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Huckabee Bags a Bird in Iowa

By MIKE GLOVER – 2 days ago

OSCEOLA, Iowa (AP) — Presidential contender Mike Huckabee bagged a pheasant Wednesday, offering Iowa voters the image of an experienced outdoorsman on shotgun blasting and dogs braying.

Just a campaign gambit? "Maybe it will show that I certainly understand the cult of being outdoors," Huckabee said. "It's not something we had to go out and get a license for. It's very much ordinary to me."

The former Arkansas governor said back home he would be duck hunting on the farm after Christmas, but pheasant hunting in Iowa — eight days before the state's legislative nominating caucuses — was a good substitute. He also offered a lecture declaring hunting is good for wildlife.

"The truth is hunters are the ones who preserve the species," he said, since hunters have an interest in preserving wildlife and their license fees pay for conservation. "In many cases extinction comes from not having some level of hunting. It's the hunters who actually keep the wildlife alive. A lot of people think that when you hunt you are destroying the wildlife."

Huckabee led a motorcade of photographers along gravel roads in hilly rural Iowa, hopping out of a pickup truck to take to a snow-covered field wearing his bright orange vest along with Dude, an energetic hunting dog. Huckabee and three hunting companions tramped slowly across the field and their shotguns were blasting within minutes.

Of four birds flushed by the party, three were felled. Huckabee claimed the third shot with his .12-gauge shotgun. He proudly displayed the birds and said jokingly, "See that happens if you get in my way."

He also joked about Vice President Dick Cheney's hunting accident in which a hunter was shot. Asked why Cheney hadn't been invited, Huckabee chuckled, "I want to survive all the way through this."

Huckabee's folksy approach and familiarity with hunting offered a contrast with his rival Mitt Romney, who said early in the campaign that he was a lifelong hunter, but have an aide say he had been hunting on only two occasions. Romney later said he hunted more than twice but only for "small varmints" and that he did not own a shotgun or have a hunting license.

Huckabee said he began hunting at age 11.

"It's an opportunity to experience Iowa at its best," he said. "Hopefully we'll just get pheasants and not each other. We'll name the pheasant for the other candidate if we use it as a real incentive."

Polls indicate Huckabee has moved ahead among Republicans in Iowa, and he contrasts to the very wealthy Romney.

"The people of Iowa don't want to be forgotten when someone goes to the White House," he said. "People in middle America feel like folks will come and campaign in Iowa then they get elected and they forget that people out here in flyover land still exist. We're the people who grew up in the middle of the country and still live here."

Huckabee later flew to Miami for a fundraiser but said he'd be back in Iowa by Thursday afternoon. "We'll be out of Iowa less than 24 hours, and most of that will be night," he told reporters after arriving in Florida. "While people are sleeping, we won't be."

He said he planned to return to Florida soon, perhaps after South Carolina's GO primary on Jan. 19. Huckabee has spent less time in Florida than some other Republican candidates, like former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who has built his campaign around winning there.

"We knew that we didn't have the resources early on to try to play in all the states, our strategy was different," Huckabee said. "It was to do well in the early states, Florida with momentum, and that's what we're hoping to be able to do, and I think we will."

Associated Press writer Jessica Gresko in Miami contributed to this report.

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