

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Jim Dickson

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

DATE: February 19, 2024

LOCATION: Ruston, Louisiana

SOURCE MEDIA: M4A, MP3 audio files

TRANSCRIPTION: Trint, David Todd

REEL: 4191

FILE: WildTurkey_Dickson_James_RustonLA_19February2024_Reel4191.mp3

Google Voice [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:04] Well, good morning, Dr. Dickson. David Todd here.

David Todd [00:00:08] Thank you very much for bearing with us with all the technical snafus. I appreciate it.

Jim Dickson [00:00:15] Sure.

David Todd [00:00:17] All right.

David Todd [00:00:17] Well, let me give a little introduction to you into the project, and then we'll just roll on with these questions that we've been considering over email. This should just take a couple minutes just to sort of lay down what we're doing here. And, then we can get on with the discussion at hand.

David Todd [00:00:40] So, I just wanted to mention that I have the privilege of being here with Dr. Jim Dickson. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:01:07] And I want to stress here that he would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit.

David Todd [00:01:12] And, before we proceeded any further, I just want to make sure that's okay with you, Dr. Dickson.

Jim Dickson [00:01:19] Sure. That's fine.

David Todd [00:01:20] Okay, well, let's get started then.

David Todd [00:01:24] It is Monday, February 19th, 2024. It's almost 10:30 A.M., Central Time.

David Todd [00:01:31] My name is David Todd, as I said. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin, and we are conducting a remote interview with Dr. Jim Dickson, who I believe is based in Louisiana. Is that correct?

Jim Dickson [00:01:47] Yes. I live in Ruston, Louisiana.

David Todd [00:01:50] Okay. Well, good.

David Todd [00:01:52] Well, as just a brief introduction to Dr. Dickson, he served in the U.S. Navy and also received his B.S. from the University of the South, which is also known as Sewanee. His M.S. came from the University of Georgia, and he earned his Ph.D. from Louisiana State University.

David Todd [00:02:13] During his career, he's taught at Louisiana Tech, Stephen F. Austin State University, Texas A&M University, and New Mexico State University as well.

Jim Dickson [00:02:24] Let me just amplify that just a moment.

David Todd [00:02:29] Yes, sir.

Jim Dickson [00:02:30] I taught at Louisiana Tech, and, but those other universities, I was an adjunct professor. I taught occasionally, but not full-time. And I mostly did cooperative research with Texas A&M and New Mexico State and Stephen F. Austin. And, you know, I was an adjunct faculty there.

David Todd [00:02:51] All right. Thank you very much for the correction. I apologize for confusing that.

Jim Dickson [00:02:54] Oh, that's all right.

David Todd [00:02:56] I also wanted to just mention that he worked for over 20 years as a research wildlife biologist at U.S. Forest Service's Southern Research Station in Nacogdoches.

David Todd [00:03:08] Over the years, Dr. Dickson has had a strong interest in the wildlife of Southern forests, having written the book, "Wildlife of Southern Forests: Habitat and Management", and in particular, he is an authority on the wild turkey, with much of his research featured in his book, "The Wild Turkey: Biology and Management".

David Todd [00:03:27] So, today we'll be talking about Dr. Dickson's life and career, and especially focus on what he can tell us about the wild turkey, just as a sample of some of the things he's been interested in and involved in over the years.

David Todd [00:03:41] So, with that short, introduction, I thought we might start with some questions and maybe just go kind of chronologically. I was curious if you could tell us about your childhood and early years and if there might have been family or friends or some kinds of experiences that encouraged your interest in nature and animals.

Jim Dickson [00:04:06] Well, you know, you hear that a lot as far as early experiences in introduction by others. But my DNA was programmed that way. I was born to be a naturalist and a hunter from early on, and that was just my inclination. My father never hunted. My grandfather didn't. My mother was from Appalachia in abject poverty, and her brothers hunted. And I got them to take me whenever I could, but I knew I always loved being outdoors and hunting and observing nature. So, you know, it was innate with me.

David Todd [00:04:45] Isn't that interesting - that some people are just born with it.

Jim Dickson [00:04:48] Yes.

Jim Dickson [00:04:50] And my father never hunted, was never interested. He took me one time and sat in the car while I went hunting. You know that terminates a hunt pretty well.

David Todd [00:05:01] I love that.

Jim Dickson [00:05:03] Well, you know, we're all different like that, you know, and my son's the way I am. He just loves to hunt. He went hog-hunting yesterday, paddled across the river, got into hogs and shot two, dressed them out and loaded them in his boat and paddled across again. But, you know, he's that way.

Jim Dickson [00:05:22] But, I don't hunt hogs.

David Todd [00:05:26] Yeah, well, so it's maybe just as you said, that's the way you're hardwired. It's your DNA.

Jim Dickson [00:05:33] Yeah, it is. I was always like that. You know, I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Now, my mother was from Appalachia, but I was born in a city. But I got to the country and into the woods every chance I got.

David Todd [00:05:48] Great. Do you remember some of those first experiences of being in the woods and going hunting, perhaps?

Jim Dickson [00:05:53] Oh, yeah. You know, I, I don't know how old I was. One time, my grandmother gave me a trombone for Christmas, you know, wanting to encourage a musical bent. And I asked her if it's all right. And she agreed for me to do this. I took it to Sears and traded it for a BB gun and went hunting. But, you know, that's what I really wanted to do. And that's what I did every chance I got. You know, and I had neighbors and some relatives, some uncles that would take me, you know, just because I wanted to go so much.

Jim Dickson [00:06:29] And I got beagles when I was really young and we hunted. There weren't, where I was, there weren't any deer, or very few deer and in only a few places. And there weren't any turkeys. And, you know, so I hunted rabbits and squirrels. And I had beagles. And so, I really got into that and really loved it when I was early.

Jim Dickson [00:06:50] And then, you know, later on, you know, it changed into what I hunted. You know, I started, you know, hunting deer and I hunt ducks a lot now. And turkeys is my primary quarry. I'll do that in the spring and some in the fall.

Jim Dickson [00:07:04] But, you know, I'm a consumer in that way. But I've really tried to be a conservationist and help with the preservation and conservation of those species and suites of species that are out there, including non-game species, you know.

David Todd [00:07:24] I understand. You know, they go hand in hand, I guess.

Jim Dickson [00:07:27] Well, I hope so. So, you know, I did wildlife research most of my career. And with my Navy time and Forest Service research time, I was able to retire and come here to Louisiana Tech and coordinate the wildlife program. And one of my objectives was to get the "save the whale" people to understand hunting, and the hunters to understand the preservation slant conservation bit, you know. But the two often do not meet, and most

people tend to be in one camp or another. I'm not sure I made much headway in that, but that was my goal anyhow.

Jim Dickson [00:08:08] You know, we have more in common than we think. But you know, most of the preservation people are usually not supportive of hunting, and the hunters don't understand the other side - "Why save an animal if you can't shoot it?" Well, that's not a reasonable perspective.

David Todd [00:08:28] Absolutely.

Jim Dickson [00:08:28] You know, we live in a world system. And we ought to try what we can to keep viable systems viable, including the species.

David Todd [00:08:38] Right. It's all connected, isn't it?

Jim Dickson [00:08:40] Well it is. You know, and we're shortsighted in some of the ways that we do things. We're almost always shortsighted. You know, we don't get ahead of anything. And Congress is not geared to do that, nor the White House. You know, it's all where the best we do is react to something.

Jim Dickson [00:08:56] And, you know, in the conservation perspective, you know, there isn't hardly any resource that isn't exploited almost to the point of extinction before there's any effort to try to conserve it, you know, where you're talking about cod off of the New England coast, or stripers in the Atlantic, or wild turkeys or deer or any, you know, bears or whatever. You know, you go get what you can, and get all you can, and then hopefully you can correct that before they're all gone.

David Todd [00:09:33] Sometimes we're a little hard-headed, aren't we?

David Todd [00:09:36] Well tell me, you mentioned that a lot of this is sort of instinctual and inborn and in your DNA. But were there any teachers or classmates when you were in college or grad school who, you know, encouraged this interest and sort of helped support it or guide it?

Jim Dickson [00:09:59] My friends, not all of them are hunters, but they're are all interested in nature, or hunt, or both, or mostly, you know, interested in other things too. So, you tend to gravitate towards that thing.

Jim Dickson [00:10:11] But I remember one significant point. I had assistance, financial assistance, at Sewanee. And part of my job was to keep the forestry library open at night. So, I was there and I was looking through all the books, and I found this, Roger Latham's "Complete Book of the Wild Turkey". And I read that think cover-to-cover, and I did the next night, too. And I thought, wouldn't it be something if you could ever see a turkey or hear a gobbler or do anything like that?

Jim Dickson [00:10:43] You know, there weren't any turkeys in Tennessee. I'm from East Tennessee. There weren't any turkeys there then.

Jim Dickson [00:10:49] But, you know, it's been quite a comeback. And, you know, I had no idea whatsoever that I would play a role in that. And I ended up, you know, coordinating and

compiling and editing "The Wild Turkey: Biology and Management", which is, you know, the current most comprehensive turkey book. You know, but I had no idea.

Jim Dickson [00:11:11] But I was impressed with a wild turkey even before I had a chance to see one.

Jim Dickson [00:11:17] But it's been an amazing conservation story. And now in places we've got population declines, which, you know, that's a real puzzle. Why are they declining? Well, it's got to be a combination of factors there.

Jim Dickson [00:11:30] But that was pivotal. I was interested. My bachelor's was in forestry. And then I went on, you know, I was interested in wildlife and my other degrees are in forestry. But the emphasis has been wildlife, forests' suitability for wildlife species or communities.

David Todd [00:11:52] I see. Well, that's what you were talking about before - this idea of systems and interconnections.

David Todd [00:12:02] Well so, you know, for some people, I should back up ... some people, there are items sort of in the public realm, books or films or TV shows that are, you know, instructive or inspiring. You mentioned this book, "The Wild Turkey", by Robert Latham. Were there other volumes or movies or videos or anything that you might have seen, that you found really important to you?

Jim Dickson [00:12:35] Well, you know, the first one, as I was saying, was "The Complete Book of the Wild Turkey". It was by Roger Latham. He was an outdoor writer from Pennsylvania.

Jim Dickson [00:12:46] But, you know, there, at that time, when I first got involved with turkeys, there wasn't any of this. There weren't videos and there weren't turkey apparel, and there weren't turkey guns. And, you know, there were only turkeys in a few places and there weren't many turkey hunters. And, if there were, they didn't share certain knowledge with you.

Jim Dickson [00:13:05] But, you know, but we've come a long way in that.

Jim Dickson [00:13:09] But as far as, you know, I was real pleased to put this book together. And it wasn't just me. I got the best, I compiled and edited and wrote, authored some of the chapters. But I got the experts in the various other chapters to do their specific chapters. I got the experts in the turkey world to contribute chapters. I just put it together, and forced them to do it. And we got a quality product. We got the Outstanding Book award from the southeast section of the Wildlife Society for each of these books.

Jim Dickson [00:13:45] But I was pleased to be able to put something together in a synthesized form. You know, most of the research community is focused on a classical set up of research, where you have a hypothesis and you collect data. You test the hypothesis with the data, and then you draw your conclusions. With these books, you know, like the turkey book, I got collected thousands of pieces of information into one source where a person can go to it. They're not going to go to read the Journal of Wildlife Management to get a piece of information. You know, we try to make it palatable and available to a wide audience in both of these books.

David Todd [00:14:30] That's great.

Jim Dickson [00:14:33] As to your question: is there any pivotal work? I mean, there's a number of people - authors, naturalists - who have put themselves in a rural position without the, you know, modern conveniences and studied nature throughout the year or several years. You know, Henry David Thoreau did it in Massachusetts. Henry Beston on Cape Cod.

Jim Dickson [00:15:03] But one of the ones that I think was pivotal in the whole world of wildlife conservation and natural observation was Aldo Leopold in "The Sand County Almanac" in the sand counties in Wisconsin. And he spent time. He was a professor at Wisconsin. He started the wildlife program there. But he had a shack in Wisconsin, and he would spend a lot of time there making observations and drawing conclusions.

Jim Dickson [00:15:31] And it's just enthralling how he could detail and how he was pursuing understanding some of these relationships that are out there, you know, everywhere. But that, to me, is the tome of the conservation movement: it's called "The Sand County Almanac". And it's by Aldo Leopold. And the Wildlife Society named their highest award after him, the Aldo Leopold Award. He died fighting a fire, you know, in the 1900s, early 1900s, sometime.

David Todd [00:16:06] Isn't that something? You know, I love the fact that he was just observant, and would sort of put himself in a position in a place where he could see some of these, these relationships.

Jim Dickson [00:16:18] Is the scope of your project Texas?

David Todd [00:16:23] Yes, sir. It is.

Jim Dickson [00:16:24] Okay, there's one in Texas. That was done, that was co-authored by a friend of mine, Dan Lay, and it's called "The Natural History of East Texas: The Land of the Bears and Honey", or something like that. It's by Joe Truett and Dan Lay. And Dan Lay was the first wildlife graduate, he and Phil Goodrum, who were both in the lab that I was in in Nacogdoches. And Dan was a consummate naturalist, and he was a hunter and he was a naturalist, and he was about protecting natural systems.

Jim Dickson [00:16:56] And Joe Truett and he wrote a natural history of Texas called "The Land of Bears and Honey". And, you know, I think for the most part it really, you know, detailed how, what changes have come about in Texas. And I think the particular emphasis there in all his work, he was one of the first biologists with Parks and Wildlife, and a lot of his work was East Texas. But I think the scope, and certainly the thought process, was much broader than that.

David Todd [00:17:33] That's great. Thank you, for returning to "The Land of Bears and Honey". That's a real touchstone. I certainly agree with that.

David Todd [00:17:44] Well, let's talk a little bit about how you might have broken into the natural resource field. I think sometimes that first job is so special, when somebody shows some confidence and interest in somebody who is young and trying to get started. I understood that you started teaching at Louisiana Tech, early on. Is that right?

Jim Dickson [00:18:07] Yes, I did my doctorate at LSU, and then before I was finished, there was a job opening here. And I was encouraged by the faculty at LSU and here to come here and take that, and I did. And that was positive, but I was only here two years. And then there was an opening in the Wildlife Habitat lab in Nacogdoches, Texas, for a full-time research scientist. And so, I went there and took that job. It was full-time research. And, that certainly worked out for me.

Jim Dickson [00:18:44] You know, I thought this was a chance to have, you know, the Forest Service had adequate resources and they had a whole structured system to help you do research. You had somebody who was an editor who reviewed your work. You had a biometrician that reviewed your work before you started collecting data, and you had a technician to help you. So that was a real positive in that time.

Jim Dickson [00:19:09] You know, we were transitioning. The work before (this was 1976, I guess), and most of the work, most of the wildlife research before that had been game animals - squirrels, deer, turkeys some. But at that point, we were transitioning to start looking at non-game communities and species. And so, you know, most of my research was on bird communities in different forest stands and forest structures and how manipulations affected those communities.

Jim Dickson [00:19:46] But, you know, that was real positive. And then I was there 22 years.

Jim Dickson [00:19:51] And then before that, I was an operations officer on a destroyer tender in the Navy, homeported in Newport. But when I got out of the Navy, I went to LSU to do my doctorate. When I got out of LSU, came to Louisiana Tech and, you know, went to Texas in Nacogdoches to do full-time research. But then after that, with my Navy time and my Forest Service time, I was able to retire and come back to Louisiana Tech to coordinate the program here. And I did that for 16 more years.

Jim Dickson [00:20:31] And my point was to try to give something back. I've spent my life in the woods in doing research and hunting and, you know, to try to share some of that collective experience with the students. So, I did that for 16 more years before I retired again.

Jim Dickson [00:20:50] But I think that worked out. You know, I've been able to shift around and land on my feet wherever I've been.

David Todd [00:20:58] Well, that's great to both have been able to do the research but also do the teaching and share what you've learned.

David Todd [00:21:05] Well, I thought that this might be a good moment just to talk a little bit about what you've learned. And this is just looking at one animal. I know that you've got experience with many different creatures, but just as an example, I was hoping that we could spend the rest of our time together talking about the wild turkey, and I would love it if you could tell me the first time you actually saw a wild turkey and what that experience was like.

Jim Dickson [00:21:32] Well, you know, again, my youth in East Tennessee, there weren't any then. And I didn't see any then. And it was, I would guess, probably when I came to North Louisiana. And that was right after some of the restoration projects had been in place, and I was involved in evaluating some of the restoration areas and the populations there that I saw turkeys. It was in the '70s. I, you know, I was a, you know, I was a middle-aged man when I saw my first turkey.

Jim Dickson [00:22:06] But, you know, it's pretty exciting for me to see turkey.

Jim Dickson [00:22:09] But I went around ... there was 30 release sites that Wildlife and Fisheries had done in the States, so I went around and assessed as best we could how those turkeys were doing.

Jim Dickson [00:22:21] And there, the main thing we found out, they're doing well, where you got a locked gate, you know, where you don't have competition, competitive hunting and "get it before somebody else does" mentality. Where you get a long-term perspective, it worked out better.

David Todd [00:22:42] Well, yeah, I guess especially when they're trying to get established, you need to protect them.

Jim Dickson [00:22:47] Well, see, you know on that: being one thing that's really helped out in Louisiana and East Texas, it was pretty open country there. And so, there was competitive hunting: a lot of people there and a lot of people there a lot of times of the year. So, there was a lot of pressure on these populations - deer and turkey. You know, non-game species, not so much. Nobody shot them.

Jim Dickson [00:23:12] But, with the ownership taking more control of the land, and leasing the land to hunters, and putting up locked gates where it's not open to the public, the deer population expanded and the turkey population expanded. You know, just some protection helped.

David Todd [00:23:37] Isn't that interesting to see what happens if you take some ownership.

Jim Dickson [00:23:41] It is. See, and most of the Rio Grande turkey's range in central Texas, up into Oklahoma, there's landowner control. They've always had control of that land. And leasing is in place in those areas. So, you know, if you don't shoot it now, you got a chance to hunt it in the spring or next spring. So there's a longer term conservation perspective about those species, and a protection of the species. You know, it's not competitive hunting.

Jim Dickson [00:24:11] Where you get public access and lots of hunters, they're going to shoot what they can shoot. And, even sometimes even, you know, illegal things.

Jim Dickson [00:24:21] You know, there's studies, early studies, that show that in a gobblers-only hunt, you know, 30% of the hens disappeared. Well, it's just a slob hunt sometimes.

David Todd [00:24:34] Sure. Well, give us, if you don't mind, a little introduction, sort of the "101" version of what the life history and ecological niche of a wild turkey is, for those of us that really aren't as familiar as you are?

Jim Dickson [00:24:52] Well, that's a pretty tall order. But they're, of course, a gallinaceous bird. They're a large-bodied, short-flight pattern. You know, they're not built for sustained long flight. They have a high wing loading, which means their body weight in proportion to their wings is high, and they're designed for short, rapid flight, not for long sustained flight.

Jim Dickson [00:25:11] And they don't migrate via flying. There are some populations in the West that move up and down the mountain range, like in New Mexico, with the snowfall and stuff. They can migrate somewhat, but they just do that by foot. They don't fly.

Jim Dickson [00:25:27] But they're in the same order as quail and grouse and things like that.

Jim Dickson [00:25:34] They are, they're ground nesters. They typically lay eleven eggs and ten of which are viable. Now, this is historic data. There may be some recent data that shows it's less than that. And typically ten out of the eleven, on average, ten out of the eleven eggs hatch. Typically, half of the poults are dead about two weeks when they can fly. So, predation is, says paramount in those populations.

Jim Dickson [00:26:02] And there have been some studies that show, recent studies, have showed that they're less viable than historic data. And so, they're even worse in that. And then there's still some questions in there.

Jim Dickson [00:26:14] But the early poults have grow rapidly. They have a high protein requirement, and they satisfy that with the insects and the other arthropods. So, they eat a lot of bugs in the first month of life, or most of that first month. They gain weight, you know, rapidly. I don't know, they double their weight every few weeks or so.

Jim Dickson [00:26:37] So, you know, that is a perilous time, and especially before they can fly up to roost. Now all turkeys other than nesting hens, or incapacitated turkeys, fly up to roost and roost in trees at night. It affords them some protection from ground predators. But and of course, they're still vulnerable to avian predators like owls.

Jim Dickson [00:27:02] But predation on the nest is high. And predation on young poults is high. On nests, raccoons and skunks are often implicated, along with another, you know, host of other things. And then, of course, you get snakes and crows and ravens and hogs and a host of other things. A lot of things will eat eggs in a turkey nest, or young poults, if they can catch them.

Jim Dickson [00:27:34] But, you know, the eggs take, you know, 28 days to incubate. So, it's about a month that they spend on the nest almost continuously while she incubates that nest. And she is almost a synchronous nester, in that she won't incubate much until she gets a full clutch. And then, when she gets a full clutch of eggs, she'll sit on that about a month. And then so they hatch almost at the same time. It takes a day or two for all of them to hatch, to dry out, to imprint on each other and the brood hen.

Jim Dickson [00:28:11] And then when they hatch, she leads them away from the nest. And she doesn't feed them. She takes them where they can find things to eat. And their first food, other than what they come born with is, is insects and, you know, and arthropods.

Jim Dickson [00:28:30] So, that's the key area, you know, the key, the key thing to population viability is hen success, nest success, poult survival. You know, it's in the reproductive part, moreso than the adult mortality part.

David Todd [00:28:49] This is great. Wow. That was the crash course in wild turkey. Well, thank you very much.

Jim Dickson [00:28:56] Well, I don't know how well I have covered it or not. You know, there's lots of things that you could talk about otherwise, you know, I probably missed. That was just one facet of what they are and how they operate.

David Todd [00:29:10] Well, that's a good start. And I'm sure we'll cover some of these missing parts as we go along.

David Todd [00:29:18] One thing I was curious about: I understand that there are three subspecies of wild turkey found in Texas - the Rio Grande, the Eastern, and the Merriam's. Can you tell us what distinguishes them?

Jim Dickson [00:29:36] There's only one species, *Meleagris gallopavo*, and it's named for the guinea fowl, the pea fowl, the chicken. You know, it's got all those in its name, anything the first settlers could think of. And originally there were six. They're defined as six subspecies. Now these originally were just defined about how they looked.

Jim Dickson [00:30:01] There was a Gould's turkey which is found in the central mountains of Mexico, way on down to about Mexico City. And that was *Meleagris gallopavo gallopavo*. And it doesn't, well, it occurs just a little bit into New Mexico and Arizona.

Jim Dickson [00:30:23] And now, the Florida turkey, which is in peninsular Florida, and more, I think, more genetic studies have showed it's an integrate with the Eastern, which is in the eastern part of the U.S. And its scientific, the subspecies is "*silvestris*", which comes from Latin. It means "wild" or "of the woods". And it has dark tail tips.

Jim Dickson [00:30:47] Now the western subspecies is the Merriam's. It has white tail tips. And historically it was in the four-state area of Colorado and New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. It is a mountainous, coniferous mountain bird. And it also occurs down in the Trans Pecos in the mountains, the Davis Mountains, in West Texas. The Merriam's is there.

Jim Dickson [00:31:15] The eastern is in East Texas, and I think there's 52 counties, or something like that, in Texas that are included in the eastern Texas, which is the Piney Woods, you know, the pine forest, and the oak-hickory forest a little farther west.

Jim Dickson [00:31:36] And then, of course, the one, the main one in Texas and in Oklahoma is the Rio Grande turkey, and the subspecies name is "*Meleagris gallopavo*". And the subspecies name is "*intermedia*". And that is named for its intermediate in appearance between the dark eastern turkey and the very light western Merriam's turkey.

Jim Dickson [00:32:04] But the Rio Grande turkey, that's what Texas is noted for. And the traditional range, it runs down into northeast Mexico, up through central Texas and on up into Oklahoma, and maybe even up into Kansas.

Jim Dickson [00:32:21] And now it's been, it has been reintroduced lots of other places.

Jim Dickson [00:32:26] So, there aren't any, I don't know, there's a lot of intergrade in a lot of places. And the first, you know, the first description of these were just in how they looked. If 80% of them look different, they were called a different subspecies. But there's more genetic follow-up on that in more recent years. And where they're disjunct, where they don't intermingle, you know, there are some places where those subspecies are probably pretty pure. In other places where there have been multiple relocations of trap and transplant, then,

you know, you don't know what you're getting. And you can always just tell by what they look like either.

Jim Dickson [00:33:10] But Texas is noted for the Rio Grande turkey. You know, South Texas Plains, the Hill Country, the Rolling Plains, and some of these other, you know, the high Plains or whatever that one is, it's mostly agriculture, and there aren't many trees. But in places there's turkeys there. And then the further west you go, you know, the less suitable habitat is.

David Todd [00:33:38] Okay. This is very useful. Thank you.

Jim Dickson [00:33:41] Most of the Rio Grande turkeys are in Texas, you know.

Jim Dickson [00:33:44] And I think, at one time, you know, the early accounts, there's certainly speculation, you know, there could have been a million or more in Texas at one time. They think that the population was reduced to, you know, maybe 100,000. And then by trap and transplanted wild birds, they were able to (and that's the main thing, along with protection), was able to increase that number to a half a million or more.

Jim Dickson [00:34:20] But in this, in "The Wild Turkey: Biology and Management" that I did, there's a Rio Grande turkey chapter in there by Sam Beasom and Don Wilson. Sam was head of the Caesar Kleberg Institute and had worked with turkeys. And Don Wilson was a turkey biologist for Parks and Wildlife. And a lot of these data that we have on the Rio Grande turkey is in their chapter in that turkey book.

David Todd [00:34:49] Okay, well, that's good to know because a lot of this is written down for those that might want some more detail.

David Todd [00:34:57] So I thought that it'd be good as a starting point to understand more about these turkey populations in Texas if you could maybe outline where this original range (I think you mentioned the likely population), before Westerners came to settle the state. I saw your article, "Birds and Mammals of Pre-colonial Southern Old-growth Forests". And it sounds like it was a different world, and the wild turkey populations were somewhat different as well.

Jim Dickson [00:35:32] Well, here's the real question I have: most earlier accounts said there was lots of them. And you know how many? Who knows? But the turkeys do best in mixed habitat. And the best habitat for young poults nesting is grass/forb, its low structure where you have abundant insects. So the best habitat often is a mixture of older stands, especially hardwood stands, with agricultural crops, and older stands with grassy fields or pastures, you know, grown-up pastures, fallow fields and stuff like that.

Jim Dickson [00:36:13] Now, in central Texas, it's a bit different because it's more arid, there's more grazing, and there's less mature timber the further west you go. So, the timber are more important. The trees are still important, the shrubs are important, and the trees are important for roosting sites. You know, in the East they can roost in, you know, there's lots of different roosting sites. They tend to like tall trees with lateral, bare lateral limbs.

Jim Dickson [00:36:43] And so, as you go west in Texas, much of the Rio Grande range, there isn't a lot of trees. The roost sites are more limited. And so, they, you know, tend to select those. And most of those trees grow along riparian zones and creeks. And then, the Rio Grande

turkeys will often sometimes use powerlines and telephone poles and abandoned barns and windmills and stuff like that to roost on. The easterns, not so much.

David Todd [00:37:17] Well. That's interesting. So, they are adaptive and resourceful and seem to have found a home in windmills and barns and powerlines.

Jim Dickson [00:37:27] You know, that was unanticipated. I think, if I remember, when they put electricity first in the parts of West Texas, the turkey expanded just from roost sites, they concluded.

Jim Dickson [00:37:40] But what's the oddity now? You know, we put all this effort into defining habitat. And, you know, there's probably at least a half a dozen different geographical sections in here about what the best habitat is based on the best we knew. But in traditional range now, the numbers have dwindled, in most of the places, or a lot of them, anyhow.

Jim Dickson [00:38:04] And of all things, they've survived, they've popped up and doing well in suburban situations. My daughter lives in Sacramento, California. They've got turkeys in the yards out there. I was in the Navy in New England and my wife's from up there. We go up there in the summer. I got more good pictures riding around in my car than I ever did in doing the turkey book. You know, they're yard birds, of all things.

David Todd [00:38:32] Isn't that funny!

Jim Dickson [00:38:33] Well it is, you know, we never thought they'd be that adaptable. Of course, there's not much hunting pressure and there's not much hunting - there isn't any hunting pressure in suburbs. So, you got artificial nutrients, and people water their grass and grow their plants, and the turkeys are there. And then you got a lot of bird feeders and things like that. You got supplemental nutrition in that way. So, the turkeys have adapted to that.

Jim Dickson [00:39:00] But the wild turkey is the only official bird name that has "wild" in it. And at one time it really was. But now we got the wild turkey in suburban places.

Jim Dickson [00:39:14] And, you know, they're attacking postmen. There was a big deal in New England a year or two ago. The gobblers were, you know, threatening and posturing and menacing the postman. And I think he had an umbrella or something. He swung at the turkey and hit him in the head and killed him. And there was outrage by the public. It's like just this postman bludgeoned to death a turkey. You know, of all things.

David Todd [00:39:46] Oh, I love that. That is such an interesting story about how things are so fluid and evolving and animals learn. Maybe people don't learn as fast.

Jim Dickson [00:39:56] Well, you know one thing, if you ever go to Charles Darwin, you know, he said there was an oversupply, there was survival of the fittest, and there was natural selection. And we've changed things a lot, and we tend to think of things in the historical pristine context.

Jim Dickson [00:40:15] But things have changed, you know, and so those, some of the things that have gone by the wayside have not been flexible enough to the changes. And then some things really have. Like in Texas, you know, mockingbird: mockingbirds, you hardly ever see him in traditional canopy, a mature forest. You see him in shrubs and in people's neighborhoods. You know, they certainly benefited from human occupation.

Jim Dickson [00:40:48] You know, we've changed things a lot. And some things have changed some to adapt to that. Chimney swifts, you know, where did they nest before there were chimneys, you know? It must have been hollow trees, but you would think with all the chimneys around that we've benefited chimney swifts. I would think so.

David Todd [00:41:09] Yeah, I guess it's hard to understand where things are going, because everything is shifting and adapting.

Jim Dickson [00:41:19] We've changed the landscape a lot. You know, we still have natural systems, we still have forests, and we still have substantial forests. But, we have more people in more places.

Jim Dickson [00:41:31] And, you know, if you're talking about the Rio Grande turkey in Texas, where are they? Well, they're along those riparian zones because you got winter habitat, you got winter roost sites, and that's where they gather. But along those creeks, anywhere in central west Texas is where the people gather, you know, that's where the water is and that's where the wildlife is. But the people put their houses there. So, you know, there's certainly a lot of competition for precious resources in those riparian zones.

Jim Dickson [00:42:06] And, and the more West you go in Texas and the more arid it is, the more positive moisture is, you know. So, they, those turkeys in Texas, in arid areas, the Rio Grande, they depend on water and in some places, artificial water.

Jim Dickson [00:42:26] You know, cows can be negative if they overgraze a place. But water for cows can be positive for turkeys where they can't get water otherwise.

Jim Dickson [00:42:36] In real humid habitat, the turkey really doesn't come to water very much. But the further west and the more arid the habitat, the more artificial water is important.

David Todd [00:42:49] Gotcha. Okay, well, let me turn the clock back a little bit to give us some more context about the wild turkey. I understand the turkey declined pretty dramatically across the U.S. During the 19th and 20th century, and that the numbers in Texas may have dropped as low as 50,000 or fewer birds by 1920 and, maybe less than 100, in the Piney Woods and Post Oak Savannah by the '40s. Can you give us an idea of how the range and the counts of turkeys shifted during those years, in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th?

Jim Dickson [00:43:32] Well, that was, you know, that was an era of exploitation. The settlers went in, they moved west, they set themselves up, and, of course, they evicted most of the natives, you know, on the Trail of Tears in early 1800s. So then, that facilitated more westward expansion.

Jim Dickson [00:43:52] Of course, the natives, it was a really different perspective from the different tribes. Some ate them and some did not.

Jim Dickson [00:44:02] But anyhow, the settlers, they consumed whatever resources were there. Well, their agenda was conquering the wilderness, and whatever they could do to sustain their burgeoning families was what they did. So, they took what was there, and deer

and turkey suffered. You know, they were part of the things that were big enough to hunt and eat. And so, you know, they were reduced through lots of places.

Jim Dickson [00:44:33] And probably the Rio Grande turkey probably persisted in Texas better than most other places. They were eliminated from most of the states by the early 1900s. You know, they shot the last of them.

Jim Dickson [00:44:53] And then, in the mid-1900s, you know, we had a different movement.

Jim Dickson [00:45:01] Well, and first, go back to the exploitation phase. Hell, they took what was there. They cut the timber and made their houses and barns. They shot what wildlife they could. You know, they were feeding their families and making pasture for their cows. And they shot the predators too - the mountain lions and the bears and everything. Wolves were substantially reduced. They were regarded as threats and competitors.

Jim Dickson [00:45:28] You know, restoration was a new concept, but it got going in the mid-1900s. And, you know, the Aldo Leopold that I talked about, he wrote an early book called 'Game Management', which kind of set the stage for restoration. And we had the Pittman-Robertson Act, which funded wildlife restoration, was 1937. We had universities starting wildlife programs. We had co-op units, which are wildlife research units, at different, usually land grant, institutions. So mid-1900s was the era of awakening in conservation, and the early vestiges of the conservation movement.

Jim Dickson [00:46:15] And turkeys were part of that.

Jim Dickson [00:46:17] And of course, what didn't work was raising turkeys in captivity. That never worked. Or hardly ever worked anywhere. And it seemed like that was like a wave of migration that started in the east and moved west. And a lot of states tried it, raising turkeys. And then, since a hen's suitable to be in a pen, she's not suitable for teaching the poults about predators or where to find food or anything else.

Jim Dickson [00:46:51] So, it was tried in lots of places in Texas and, you know, it didn't work.

Jim Dickson [00:46:58] The only thing that worked consistently was trap and transfer. Trap wild turkeys in the wild and move turkeys immediately to another location. And there was a lot of that done in Texas. I don't know, hundreds of locations where they got turkeys.

David Todd [00:47:15] Well, let's talk about that in a bit. And just to see if I can follow this - a long and winding road.

Jim Dickson [00:47:25] Yes. I've made it winding.

David Todd [00:47:27] No, no, no, it's, it's me. It's not you at all. So, I was curious about some of the reasons why the turkey may have declined. And I think you gave a nice, clear, explanation about the just sort of general pressure on, you know, timber cuts and pasture creation and hunting. I'm curious if there might have been other issues like fire suppression or screw worms. Were any of those significant, do you think?

Jim Dickson [00:48:00] I don't know about, I think screw worms, I think they're probably mammalian related, but I don't know, you'd have to check that, I really don't. Turkeys have

some diseases, you know, avian pox and there's a few others, but, you know, they have parasites. But we don't think at that time they were part of that demise.

Jim Dickson [00:48:26] But, you know, the timber harvest that come through, you know, they were taking out what they needed and what they could use. And, you know, it was probably a drastic habitat change for the turkeys in place at that time.

Jim Dickson [00:48:44] And then so but I would suspect that the main part was unrestricted hunting. You know, you can trap them or you can bait them and shoot them over bait. You know, that's how, that's probably how they did most of that.

Jim Dickson [00:48:59] But, and there wasn't any thought to preserving them for the future. It was like, we need to, you know, get them now while we can.

David Todd [00:49:11] Yes, I guess that would be hard to foresee.

Jim Dickson [00:49:14] I think the main thing would be hunting. And in Texas, the ranchers and farmers had more land control. So, I think they probably did better. They weren't as much reduced in Texas as they were in other places. A lot of places, a lot of states, lost all the turkeys.

David Todd [00:49:37] Just because, like you were saying before, maybe not good control of their gates and fences and property rights. Is that what you're saying?

Jim Dickson [00:49:45] Well, yes. You know, like in Louisiana and East Texas, it was open woods people, you know, just have always hunted there, and they maintained their right and kept their right. Now timber companies, when they started leasing land, that changed. But historically, that was the open range. And then, you know, people could graze their cows, or ride their horses, and shoot, hunt there and do that. You know, the timber companies and the control of the land and leasing of the land was a whole different concept.

Jim Dickson [00:50:16] And it was, landowner control was best in the Rio Grande range, where the ranchers had had control, better than in the east, where you had forested areas where you didn't have as good control.

Jim Dickson [00:50:33] But when the timber companies got control and started leasing the land to hunting clubs, then the populations went up. And I would suspect if you look at deer numbers now, like in East Texas, probably as far as the forested area, probably some of the lesser deer populations are on National Forests where you have like, you know, a lot of hunting pressure.

David Todd [00:51:00] I see. OK.

Jim Dickson [00:51:00] I don't have data to support that, but it'd be my guess.

Jim Dickson [00:51:04] Most of the places, a lot of people there are managing for trophy deer. So, they have high standards. They're not shooting everything. It's not competitive hunting. They're watching a lot of deer and hoping to produce a few big bucks.

David Todd [00:51:22] Right. So, they've got to maintain control over their property.

Jim Dickson [00:51:25] If you've got control, you can do that. If it's competitive hunting, you can't.

David Todd [00:51:30] Okay.

David Todd [00:51:31] What about issues of fire? I understand that fire was suppressed in, you know, many parts of the U.S., including east Texas, and that there might have been more underbrush and difficult for turkeys to do well. Is that right?

Jim Dickson [00:51:49] Oh, yeah. I would think there's some substance to that. You know, if you burn an area you set succession back and what it does, it disfavors woody and favors grass/forbs. Grass/forbs is the brood range for young poults. So, I would think that fire would be a positive aspect for wild turkeys. It's generally regarded so, you know, especially if you've got a winter fire. You know, there's some controversy over a summer burn or, you know, about the nests and all. But fire probably overall was helpful.

Jim Dickson [00:52:25] And how it was helpful? Probably other than in the very short term was it was keeping the brush from getting to dense and encroaching, you know. Texas and elsewhere, you got mesquite, you got junipers, you know, are just widespread and some of these are probably good. They provide some winter cover. They provide some food. But, left without management, they get real dense and real thick and are negative for wild turkeys and other wildlife.

Jim Dickson [00:52:59] Especially the junipers: you know, you leave them alone, they'll just dominate a landscape. And it's not that the plant itself is negative, but if the whole area is dominated by juniper, then it excludes the light and groundcover. It's not good for grazing, nor for turkeys or deer.

David Todd [00:53:25] Okay.

David Todd [00:53:27] So, I think you also said earlier that hunting was probably a problem - competitive hunting. And I'm wondering if this was mostly subsistence hunting or if it was also market-related hunting where folks would shoot turkeys and then try to sell them in town.

Jim Dickson [00:53:48] Well, probably some of both. You know, I don't know how this operates, but I think sometimes it was a social thing and sometimes it was, how you can do competition. You know, I think when deer were at real low numbers, if somebody saw a deer track, they would all gather up and bring the hounds and go try to run down the deer and kill it, you know, because that's what they thought they needed to do.

Jim Dickson [00:54:15] And it wasn't efficient as far as their energies or whatever. Or, you know, the bears too, you know, they really shot a lot of bears. And, you know, bears are not particularly a problem. But, you know, there was some innate inclination to hunt these things and shoot these things when it really wasn't energy-efficient or otherwise. But, you know, that's just the way people are.

Jim Dickson [00:54:41] But, there was a lot of pressure on wildlife resources in the 1800s and early 1900s, and even continued later than that. But the main conservation efforts, I think, really mostly got started, it was started in maybe the mid-1900s, but mostly after World War

It when, you know, the war was over, and had a lot of people that were turning their attention back to the landscape rather than the Nazis.

David Todd [00:55:17] So, tell me one last thing, while we're talking about the decline of these turkeys, and then we can certainly get into the restoration. I think you mentioned that that there were these remnant turkey flocks, particularly the Rio Grande, in central Texas. And I gather from what you're telling me that it was mostly just better control over the land, and, you know, using leasing rights and so on to make money back from that kind of control. Is that the gist of why those strongholds remained for the remnant flocks?

Jim Dickson [00:55:58] I'm not sure I understood your question, but, you know, the landowner control was good. Moderate good management can be good. If it's overgrazed, it can be bad, if it's leveled to a monoculture, that can be bad. But some grazing can be helpful and, you know, moderate pasture rotations and stuff. For that, you can manage cows and turkeys. But they still need trees and riparian zones and water and stuff like that. So it can be done. But the problem with the cattle thing is that when you get a drought, you know, everybody's selling off their cow herd and they're not worth much, so they're not inclined to do that much. And that's when you really need to bring them down. And that's when you really need to protect your habitat.

Jim Dickson [00:56:56] But overgrazing can be negative. You know, cow density can be negative, but moderate grazing and rotational grazing can be positive.

Jim Dickson [00:57:06] But, you know, in agriculture, the same way: if you've got vast open fields with no trees and nothing else, and you've got herbicides to eliminate all the wildlife food plants, you know, that could be negative. But you know, one reason that some of the things did well, like in the early 1900s, well, mid-1900s, like quail was all over agriculture pest plants are quail food plants. So, the worse the farming was, the better the quail did.

Jim Dickson [00:57:40] But now we're getting much better at farming. You look at these fields, there's no waste grain and there's no weed crops. You know, there's just not much there for them.

Jim Dickson [00:57:51] But turkeys still, overall, can do well with a mix of woodlot and agriculture.

David Todd [00:58:01] All right.

David Todd [00:58:03] Well, let's switch just a little bit to, you know, how there were efforts to restore the turkey. And I gather that, you know, since a lot of the problems were with the hunting pressure, some of those early efforts had to do with imposing harvest regulations. And, I think that there were some limits on trapping, in the early decade of the 1900s and bag limits and so on. Can you get us started to understand more about those harvest regulations?

Jim Dickson [00:58:39] Well, yeah, that was part of a new, you know, a new concept. In exploitation, you know, people basically would get what you could to feed your large family. You know, whatever was there was for the taking. And the idea was kind of was, "We're taming the wilderness", you know, as though everything out there was for the taking or a competitor to be eliminated.

Jim Dickson [00:59:00] But you know that that idea began to change as we started thinking about what about the future, you know, what about our grandchildren? And what can we do to restore these, keep these populations and restore these populations? So, you know, it was a mainly a mindset that started to evolve.

Jim Dickson [00:59:19] And, you know, again, you started to have schools teaching wildlife management. You know, I think at Texas A&M, I think Dan Lay, you know, the one that I told you about, he was a consummate naturalist. I think he was maybe the first wildlife graduate of Texas A&M. And that was, I think, was in the 1930s or something. He was writing articles about wildlife.

Jim Dickson [00:59:46] You know, so you had a program at Texas A&M, you had a program at Texas Tech. And then in later years, you had programs at, you know, various other places. Most of them had some sort of wildlife program, including Stephen F. Austin, where my lab was on campus there.

Jim Dickson [01:00:07] But, you know, we're just, you know, doing things in moderation, trying to protect things. You don't shoot them year-round. You don't shoot them by any means. You know, if you hunt, if a population is productive and the hens are producing poults, they can withstand quite a bit of hunting gobblers-only in the spring. You know, I think that's been documented.

Jim Dickson [01:00:33] But if you hunt them, you know, if you're shooting hens and you're shooting poults and you're hunting them fall and spring, you know, that's a different deal. You can over-hunt them. And in those early years, they were doing anything they can to, you know, to take them and eat them.

Jim Dickson [01:00:53] And then with the age of conservation, it becomes, "Well, we need to protect these and try to keep them here and try to help them. And we can still harvest some if we do this other part right."

Jim Dickson [01:01:06] But you know, a lot of things ... turkeys were eliminated through much of the country and most of the states of the historic range. You know, at one time there may have been, I don't know, 100,000 or something like that nationwide. Or, not many, anyhow.

Jim Dickson [01:01:26] But you know, the restoration with turkeys in a pen did not work. Trap-and-transplant worked, and it worked in a lot of places.

David Todd [01:01:37] Well, let's talk about that effort to translocate wild turkeys. I think I read that it began in maybe the mid '20s with Rio Grande turkeys, but was not successful. And can you explain, you know, what the idea was behind translocating them and maybe why it tripped up?

Jim Dickson [01:02:00] Well, you know, the trap-and-transplant for wild turkeys certainly started before the pen-reared. But the failure of the pen-reared programs, you know, enhanced the efforts at trap-and-transplant.

Jim Dickson [01:02:14] And in some of those Western ones, they had drop nets where you could drop a net. But turkeys overall, especially the eastern ones, were reluctant to walk under anything. So, they developed the cannon net and then the rocket net to deploy a net.

And you'd put out bait and you shot the net over the turkeys. You were in a blind and you had a battery and you had an electric line running to three or four rockets that were positioned to shoot the net. They were attached to the net and programmed or attached, affixed, so it shot the net over the turkeys feeding on the bait.

Jim Dickson [01:03:01] So, you had to get turkeys on the bait with their head down. And then you shot the net. And then, hopefully, you got a bunch of turkeys under your net.

Jim Dickson [01:03:12] That process was first used by waterfowl, I believe. My son is the biologist on Tensas Refuge here in Louisiana. And he still catches wood ducks in the summer by that means. You shoot the net over feeding waterfowl.

Jim Dickson [01:03:29] But, you know, it works for turkeys too. So, it was successful. And the dynamics of turkeys, the populations, is frequently they do real well when you take a dozen or fifteen of gobblers and mostly hens and put them in a new place. Frequently, they thrive and flourish and they expand rapidly. So, that worked in a lot of a lot of places. I mean, they did thousands, they moved thousands of turkeys.

Jim Dickson [01:03:58] And you put them in a box, individually in a box. And they're pretty hearty. They can do that. But you take them and release them as quick as you can to the new location.

David Todd [01:04:11] Okay. Well, that helps me kind of understand the mechanics of this.

David Todd [01:04:17] So, one of the things I was curious about is that I understand that, a number of the turkeys released, at least in East Texas, were eastern wild turkeys that came from other states like Maine and Missouri, North Carolina and West Virginia and so on. How does one state managed to persuade other states to contribute birds, you know, for conservation another state?

Jim Dickson [01:04:47] Well, I think there's two things. And, you know, what we tried to do was get turkeys similar in habitat to East Texas as we could. So, you know, I know there were some that came. We helped set this up when I was with the Turkey Federation. Now they had done some on their own, but I think the National Wild Turkey Federation was instrumental in working with the state and working out some agreements, and they did with Georgia. And they did with South Carolina, and they did with Missouri. And there was some trading of species. I know there's some river otters that went to Missouri in exchange for wild turkeys.

Jim Dickson [01:05:28] But, I think a big factor in this was establishing a cost of these turkeys and a replenishment of that cost to the donor states. And I think at that time it was figured that each turkey cost about \$500 as far as the trapper's time and everything else. And so, then once that cost was established then some of the trapping costs were reimbursed to the donor states.

Jim Dickson [01:06:00] And, there was a lot of turkeys moved into East Texas. And then for a short time, for some time, they did pretty good. And then they started dwindling. And they dwindled in lots of other places, too. So, there's been more recent efforts of block stocking or larger number stocking or stuff like that. And I don't know how successful that has been, but I know there's more recent efforts.

Jim Dickson [01:06:25] But there was a huge effort in East Texas when I was there to move turkeys into Texas. And then we had seasons in Texas and it was, you know, much-heralded. And we had a lot of fun on some of the hunts.

Jim Dickson [01:06:41] But then, overall, the populations began to decline. But they've declined in a lot of other places, too, you know, traditional range - all throughout the South and in the East. You know, some of the traditional eastern states - Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York - all had good turkey populations. But numbers there in recent years have been down.

Jim Dickson [01:07:06] So, there's more there to that turkey ecology than we really understand. Maybe some sort of parasite or diseases or something that's impacting virility in some of those. But they, they just seem to get stagnant.

David Todd [01:07:21] That's interesting.

Jim Dickson [01:07:24] There's recent efforts in East Texas that I'm not familiar with, you know, to bring them back. And some of these things, the decline in some places is habitat loss. But, the question is much larger than that. Because in a lot of places where the habitat had changed much, the turkey populations have decreased. And then in some suburban areas, you know, that we considered unsuitable, the turkeys have reinvented themselves there - yard birds.

David Todd [01:08:03] Yard birds.

Jim Dickson [01:08:04] You want to hear a story? You know how they're wild and wary, and I hunt them a lot. And I go to a lot of places. In New England, about four years ago, I drive around in my wife's car and I got my camera, and I take turkey pictures. All right, so I'm sitting on the paved road there in a neighborhood south of Boston, and I see a gobbler, and he's coming from right to left. And he walks across the road and he walks up to the front door of this house, and he starts gobbling. And a woman opens her door and throws out Cheerios or some breakfast cereal, and the gobble starts eating. He gobbled up his breakfast.

Jim Dickson [01:08:51] Is that crazy or what?

David Todd [01:08:54] That's great.

Jim Dickson [01:08:55] I wouldn't have believed that unless I saw it myself, but I did. But, you know, they have adjusted to that whole suburb situation and they're doing well there.

Jim Dickson [01:09:11] Last year I had one jake, and every time a car would come by, he'd gobble. So, I'd set up on the other side of the road and get my camera ready. I wanted to get a picture of him gobbling, so when a car would come by, I'd start clicking my camera and get him gobbling. He's gobbling at the cars.

Jim Dickson [01:09:29] But that, you know, that population just showed they're, in some ways, they're more resilient than we ever thought. We never thought they'd do in a suburb. But they are, in places.

David Todd [01:09:42] Well, isn't that great about nature? It's always interesting and surprising.

Jim Dickson [01:09:47] Yeah, it's more complicated, it's more complex than we understand, and more complex than we could even think we could understand, I think, you know how things operate. But, nature is quite impressive, you know, how she can be so cruel in ways. You know, I think about animals with ticks, and animals with mosquitoes, and animals with ice, and how to deal with all of that, you know, and still reproduce and still not get killed. Avoid predation. Reproduce. You know, those are the premises.

Jim Dickson [01:10:35] But some are really adaptable. You know, here, pine warblers are a permanent resident. And they are one of the few species that use a pine tree. But in the winter, when it's cold and icy and snowy, I get them on my suet feeder here. So they, and warblers are mostly insectivorous, so they don't eat other things. They eat bugs most of the year, but when it gets real cold, there aren't many and they're not accessible, they switch their diet to seeds and suet. So that's adaptable, probably carries some of those through the winter. They wouldn't get by normally.

David Todd [01:11:19] Sure, sure, I can understand that.

David Todd [01:11:22] Well, let's talk a little bit more about this transplanting, if you know mind. I was intrigued that, you know, about these partnerships. I think you mentioned the Wild Turkey Federation was one partner in these efforts. How about timber companies? I understood that Temple Inland, Champion, and Kirby, Louisiana Pacific, international Paper, all played some role in getting turkeys re-established in East Texas. Is that right?

Jim Dickson [01:11:52] You know, I think they did, you know, to some extent. And they may have financed some of that. I don't know, but the main thing was their habitat practices that they did, I think, were reasonably, you know, accommodative to wildlife populations. But, you know, the main thing, they had control of their land, they cared about their resources. They basically, you know, they're in the business to raise timber to make money. But I think they still had an idea of being a good neighbor, too, and did that in some different ways and probably helped finance some of that.

Jim Dickson [01:12:30] But let me go back to the Turkey Federation. And I think one thing the Federation really did was they adopted an idea of partnerships, and particularly with the state agencies and the federal agencies. And they formed a technical committee. So, you had a person from each state that was on this committee and what they did, they shared information. So, every state wasn't re-inventing the wheel. So, you really benefited from the research effort and the management efforts that everybody had gone through. So, you know, everybody wasn't a separate entity. They were working together and transferring information, sharing information. And I think it was really helpful in that regard.

Jim Dickson [01:13:17] But back to the timber companies, yes, I think they were. And they may have, you know, the land control and the leases on the land - you know, a lot of people were negative about that because they'd been hunting these places all their life, without paying anything. And now you had clubs that had control. But the leasing of the land and the locked gates made a difference, particularly in East Texas. In most other Texas - South Texas and the Hill Country - the ranchers had, pretty much had, control of their land. Poaching, I don't think, was as much of a problem there as it was in East Texas.

David Todd [01:14:03] That's interesting. So, just a different culture and attitude about land ownership and control from one part of the state to another.

Jim Dickson [01:14:11] Well, that's my perspective. I think there's something to it. You know, there are still places where, in the Midwest, where, you know, people still, they don't lease their land and they let people hunt that are good neighbors or stuff like that. But in Texas, land leasing has been in place forever. You know, it was probably one of the first places in the U.S. where people leased land for hunting.

Jim Dickson [01:14:41] You know, we leased. I was in Nacogdoches. We had a deer lease. It was right out west of Fredericksburg, and that was in the 1970s. But land leasing had been in effect much before that.

David Todd [01:14:59] Yeah. And I guess it's an important source of income for many landowners, so they are probably pretty eager to protect those rights.

Jim Dickson [01:15:07] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then the thing about it, and I've got some land I own here. I lease some. I hunt some myself, mainly for ducks. And I lease the deer rights on a couple of areas. But, in that situation, the hunters pay me a little, and it pays the taxes, and maybe a little more. But you keep others - if they're not there, somebody is going to be hunting them and they're not paying me anything, you know. So, I try to get somebody there. You know, if you've got a resource and it's unguarded or unprotected, people will take advantage of it.

David Todd [01:15:46] I see. That's good. So, the hunters that are actually paying their lease have an incentive to protect your land. And, it should scare off poachers. Gotcha.

David Todd [01:16:02] Well, let's talk about just a couple more things about translocating these turkeys. I think you mentioned just in passing that there are these techniques, these methods of stocking, like block-stocking and super-stocking. And I'm just not really familiar with how those started and actually what those terms mean.

Jim Dickson [01:16:23] Well, I think ... Well, let me start, back up. There's a lot of restoration that worked on just a few. It worked in the Black Hills, it worked in Kansas, you know, when you had a dozen or so birds.

Jim Dickson [01:16:37] In Texas, it didn't seem to work very well. And I'm not sure it was the number of turkeys. Well, if you get just a small sample size, if something happens to a few, you know, you could be lost. And then, in Texas, I think the thinking was if it were just a few, you know, if you have any mortality, if you got a problem, if you got any variation in hen success. So if you got a large portion of unsuccessful hens just by nature that they're bad. So, and then they interact with each other too sometimes.

Jim Dickson [01:17:13] So, the idea was if you have, you know, a larger number, you have a better chance of success. Rather than spreading them out in more places, try to block-stock, you know, a large number on one area. You might have a better chance of success.

David Todd [01:17:33] I see. So they felt like they would have better results if they kind of focused their efforts, and really did a dense stocking. That's what the idea was behind block- and super-stocking?

Jim Dickson [01:17:45] Yeah, and you know, in some of these species (I don't know if it works in turkeys very well), but it seems like there need to be some sort of critical mass till they, you know, go into breeding behavior. I don't know if it works with turkeys, but I think it

may work the other way, but the idea is if you got a bunch and they're interacting, then you got a better chance of of success.

David Todd [01:18:12] I see. Okay, well, that makes sense.

David Todd [01:18:15] So, one last thing I wanted to ask you about translocation of wild turkeys is that it sounds like that's just, you know, one aspect of wildlife relocations and recovery efforts, and that Texas and other states have tried it with everything from whitetail deer, to desert bighorn sheep, to pronghorn - that there have been lots of these relocation efforts. And I was wondering how, you know, the turkey effort kind of fits in with those other efforts for other kinds of wildlife. Can you tell like compare and contrast those different animals' efforts?

Jim Dickson [01:18:56] Well, you know, in the era of exploitation, most everything was substantially reduced, if not removed from large areas. And so then the effort where they did persist was to trap them and move them to other areas. And of course, it worked differently with those other species. The technique worked differently, you know. But as you mentioned, I think all of those were trapped and transferred. I assume the pronghorns and maybe the bighorns were herded into corrals or herded into nets and stuff like that.

Jim Dickson [01:19:33] You know, I was not involved in any of that. But the white-tailed deer was trapped and transplanted also, as you mentioned.

Jim Dickson [01:19:42] But, they say when you put, when you take a group of animals and you move them or you put them into another area, usually they do well or often they do well. And, you know, it seems like they're geared to reproduce and the predators don't know what they are.

David Todd [01:20:04] Oh. That's interesting. So, they may be just a sort of new foreign object that predators may not be attuned to.

Jim Dickson [01:20:12] Not keyed in on. And then I think a problem in Texas is the raccoons and the hogs. And you know, we got hogs everywhere.

David Todd [01:20:21] Let's talk about that, about the different obstacles, because it sounds like, from what you've told me, that these turkey translocations work for a while, and then they seem to have faltered. And I was curious if maybe it's predators, like, like hogs or raccoons or...

Jim Dickson [01:20:40] Oh, I think I think it could, that could be part of it, you know. But I think I need to go back and review the Leopold's first book in 1930, I think. But he had, I think, some charts about reintroductions of some things and how there was a sharp upward slope to the curve, and then oscillations back and forth, at some point, you know, things seemed to begin to adjust to other things.

Jim Dickson [01:21:11] And, but, you know, that seems to be what's happening. A lot of those places that were gangbusters, you know, not so good right now. You know, Kansas has reduced, you know, Kansas and Nebraska (and I hunt there), they have just recently reduced their limit their spring limit from three to two, and the fall limit from four to one. And Kansas is a lottery now for out-of-staters. You got to get picked to even play, to even have a chance. And so those numbers are down.

Jim Dickson [01:21:59] But, you know, they went gangbusters for 10 or 20 years. And then also North Carolina and Tennessee, or Tennessee and Kentucky. You know, the restoration was later there. And it blossomed for a while. And, then went down for a while.

David Todd [01:22:17] I see.

Jim Dickson [01:22:22] So, there are some unknowns for that, but, you know, it just seems like that's the way restorations work. There are a lot of commonalities to that. They do well for a while. And then things set in.

David Todd [01:22:39] I see. Well, I guess there are lots of complexities to this.

David Todd [01:22:43] I just wondered if we could certainly go through some of the possible factors tripping up some of these translocations. And one of the ones I thought was interesting is that you had written this piece about streamside zones and breeding birds in East Texas, and you felt like it was really important to protect some of these riparian corridors. What's your thought there?

Jim Dickson [01:23:08] Well, you know, it's important in East Texas. In East Texas, the situation is you've got forest land and the adjacent uplands is in pine plantations. And so the only hardwoods, and mature hardwoods, you have in the streamside zone. So, wide streamside zones are good for turkeys. They're good for deer. They're good for a host of forest bird species. You know, good for squirrels. So, you know, that's positive.

Jim Dickson [01:23:43] In a pine plantation context, it gives habitat diversity. It gives you some mature mast producers like oaks and elms and stuff like that.

Jim Dickson [01:23:54] And then, the riparian zones as you go west, you know, they're even more important because that's your only water. But that's important for everything, including people. You know, any stream in Texas has got people all over the place, or mostly.

Jim Dickson [01:24:09] And then you got a lot of, you know, a lot of exotic pests or even some native or exotic pests. You know, you got salt cedar on a lot of those streams, and you got, you know, invasive juniper, wide-spread, you know, not just along the streams. And then I think in places you've got drought and you've had cottonwoods' demise. But there's a number of pest plant species that are negative for wildlife.

[01:24:52] [I don't know. Something's bothering my sinuses.]

[01:24:55] [Oh, boy. Yeah, yeah. It's probably those juniper, right!]

Jim Dickson [01:25:01] [Hate to keep coughing.]

David Todd [01:25:04] [You're okay. You're okay. If you need to stop and get a drink of water or something, just do that, please. We want you to be comfortable.]

David Todd [01:25:14] So, speaking about streamside zones and turkeys, I wonder if dam construction, you know, during the '50s, '60s, and into the '70s would have had an impact on bottomland hardwoods and in turn, on turkeys. What do you think?

Jim Dickson [01:25:33] Oh, sure. You know, your prime habitat - bottomland hardwoods in conjunction with openings in the east. And then it's probably even more important in the Rio Grande range, because that's where your winter roost sites were and your winter habitat was where they put the lakes. You know, some water is helpful, but large lakes is not turkey habitat.

David Todd [01:26:01] Ok.

Jim Dickson [01:26:02] You know, what's good for bass fisherman is not good for turkeys.

David Todd [01:26:09] That's funny.

David Todd [01:26:12] You know, and then people got houses everywhere. You know, and you're not going to undo a lake when you get a lake in.

David Todd [01:26:23] No, sir. Yeah.

David Todd [01:26:27] So, something else I've come across and you would know more about. But I've heard some people say that livestock, especially if it's heavy and continuous grazing, can damage, end up trampling some of these wild turkey nests. Is that something that you've seen or heard of?

Jim Dickson [01:26:47] Well, I think you know that idea has been in place a long time. I think that there might be some of that, but I think the impact of grazing and cattle density needs to be based on the habitat is probably more important than the occasional nest that's trampled. If they're of that density to trample nests, they've probably consumed all the vegetation and probably don't have much suitable habitat. Pastures that are overgrazed are not good turkey habitat.

Jim Dickson [01:27:20] Moderate grazing can be helpful, you know, especially when you have a dense habitat. Then you get brush control. And, you know, if you've had, if you've got habitat that's dominated by juniper, it is not suitable for cattle nor turkeys. So, if you go in and control that juniper, you know, it can be positive, if you have a dominant landscape, a monoculture. But, you know, then typically what happens is they plant it in a monoculture grass pasture, which is, you know, not very good.

Jim Dickson [01:28:01] So, trampling can occur. But, I think there's other issues that are more important as far as cattle and land and habitat.

David Todd [01:28:11] Right. Right. Okay.

David Todd [01:28:14] So, I think when we were first talking this this morning, you mentioned that turkey is a member of the Gallinaceous family of species. And I was curious if the problems facing turkeys were similar to those facing other birds like bobwhite quail, or if those are very different problems.

Jim Dickson [01:28:38] Well, the Gallinaceous birds is an order of birds, and you know, Galliformes, and there's a number of species, but their habitat is quite different. The quail is a grass/forb, woody, you know, woody, "edgy" species, habitat diversity species. They do well with primitive farming.

Jim Dickson [01:29:05] But basically their habitat is short-lived in of most situations. You know, most of the agricultural weed crops are quail food plants - and for turkey somewhat too but particularly for quail. But quail is an early succession species. And so given natural succession, its only suitable habitat for a year or two until it gets too woody and too thick. So, fire can help protect that, maintain that.

Jim Dickson [01:29:38] Turkey is a more later successional species. And, there again, habitat diversity can be good. You can have both. But they're quite a bit different.

Jim Dickson [01:29:48] And then you know, the other Gallinaceous birds are different too. You know, you got scaled quail in the arid areas of Texas. And then, of course, in the rest, the other parts of the country, you have other species, but their habitat requirements are quite different - overlap somewhat, but mostly differ.

David Todd [01:30:12] I see. Okay.

David Todd [01:30:15] Well, I think when we were first visiting this morning, you mentioned that, you were sort of hard-wired for hunting. And I was intrigued to see that you were the three-time Texas Wild Turkey Calling Champion. And I was wondering, how you learned to call since it sounds like a lot of this was sort of self-taught. Your interest in hunting was something that came from a sort of innate place.

Jim Dickson [01:30:49] Well, to be quite honest with you on this one, I did win that three times, but that was in the early years when there weren't many turkey hunters in Texas, and most everybody that entered any contest were from somewhere else where they had a tradition of turkey hunting. Hunting and calling came different for Texas. Texas had turkeys forever, but there wasn't a tradition of spring hunting, I mean, calling gobblers. The way people shot turkeys in Texas, and they still do, is over a feeder, hunting deer in the fall.

Jim Dickson [01:31:31] But the spring hunting of turkeys came later. And then, you know, there was about a dozen Hill Country counties that didn't allow spring turkey hunting, but then they transferred the season prerogatives to the state legislature or the state agency. And so they opened the counties. And the farmers and the hunters have benefited from that.

Jim Dickson [01:31:58] But Texas did not have a tradition of spring turkey hunting like some of the other states did. So, those first years, you know, I won it several times. My son won the junior several times. But there wasn't a whole lot of experienced, dedicated turkey callers in the competitors at that time.

David Todd [01:32:23] Well, you're being very modest. But, I take your point.

David Todd [01:32:29] So, how did you learn how to call? Did you have a mentor? Was this just trial and error on your own part?

Jim Dickson [01:32:35] I did a lot of trial and error, and a lot of error along with the trial. And the problem with that is they're so variable in their behavior and response to vocalizations and everything, you know, that they do. They don't have a long-range plan. They do what they think, and it's always short term.

Jim Dickson [01:32:55] But in how they respond to you ... you know, you go out and, you know, you make good sounds and they don't respond. You think your sounds aren't good.

Well, that's not it at all. It's them. You know, and if you get a gobbler with hens, he's hard to deal with. He's hard to pry away from them. But if you get a gobbler away from hens, looking for hens, he can be pretty easy. And sometimes almost anything will work, and sometimes nothing will work. And everything in between.

Jim Dickson [01:33:24] So, you know, I was an early student in how to learn how to call and how to learn how to hunt. You know, I've been a hunter all my life. But I got into turkeys, you know, later because I wasn't into turkeys, but I put a lot of effort into thinking about, listening and working with them.

Jim Dickson [01:33:43] But in those early years, there weren't all these videos and everything. You know, there weren't any videos. There was a record or two. But, you know, it was all mostly trial and error.

David Todd [01:34:00] Interesting. Well, and so did you use a slate or a mouth call?

Jim Dickson [01:34:04] Actually, yes, I'd use a mouth call. You know, it does pretty good. Now, some people have problems with it, but, you know, most turkey hunters, experienced turkey hunters, carry a variety of calls. I carry a slate and I carry an aluminum slate type call. And I carry a box and I carry a couple of diaphragms. So, sometimes anything will work and sometimes you got to push the right button. But I use a diaphragm a lot and I use my box a lot.

David Todd [01:34:43] Okay. Could we impose on you to make any of these calls while we're on the line?

Jim Dickson [01:34:52] I don't know. Well, yeah. Let me see if I can find anything. Put my diaphragm calls, you know, keep them in my refrigerator. You have to keep the reed separate or they'll stick. And, you know, I guess probably for real, the diaphragm in the box. Boxes are pretty easy to run. They haven't run this for a while. So, I just find now. I use this. This is a space diaphragm that I have here. And the reason it makes a good sound. There's a space between two diaphragms. So they stick together if you don't keep them separate. So, it's easy to do when you got a space.

David Todd [01:35:57] I see.

Jim Dickson [01:36:06] [Making a turkey yelp call]. "Yelp yelp yelp yelp yelp yelp". That's a yelp of a hen.

David Todd [01:36:18] So, you're calling for a hen there?

Jim Dickson [01:36:27] That's a sound, that's a typical yelp of a hen. You know, most of the calls are a cluck or a yelp, and you use hen calls mostly to call gobblers. And that's what I was just doing.

David Todd [01:36:41] I see. Okay. And what is a purr?

Jim Dickson [01:36:47] [Making a turkey purr call]. "Purr purr purr purr." That's what they use. And it can have, purrs can have very... I got to do that with my slate. But, it can have different meanings depending on the context.

Jim Dickson [01:37:02] It can be ... [Making a soft turkey purr call]. "Purr purr purr." And it'll do brood purrs, you know, soft purrs a lot of times.

Jim Dickson [01:37:10] And then. [Making a louder turkey purr call]. "Purr purr purr." Like that is an aggressive fighting purrs, when the gobblers are fighting, or even hens are fighting, they'll make what's called fighting purrs. So, it's how loud, and how aggressive, and the context. It's what it is.

David Todd [01:37:31] That is fascinating. Gosh, it's a whole language.

Jim Dickson [01:37:34] Well, you know, they have a whole lot of things. And a lot of it, it has to do with the vocalizations, with their body posture, and how loud and aggressive is the tone of what they do.

Jim Dickson [01:37:46] You know, clucks can mean, "I'm here, where you?" Or clucks can mean, "Oh, no, danger ahead": called a putt. You know, when they're real loud and aggressive.

David Todd [01:38:00] What is an assembly call? I've heard that that's something that they use.

Jim Dickson [01:38:06] The turkeys - it's also called a lost call, and the hens will use it when she's rounding up her poults. And it's just a long series of yelps: "yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp".

Jim Dickson [01:38:23] And often a brood hen will do that when she's rounding up her brood. Or hens that are lost and looking for company will do it. But it's just a longer series of yelps. Typically, the yelps are 3 to 5, you know, symbols, 3 to 5 times. But a lost call can be, I don't know, a long long one.

Jim Dickson [01:38:50] But, I don't typically use that because if he gobbles back to me while you're yelping, you can't hear him very well and you don't know what direction he's in very well. So I just typically use 3 to 5. "Yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp", like that.

David Todd [01:39:11] This is just fascinating. It's like listening to a linguist, and how they translate and interpret.

Jim Dickson [01:39:17] Well, and then calling is overrated overall. You know, being able to call and do different calls. But what's important is the context. What's he eating, what's he doing? What's he thinking? He's not thinking very complicated. And you know, if he's with hens, you've got to try something different. You got to try to rev up the hen or pry him away from the hen. Or sometimes you can call him with the hens, typically not, though. So you, you know, you got to, you got to adjust.

Jim Dickson [01:39:53] And sometimes it's best not to call. You know, several times I've been in situations where you got a gobbler and a dozen hens and you're between them and the roost site. And they're coming along. Well, if you start calling and you get their interest, you've got a dozen hens looking for you. You're not going to be able to get him. You know, they're going to spook before you ever have a chance at him. So I just shut up then.

David Todd [01:40:22] Yeah. Sometimes, that's the most clever thing to do, is to just be quiet, I guess.

Jim Dickson [01:40:26] Well, it's the hardest thing to do. And, you know, you can always, when he gets close, you can always get him to put his head up. You can cluck or whistle or whatever. He'll put his head up then. But, you know, sometimes you got to know when to shut up.

Jim Dickson [01:40:43] And if he, you know, different people have different perspectives based on their own experiences. But typically you he's gobbling and cutting me off and double-gobbling and closing the distance. I don't call them. I just get my gun up, and get ready.

Jim Dickson [01:41:03] If I've been calling him with a box call and he's answering. Then I run my diaphragm. If he'll gobble to that, I'll put my box call down, because I can keep the diaphragm in my mouth and keep my gun up.

David Todd [01:41:24] Yeah, I can see how you're doing several things at once. You're trying to track these birds and hunt the birds and call to them and listen for them.

Jim Dickson [01:41:33] Well, you know, with a box call you got to move your hand. You got to run the lid. And then so you're making movements. So, you don't want to be, if he shows up, you don't want to be holding the box. You want to be holding your gun.

Jim Dickson [01:41:47] And so if he'll respond to the diaphragm, then you bring him in on with the diaphragm.

Jim Dickson [01:41:57] Or the same thing with a slate: if you're running your slate, and he's answering, try him with a diaphragm. If he likes that, I'd bring him on in with a diaphragm. But sometimes they're pretty specific, as to what they like and sometimes they're not.

David Todd [01:42:14] All right.

David Todd [01:42:15] Well, let's switch to talking a little bit about people rather than turkeys. I understand that you were on the board, and even served as chair and president, of the National Wild Turkey Federation, and I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about the Federation and your role there.

Jim Dickson [01:42:35] Well, it was founded. I think, you know, 1983 or something. I served for a long time as a director and then as president and chairman of the board. But, you know, I felt like it was positive in doing something for turkeys and other wildlife. And the key to it was the cooperative nature to working with the state biologists, the state agencies, and with the federal agencies - the Forest Service, NRCS, the Bureau of Land Management. All of those are partners with the Turkey Federation. And cooperatively, you could do more in transferring information and getting programs on the ground.

Jim Dickson [01:43:20] So, you know, it was a positive thing, and I enjoyed doing it. I did it for a long time. And then I was able to be president and that worked out fine.

David Todd [01:43:34] Well, it sounds like this idea of transferring information and technology is something that you have been recognized for by the U.S. Forest Service. It sounds like you've tried to work with the landowners and how they might improve their habitat management. Any sort of ideas about what you were trying to convey there, how you might teach landowners how to do a better job?

Jim Dickson [01:44:02] Well, you know, I was hired as a research biologist for most of my career, but I looked at it a bit differently, seeing that I thought the main idea was to produce information. It wasn't just particularly setting up an experiment. And these books were part of that. And, you know, provide information. The measure of your research was, what 's the value of it? Was it of any use? You know, if you do something, it doesn't make any difference in anything, then why do it?

Jim Dickson [01:44:37] So, I took a little different tact in that. But you know, I felt that would be positive.

Jim Dickson [01:44:44] You know, this last project, this Wildlife of Southern Forests - I spent five years on that, and I got the best people to do the different chapters, and I did several, but it's not the answer to everything. Nothing can be. But it gives you a starting point. If you're looking at, thinking about how to manage herbs and bottoms, or manage pine plantations, or what about snags, or what about reptiles and amphibians or bats.

Jim Dickson [01:45:12] You know, those last topics there were pretty weak in that chapter because we didn't know much, you know, about bats. Now it's been 20 years. We know quite a bit more.

Jim Dickson [01:45:24] But anyhow, the point was, if you're dealing with a suite of species or particular species, this gives you a starting point. It gives you how much we know at that time. So, you can draw on that.

Jim Dickson [01:45:39] And a lot of people doing research now, they're familiar with what's been done. I see a lot of things now we did 30 years ago. They're not aware it was done.

Jim Dickson [01:45:53] But, you know, the idea was to produce information, and I've been lucky to be able to work with landowners. You know, that's the key - it's not just producing the information, it's putting it in practice, you know, having it make a difference.

David Todd [01:46:12] Right. On the ground. I understand. Yeah. So, taking the results of your experiments and really finding a practical application.

David Todd [01:46:22] You know, something else that struck me looking at your career, is that you seem really open to giving presentations to all different kinds of audiences. Some, you know, highly technical, but then also lay groups of, you know, like the Houston Livestock Show or going to the Peabody Museum or, you know, participating in Outdoor Channel or Animal Planet shows. How do you think about these different kinds of audiences?

Jim Dickson [01:46:55] Well, you try to interact with them. You know, I think we're too fragmented in our field. You know, typically the scientists just deal with scientists. You know, my idea was we ought to try to get this over to somebody else and it, you know, it comes pretty easy to me, you know, giving a talk about turkeys or something like that. You know, it's always been fun. So, I'm open to doing it.

Jim Dickson [01:47:20] You know, I did a talk, you know, at the Peabody Museum and, you know, I thought that was really different. And then there was a cooperative of the Goldenrod Foundation in Plymouth, Massachusetts. So, I did a turkey talk of all things. Well, so the only hunters there were my friends up there that I trained duck dogs with. But, you know, there

was a lot of other people. Turkeys were new there, too: interested in what's this new bird in my yard?

Jim Dickson [01:47:52] But, you know, it's fun. I enjoyed doing those things. And, you know, I have pretty good reception with the audiences. You know, you don't make it too technical. You try to interact with them, you tell a few jokes.

David Todd [01:48:08] Yeah. So it sounds like you try to make it accessible and user-friendly. That's a real art.

Jim Dickson [01:48:15] So, here's one story. I did one at the Early Childhood Learning Center here at Louisiana Tech years ago. And I was talking about, you know, these are kids, and I'd tell them about mama turkeys and daddy turkeys and baby turkeys. And here's what the male turkeys, the daddies, sound like. And I ran a gobbler tube. I make a gobbler tube out of a film canister. And it scared them. You know, it was a big "Wahhhh". I was running that thing.

Jim Dickson [01:48:50] And I see them jump back. They weren't ready for that. And one of the little kids reached up and tugged on my pants leg and I looked down at him, and he said, "That's about enough".

Jim Dickson [01:49:05] So, I start off with my program, you know, let me know what that's about enough. But, you know, people are interested in things, and especially if they're presented in a reasonable manner, you know, people are interested in learning things.

David Todd [01:49:21] Yes.

Jim Dickson [01:49:22] Used to give a lot of talks on turkey biology and turkey hunting and whatever. But I don't do so much of that anymore. Well, one thing, you know, there's a lot of people that turkey hunting now and know more about how to turkey hunt. And there's a lot of videos on turkey hunting and all kind of stuff like that.

Jim Dickson [01:49:45] You know, when I started, there wasn't anything like that. There wasn't a turkey vest. The only camo was military camo. There wasn't head nets. There wasn't turkey guns. There wasn't anything like that. You know, you made do. It was fun.

David Todd [01:50:04] Yes.

David Todd [01:50:06] Well, so tell me. I want to be respectful of your time here. So, maybe we can start winding up in a little bit.

David Todd [01:50:15] As you think about this, this creature that you, you know, worked with extensively over the years. What do you see as the value of a wild turkey, to you personally, or just ecologically, or in an ethical way, or what? What does it say to you?

Jim Dickson [01:50:36] Well, I don't know why it excites me so much to hear a gobbler or see a hen with poults, but it does.

Jim Dickson [01:50:41] And, you know, to me they're kind of the icon of America. You know that people often misquote Ben Franklin on his position there. He never championed the turkey as a seal, and he only mentioned that in a letter to his daughter years later that it

perhaps would have been better than the bald eagle. But to me, that's America. It's a Native American.

Jim Dickson [01:51:06] You know, they're a wonderful bird. And just a gobble is just exciting and then hearing the hen, or seeing the poults. You know, it's just a pretty, pretty basic American to me. You know, it's America's bird. Should be. But you know it's the oddity, of the state birds, it's only the state bird of one state, and that's Virginia. In fact, it ought to be the state of Texas.

David Todd [01:51:38] High time. Yes. Yes.

David Todd [01:51:39] But nobody ever changes their state bird. Once you got it, it's entrenched.

David Todd [01:51:46] Yeah. The mockingbird is entrenched here.

Jim Dickson [01:51:48] He is Mimidae polyglottos, a many-tongued mimicker.

David Todd [01:51:55] Well, maybe that'll change sometime. We'll have to start a campaign.

David Todd [01:52:01] Well so, you've taught, both as a full-time professor and as an adjunct in a number of universities. And I'm always curious what teachers think about their profession. And you know what the calling is, why it is important for them to pass these ideas on to a new generation.

Jim Dickson [01:52:26] Well, it's certainly, professorship is a mixed bag as far as, you know, what they teach, how they teach, what their position is. I think we've lost our way in much of academia now. It's a political agenda rather than an open-minded educational pursuit. But that's a different deal.

Jim Dickson [01:52:46] My idea was to give something back. You know, I've been doing this all my life, and so I thought it'd be good to share some of that with students.

Jim Dickson [01:52:55] Most of the people in academia, they spent all their life in academia. They were there for all their degrees. And they still, they teach there. They don't, many of them don't have any real world, or not much real world other than academia experience.

Jim Dickson [01:53:13] You know, I thought it would be good to have a little different slant on that. But, you know, for me, I just wanted to try to share that with the students. And that worked out.

Jim Dickson [01:53:29] I never made much at that. My perq was to see some of my students and what they're doing and how they're doing.

David Todd [01:53:40] Well. So, one last question about, you know, career choices. You wore a number of different hats, but it sounds like you might be characterized as a wildlife biologist, you know, through all these different positions. And I'm wondering about that as a career because it seems like this interesting combination of being a research scientist, but also being sort of an applied habitat manager. And, you know, there's a sort of idealism with trying to restore a species that's been rare. Well, what is the thing that's sort of most significant for you in being a biologist?

Jim Dickson [01:54:25] Well, it's just what I wanted to do. You know, I'm really interested in it. You know, I'm not ... there's a lot of people that I think are probably smarter than me. But I have a keen interest in how things operate and what they are. And, you know, I think in putting these books together, one thing, I think it helped me do is to get a broader picture of these things. You know, in academia, or a good early part of it, you know, you're piecemealing it. You're just getting a piece here and a piece there. And I think doing these books, these synthesis-type books, give you a little, you know, broader perspective of how things work together.

Jim Dickson [01:55:08] Of course, that's a work in progress, too. You know, we never understand all of it.

Jim Dickson [01:55:13] But it was something I was just inclined to do and, you know, was pretty adapted to doing it, I think reasonably so. And, you know, I have always enjoyed doing it. I really enjoyed doing birds or hunting turkeys or hunting ducks or, you know, and trying to do something for them, not just shooting the most or the biggest or, or whatever, but trying to make something more positive, leave something a little better than when you found it.

Jim Dickson [01:55:43] You know, that's about all in life I think you can do. If you make things something a little better, and have some fun while doing it, that's the best you can do.

David Todd [01:55:57] You put it well.

Jim Dickson [01:55:57] Well, you know, I'm fortunate in life. You know, my finances are in good shape. I have a great family. I've enjoyed my career. I still can, I'm not hurting too bad. Still enjoying my family. My son is a big hunter, so we still do that.

Jim Dickson [01:56:15] My son-in-law was never a hunter, so we've kind of brought him along. He really wants to do that. We named him, "Nimrod". I guess you know who Nimrod was, huh?

David Todd [01:56:28] Well, tell us the story about Nimrod and your son-in-law. How do they overlap?

Jim Dickson [01:56:33] Well his family was military. His father didn't hunt. And he didn't have a chance. But, you know, my son and I have always hunted, and he's always been inclined to do it. I didn't force him to do it at all.

Jim Dickson [01:56:46] But my son-in-law really wanted to do it, but he doesn't know anything, you know? So we're bringing him along. We're patient. But he showed up. It was cold, and I had a problem, I didn't go. One time this year, the first duck hunt and he shows up, he's wearing his hunter orange deer hunting cap.

Jim Dickson [01:57:11] But, you know. But, you know, we should have got a picture of that. But we didn't. And we had a pretty good duck hunt this year. But he, my son, taken him deer hunting, and I bought a wetland reserve. And are you familiar with that program?

David Todd [01:57:29] A little bit, but tell me more.

Jim Dickson [01:57:30] Well, it's an effort to restore bottomland hardwoods in shallow water areas in historic, the delta area. And so, it's administered by the NRCS and it's taken out of crop production. So I bought this. It was already in place, but we got bottomland hardwood restoration, and we got shallow water there for ducks and wading birds. But, we hunt deer there. It has pretty good deer for a small area.

Jim Dickson [01:58:06] And, so my son took him there to deer hunt. He shot his first deer, and he shot another deer. So, he really got into that. But in this area, you know, it provides habitat for some of those bottomland hardwood species that there's not much of anymore. You know, most all the delta, the Mississippi Delta, and other deltas, were bottomland hardwoods, and they were eliminated for row crops. That's a fertile land.

Jim Dickson [01:58:39] So, this is a program to restore it. And I bought one. And the easement - I've got a perpetual easement. I can't grow crops or anything like this, but I'm fine with that. And that's what I got it for. It's a prime hunting area.

Jim Dickson [01:58:59] You know, the key is to provide habitat that's been seriously reduced in the south, is bottomland hardwood.

David Todd [01:59:10] I see.

Jim Dickson [01:59:10] You know, in east Texas, a whole lot of the bottom hardwoods went into Sam Rayburn and Toledo. You know, they're huge reservoirs.

David Todd [01:59:22] Right. So I guess the effort here is to try to provide some alternative sites for these bottomland hardwoods and for the waterfowl and wading birds?.

Jim Dickson [01:59:32] It's a program. You pay people to take it out of crop production, and you get a permanent easement on it. And that's what ... and I bought it in that condition. I could lease it for hunting, but my son deer hunts there. So, you know, I don't lease it. I have another property I lease for deer hunting.

David Todd [01:59:55] Well, it sounds like you're fortunate. You know, you're able to go and visit these beautiful spots with wildlife that are vibrant. And your family enjoys it. What a nice mix.

Jim Dickson [02:00:08] Oh, yeah. It is. You know, this wetland reserve, when we pull the water down from the sloughs, you know, the wading birds gather there. So, we got great blue herons and great egrets and white ibis and glossy ibis, and got American bittern there, you know. So, we got a bunch of killdeer and snipe and stuff. So, it provides habitat for a lot of different species, not just waterfowl.

David Todd [02:00:37] Well, it sounds like all these animals bring you and your family a lot of pleasure. And I appreciate you telling us about them and about the wild turkey as well. I see that we probably are using up your whole day. How about if I just ask if there's anything we might have missed that we should have talked about before we wrap up?

Jim Dickson [02:01:01] Oh, I don't know. You know, I've bounced around so much. I'm not sure you know what the scope or what you wanted. If you're satisfied, I suppose I am, you know.

Jim Dickson [02:01:10] But I think, well, one thing I'd leave you with. And I think I've mentioned this, you know, the point is, if you do something good, it's not, you know, be a giver, not a taker. You know, the world is full of takers and I think it's getting worse. But, you know, try to make something better. Wouldn't it be a nice thought to leave something better? And to think that your son or your grandson will have, or daughter, will have a better chance to see something or harvest something than you did?

Jim Dickson [02:01:39] You know, that's a that's a very positive thought, I think.

Jim Dickson [02:01:43] And you have opportunities. There's a lot of ways of doing it. One, go by the rules; two, help a conservation organization; three, be a mentor to others. You know, people need people. People need leadership. Go by the rules. Don't shoot all the doves you can or the ducks you can.

David Todd [02:02:10] Well, I've been writing down and listening, and I've enjoyed it and learned a lot. And I just want to thank you for spending some time with us. It's been really valuable.

Jim Dickson [02:02:22] David, when you put this together, you know, so give me a call if you have any questions, you know, email me or give me a call, if you have questions on anything. You know, we covered and I bounced around. I know there wasn't much framework or thread to the whole thing. But, you know, if you do, if you have questions, feel free to contact me.

David Todd [02:02:45] Well, I will stay in touch. And, again, I really appreciate your time today. And, I'll follow up with a transcript so that you can read it, and I'll send you an audio as well. Okay?

Jim Dickson [02:02:59] Yeah, that'd be great. So, tell me your program. Is this ... tell me what you're doing again.

David Todd [02:03:06] Yes sir. So it's called Texas Fauna Project, and it's, basically a history of wildlife conservation in Texas. And we're doing it for an archive at the University of Texas, and also for a book for Texas A&M Press.

Jim Dickson [02:03:22] Oh. Okay. Well, good. That's a worthwhile project. You're doing some good.

David Todd [02:03:27] Well, I hope so, with your help, we're trying.

Jim Dickson [02:03:30] Yeah. Good deal. Thank you.

David Todd [02:03:33] Thank you so much.

Jim Dickson [02:03:35] Have a good day.

David Todd [02:03:36] You, too. Bye now.

Jim Dickson [02:03:37] All right.