



Celebrating the Holidays with Wild Idaho Cooking

By Niels S. Nokkentved

Instead of store-bought turkey, this holiday season, for a break with tradition look to the bounties of wild Idaho.

Five kinds of grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, pheasant, ducks, geese and wild turkey – to say nothing of deer, elk, pronghorn or moose in the freezer – all find a way to dinner tables around the state. Or what could be better than smoked, freshly caught Idaho steelhead?

What better way to celebrate holidays than with family, friends and locally harvested wild game or fish. Doing so not only gives you healthy and locally grown meat, but stories of the hunt to share with the dinner guests.

This month Fish and Game News looks at some of the wild game and fish available this time of year, some suggestions in preparing it for the holiday dinner table and some delectable ideas and recipes.

David James Duncan, one of my favorite Western fly-fishing writers, once suggested the quintessential Thanksgiving dinner in the Pacific Northwest should include salmon as an expression of thankfulness for the winter rains that make the annual salmon runs possible.

He reminded me of a recent fishing adventure of my own.

Fishing guide Jim Tuggle dipped a battered aluminum coffee pot in the river and set it on a propane burner, hissing and glowing between us in the bottom of the aluminum drift boat.

While it boiled, he passed out some home-smoked oysters. After a few minutes, he poured the boiled river water into our cups. Instant soup never tasted so good.

We swapped stories and cursed the rain. Maybe it wasn't such a good day for steelhead after all. But hey, steelhead are fickle and unpredictable.

Catching a twenty-pound fish would have been good, Tuggle admitted. But that's not the only reason we go fishing.

"A lot of reason I do this is the social stuff," he said. He enjoys sharing time with clients and friends, telling stories, swapping bad jokes, enjoying a cup of warm soup on a cold rainy day.

As much as I enjoy eating freshly caught steelhead, I too got something better. A day outdoors in good company is

always worthwhile, even on a wet, cold day. And I never head out expecting anything more than I get. That way I'm never disappointed, and I sometimes learn something.

Though we didn't catch any fish, there was enough scenery, sodden as it was, enough camaraderie and enough intangibles to make it a full and satisfying day. For those hours, I managed to forget all the petty pursuits

that normally take up my time. We had no destination. Being on the river was our destination. There was no place I would have rather been.

Too often, I too have lost sight of everything but the destination, missing the details that make up the journey. But it's all those details, including being cold, wet, tired at the end of the day, that make it all worthwhile.

I like Duncan's sentiment. I just wonder, how cranberry sauce would taste with smoked steelhead.



IDFG photo by N.S. Nokkentved

Eager anglers line the Boise River in anticipation of a nice fall steelhead for the holidays.

Inside this issue

Page 2:

Fall and Dutch Ovens Go Together

Page 4:

Seasons Open in December

Wild Game, Fall and Dutch Ovens: They Just Go Together

By Dale E. Towell

Even more than Thanksgiving turkey and all the trimmings, the aroma of venison stew simmering in a Dutch oven, mingled with the smell of smoke from a campfire has always been my special memory of fall.

uncertain winter. Gardens were harvested and tomatoes canned, cucumbers pickled, and fruit was turned into jams and jellies. Apples and pumpkins were baked into pies carefully stored in the big freezer.

Then came the high point of the year: October brought hunting seasons! Both

the last of the previous year's venison. Our family recipe always featured venison browned in a deep Dutch oven, stewed with potatoes, carrots, cabbage, onions and tomatoes from the garden. Made in advance, the stew could be reheated in camp to feed a crew of hungry hunters.

Seasoning varied by cook, and the particular ratio of ingredients varied, too, by availability and even by day. One of the great things about the stew is that new ingredients could be added each evening after helpings were removed, and the new flavors allowed to mingle as the pot simmered over the fire.

Fall was always eagerly anticipated and thoroughly enjoyed as a family, the high point of the year when shared good times and good harvests meant a time of celebration for all that the year had provided.

Dale Towell is trophy species manager for Idaho Fish and Game.



A dutch oven full of wild game stew is welcome on a cold winter day.

Photo by Dale Towell

I was raised in the Pacific Northwest, where fall meant yellow aspens, sagebrush fires, and hunting seasons. Fall was the time of reaping the harvest of the land: vegetables from the garden, fish from the rivers, and venison from the hills.

Early fall, marked by the first freeze, was hectic with storing food against an

a deer and an elk were needed to ensure sufficient meat to last the year. On at least one occasion my father, when faced with a choice of losing his job or hunting for the larder, chose hunting. The reason was simple: venison was tangible, able to help a family get through tough times; jobs might come or go, but growing families had to be fed.

Those hunts were the high point of the year for many reasons, but most of all because they were the time when everyone in the family came together to hunt, worked together to butcher fresh venison, and celebrated our successes together. For that reason, I guess, fall always remained special, with memories of family hunts observed and experienced.

And the essence of fall was a rich stew made of garden vegetables and

Panhandle Region Supervisor Chip Corsi celebrates the holidays with a roast—usually elk, but sometimes pronghorn—along with Yorkshire pudding, mashed potatoes, peas, creamed onions and more.

Cookbooks:

There are lots of cookbooks out there with recipes for cooking wild game. Idaho Fish and Game employees in the 1990s, gathered their favorites into a small, easy to use “Idaho’s Wild 100,” available from Fish and Game. Most are suited to dutch oven cooking.

Idaho Fish and Game News
Fish and Game Commission:
Chairman: Tony McDermott
Director: Virgil Moore
Published by Idaho Fish and Game
600 South Walnut
P.O. Box 25, Boise, ID 83707
(208) 334-3746
E-mail: idfginfo@idfg.idaho.gov
http://fishandgame.idaho.gov
Volume 22, Number 3

Here are a Few Holiday Suggestions to Get the Gourmets of Game Going

Holiday Bear Ka-bobs:

From Jake Powell

I don't have a specific recipe for this marinade, as it changes every time I make it. But the basic ingredients are soy sauce, vegetable oil and brown sugar. Just make enough for the amount of meat you are marinating. I like a sweet marinade and have added maple syrup or Karo syrup, grape juice, Coke, barbecue sauce, or whatever else I feel like adding at the time. Don't be afraid to experiment. Marinade bite size pieces of bear meat overnight. I prefer spring bear for this recipe.

Cut up green peppers, onions, and mushrooms and alternate them on a skewer with bear meat and cherry tomatoes. The red, white, and green colors of the vegetables compliment the holiday festivities.

Cook skewers on tinfoil placed on a barbecue grill.

You can also substitute most any other big game—I use it frequently with pronghorn.

Duck or Goose Poppers:

From Aaron McKarley

Use canned Ortega whole green chilies cut crosswise into 1 1/2 inch rings.

Cut the duck/goose into one inch cubes.

Fill each chili ring with a cube of meat and bleu or feta cheese. Wrap with a quarter slice of bacon and hold together with a toothpick.

Grill until bacon is done. Serve

Elk Backstrap Steaks

From Eric Stansbury

Elk backstrap cut into steaks about one inch thick make a great holiday meal, served with your favorite holiday side dishes.

Rub with a little coarse salt and marinade the steaks lightly with some lime juice, some red pepper flakes, and salt and pepper for about an hour.

Cook them in a little olive oil, remember the meat is very lean, so cook them rare, no more than five minutes on a side.

Suggestion: Serve with boiled red potatoes and asparagus with a sauce of two tablespoons of butter melted with a tablespoon each of lemon juice and capers.

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.



A successful grouse hunt helps fill the larder.

Photo by Ed Mitchell

Smoking Steelhead or Salmon

Mix three cups of darkbrown sugar with one cup rock salt – add in this proportion enough to cover all the pieces of steelhead to be smoked.

Put serving size steelhead pieces skin down to cover the bottom of a plastic bucket, and sprinkle with just enough dry mix to cover the meat. Add another layer, skin down and cover with brine mix. Continue until all the fish is in the bucket.

Store in a cool area between 40 and 60 degrees for 10 hours.

Rinse each piece before placing it on a smoker rack, and let air-dry at least overnight. Leave it longer for a deeper color of the final smoked fish.

Begin smoking, adding chips every two hours. Chips from fruit wood, such as apple or cherry, gives good flavor. Red alder works well too.

Do the smoking outside to avoid fires.

Begin checking the salmon after four hours. Temperature and heat from individual smokers vary and will affect cooking time.

Remove the smoked fish from the smoker when it is considered in the early stages of being cooked. Take care to not overcook it. Overcooked smoked steelhead is dry and hard.

(Source: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife)

Cooking suggestion: For some of the tougher cuts of meat – try braising it. Rub meat with salt and pepper, brown well on all sides, and let it simmer for a couple of hours in beef broth with a bottle of dark beer, such as a porter, and chopped and sautéed carrots, celery and onions, some garlic, a couple of bay leaves and some juniper berries.

Wild game rub: Good on game birds or on steaks.

Mix a quarter cup fresh ground dark-roast coffee with one tablespoon each of salt, black pepper and coriander. Rinse and pat dry the meat and coat each piece generously with the rub. Wrap it in plastic wrap or wax paper and put it in the refrigerator for an hour or more. Leave the rub on while grilling or broiling.

So, Which Seasons are Open in December?

Duck and goose seasons all run through the holiday season and into January 2012.

Forest grouse seasons run through end of December, except in the Panhandle where seasons run through end of January.

Quail, chukar and partridge seasons run through the end of January. Pheasant season runs through December in Areas 1 and 3, but ended in November in Area 2.

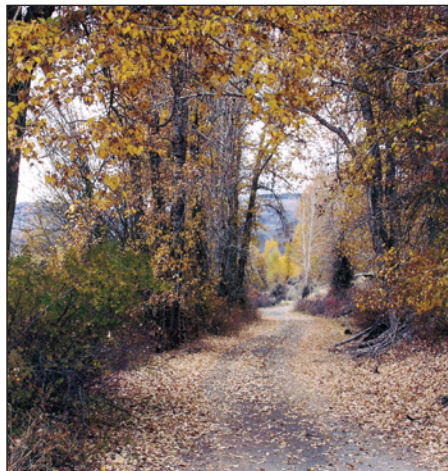
Some **turkey** seasons ended in October, but in Units 1, 2 (except Farragut State Park and Farragut WMA) 3, 4, 4A, 5 and 6 are open through December 15, and on private lands in Units 8, 8A, 10A, 11, 11A, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 18, the season runs through end of December.

Cottontail season runs through February, and snowshoe hare season runs through March.

Fall steelhead season is open through the end of December.

Most fishing seasons are open year round – with local exceptions – check the current fishing seasons and rules brochure for specific regions and waters.

Most **deer and elk** seasons are closed by now, but a few are open during December.



Tips: Caring for Game Meat While in the Field

- Carry all equipment with you while you hunt. Leave heavier canvas bags in camp or with the horses. Lightweight game bags tear easily and can allow flies and other insects to ruin the meat. Repair tears in game bags and close all openings to prevent flies from getting in. Place cheesecloth bags inside canvas bags for transportation on stock or in vehicles.
- Fully boned meat cools slowly if packed together and can spoil if not spread out to cool completely. Carrying more game bags allow you to separate meat to cool better.
- Only use plastic bags for very short duration and not for storage. Meat spoils quickly in plastic.
- Keep meat in large pieces, so it has less surface area to get dirty or dried out.
- Try to cut as little hair as possible and remove loose hair from meat.
- A sharp knife is much easier to use and is less likely to cut you because you will not be straining to make your cuts.
- Once meat is cold, cover it with a sleeping bag in the shade during the day and it will stay cold even on fairly warm days. Uncover during cold nights. Get meat out to cold storage as soon as possible during warm weather.

Suggestions for Caring and Preparing Upland Game Birds

There are several ways to care for the meat from harvested upland game birds.

Plucking is usually excellent for a bird destined to the roasting pan. The skin acts a barrier so moisture doesn't escape as quickly. A low temperature, long cooking time method will usually yield tender meat that literally falls off the bone.

Skinning is quicker than plucking and is better for freezing or storage. Also, a skinned bird carcass is easier to cut into parts or bone out. Meat from bird carcasses that have been skinned work out well for marinating or cutting up in casseroles, soups, stews or other meat dishes.

Either plucking or skinning is fine, but more important is the amount of meat you can get from the pheasant that is not on the breast. Thighs, wings, back and legs all have edible meat on them, it just takes a few more minutes to get it.

Here are some other suggestions to make the bird better table fare: remove the guts and get the carcass cooled down as quickly as possible. Both will lessen the "birdy" flavor so many folks don't care for. Also consider placing the meat in a salt water bath overnight in the refrigerator. This will properly cool the meat, draw out some of the bloodshot and tenderize the meat somewhat.

A simple solution of two tablespoons of salt to two quarts of water works well. Place meat in the solution, refrigerate for 12 to 24 hours. Then use it fresh or prepare for storage in freezer.

If you plan on freezing a bird for use months later, wrap the meat tightly in a plastic cling type wrap getting all the air out. Then wrap in butcher paper, place in a sealable freezer bag or vacuum pack it. Getting the air out greatly extends freezer life and reduces the possibility of freezer burn. A partially boned out bird is even less susceptible to freezer burn.

Any meat harvested from the wild should be treated like the meat from the grocery store.

