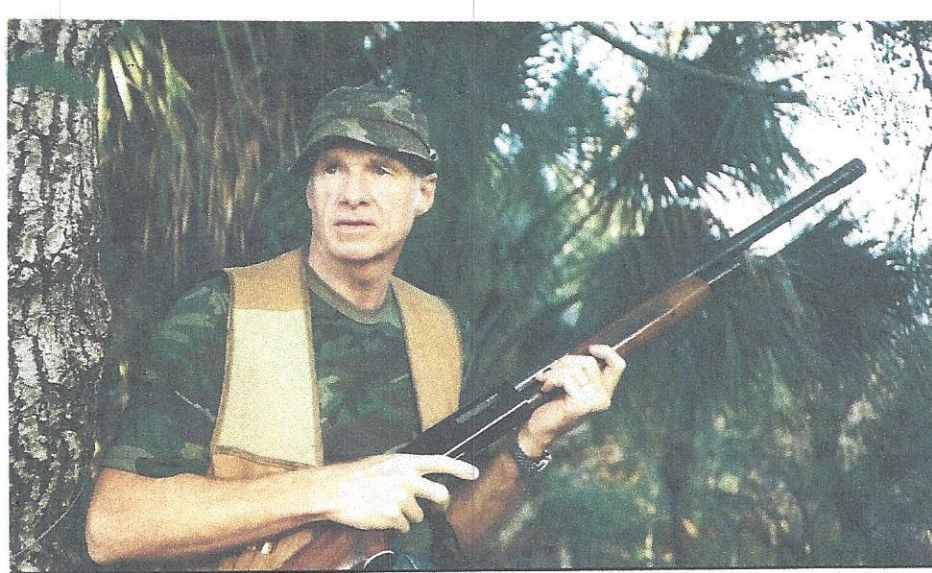
Therefore, on the December hunt last year, I was determined to redeem the times and shoot my first (real) turkey.

After three days of seeing nothing but wild pigs, we rose at our usual time on the last morning of the hunt. Peter, Mickey, and Harvey Hester decided to sleep in. Bruce, Tim, Murf, and Bill Coley (Minister of Music at Park Avenue Baptist who was armed with two rifles, a shotgun, a .357 Magnum revolver and various hunting knives — plus a 35mm SLR camera with a huge telescopic lens) piled in the back of the swamp buggy. Guy and I took the front seats. We looked like a General Sherman tank covered with infantrymen.

One by one the men slid down from the buggy as we pulled up at their tree stands. Some of the stands were so well hidden they could only be spotted by the gun rope hanging down through the branches.

The last one down was Bruce. Guy then turned the swamp buggy west until we came to an old barbed wire fence. Parking the buggy we sat in the darkness. Waiting.





Jamie Buckingham awaits turkey in the Everglades.

Photo by Jack "Murf the Surf" Murphy

Listening. Then, long minutes later, we silently climbed down and loaded our guns.

I felt the excitement surging through my body. We found the tree stand in the dark. I tied the dangling rope around the trigger guard of my 12-gauge Winchester pump, then climbed the tree. It was awkward in my rubber boots, but Guy had driven big spikes into the trunk of the tree as ladder rungs. I had to feel for them in the dark, hoping a big snake was not coming down as I was shinnying up.

Finally perched on the wooden planks about 30 feet off the ground, I hauled up my shotgun on the rope. Moments later Guy was with me. We crouched on the stand, waiting.

Very few things in this world match the beauty of a Florida sunrise in the Everglades. Far across the meadow, veiled in the early morning mist, my sons were sitting in other trees.

The ground fog was thick, but we were almost above it. Propped against the rough bark of the live oak tree, my shotgun across my knees, I could see the first rays of the sun peek its head above the cypress trees on the other side of an old drainage ditch.

It's awkward, sitting in the top branches of a tree like an owl, holding onto a big branch with my legs. But a man can do a lot of thinking — and praying — on a deer stand before dawn, listening to the world come alive in one of the few remaining primordial paradises in America. It's a good time to listen to the voice of God — knowing my sons were doing the same.

The sun was now up, burning away the early morning fog. The trees behind and above were alive with sound. Birds chirped. Squirrels barked, chattered, and crashed through the palm fronds as they leaped from tree to tree. A mother raccoon, followed by three little coons, ambled under our roost. In the hammock across the slough, a wild boar grunted and snorted. A bull gator thundered and a huge flock of mallards rose in unison from the marsh to my left and came right at us, clearing our tree stand by just a few feet.

Then, across the meadow, I heard them. Turkeys. Gobbling.

Guy tapped me on the arm. Pulling a turkey caller from the pocket of his hunting jacket, he began softly rubbing the thin pieces of wood over the opening of the little box. "Skawwwk. . . gobble. . . gobble."

Once, twice. . . then a return call from afar off. He did it again. Once again we heard the return.

"They're down off the roost," Guy said softly.

We climbed down, too. Guy pointed to a place near a ditch bank. "Wait here. They may be coming toward us. I'll head down the bank."

He was gone and I settled behind a small palmetto, straining my eyes through the fog in the direction we'd heard the turkeys.

Was that something coming, or was I merely imagining movement in the mist? I slipped off the safety button and dropped into a firing position on one knee.

Yes, it was movement. I waited, feeling my breath growing shallow. I counted four turkeys. They were moving slowly, feeding in the short grass along the ditch bank, then standing and looking around.

I remained still, partially hidden behind the palmetto — thankful for the fog. They were coming right at me. At least two were toms. I could tell by their red necks and the "beard" which extended from their chest.

I drew a bead on the second tom and squeezed the trigger. The explosion shattered the air and the turkeys scattered. I pumped the spent shell and fired at the other tom. Both had gone down — the other two had disappeared.

I waited for a moment. Then, suddenly, I heard the mighty flapping of wings and the other two turkeys were airborne, coming right at me like rockets. I stood up and aimed at the first one.

Rats! I had forgotten to eject the second shell. By the time I had pumped they were beyond me, disappearing into the fog. I fired my final shot after them, but it was in vain. Both were gone.

Guy returned, grinning. We loaded the two toms into the buggy. After picking up our friends and scouting around for any other game, we returned to camp. Both weighed in at 14 pounds.

No record, but not bad. Especially when your only other kill was a black buzzard. □

Jamie Buckingham is an editor for *Charisma* and *Ministries Today* magazines. Buckingham, a former editor of *Guideposts* magazine, has written 40 books and is founder and senior minister of Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Florida.



# OUTDOORSMAN SNAPSHOTS

Share your adventures. Snapshots are welcome and should be in color and in focus. Please label the back in ink or pencil (not felt-tip) with identification, location and hometown of person(s) pictured.

Mail to: Snapshots, *The Christian Outdoorsman Magazine*, P.O. Box 18489, Fort Worth, Texas 76118-9983.

Photographs will remain the property of *The Christian Outdoorsman Magazine*.



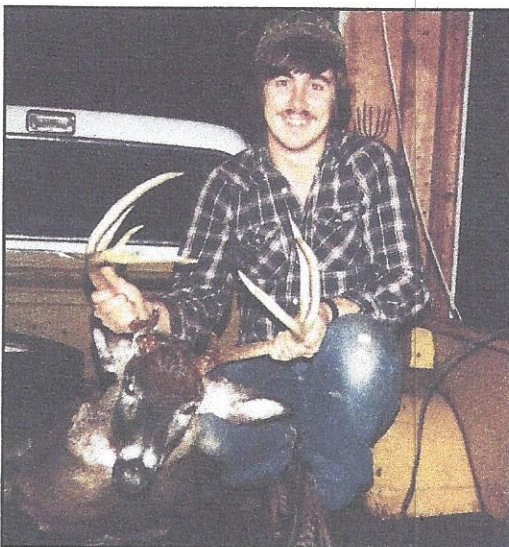
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Lake Conroe, Texas



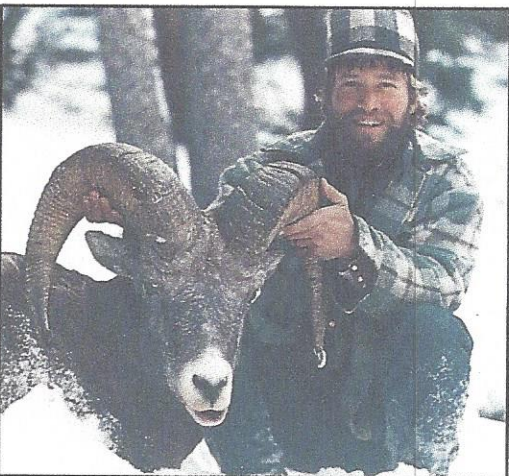
**Jamie Buckingham**  
Melbourne, Florida



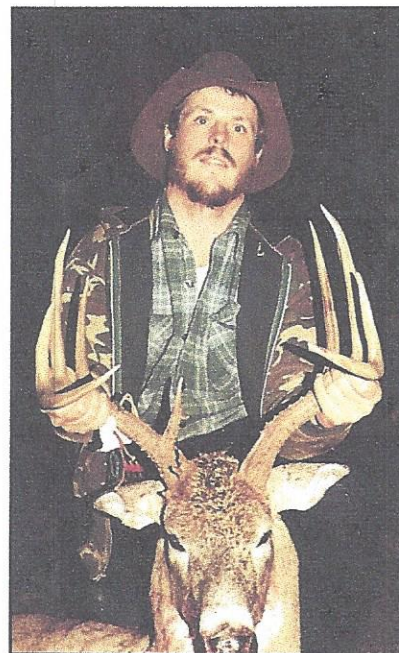
**Sue Kayser**  
Heron, Montana



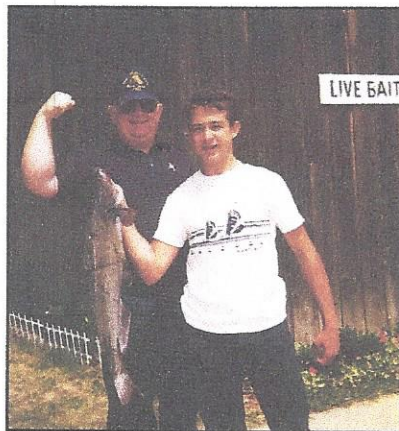
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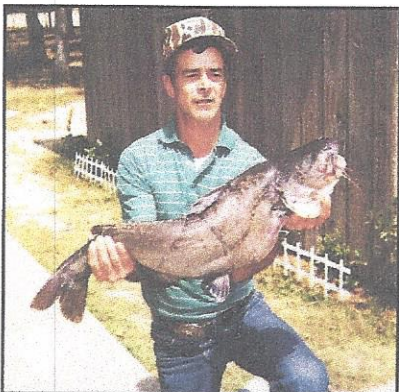
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