



# The Lonesome E

By  
Jack Randolph

**Y**ou really don't have to read much further than the title of this article to figure out what it is all about. To put it simply, it is about turkeys - wild turkeys to be exact. It is about hunting them, not in the spring when their good sense is corrupted with *he'in* and *she'in*, but in the fall when survival is about the only thing on their minds. The two hunts are so different you could be gunnin' for two entirely different critters.

This year the fall season runs pretty well into winter. It starts October 25 and runs until November 6. Then there is that silly one-day hunt on Thanksgiving Day, and finally there is the closing segment that runs from December 6 to New Years Day.

The basic thing a turkey hunter must appreciate during the fall hunt is that turkeys are sociable critters. They like to wander through the woods scuffing up leaves and pecking at a morsel here and there, all the time keeping up a quiet conversation. If something happens to frighten the birds, they scatter. Usually the flock breaks up into small groups of threes and fours, but those few that find themselves *by* themselves are unhappy in the extreme. Turkeys just hate to wander about alone.

When the turkeys are scattered, once they get over their initial fright, they start quietly calling in the hopes of finding others of their kind nearby. It is this urge to reassemble the flock that forms the basis

for the main technique of the fall turkey hunter.

So, in a nutshell, the fall turkey hunting technique is to find a flock of turkeys, bust them up, and then ambush them as they try to get together again. It's a whole lot easier to write about this technique than it is actually doing it.

The first problem is to find the turkeys. This is greatly simplified if you have a good turkey dog. Most hunters don't have dogs, and if the truth be known, most fall turkeys are bagged by deer hunters as targets of opportunity. Relatively few hunters actually hunt for turkeys and bag them in the fall.

# Bird



The late Ellsworth (Eggy) Hatch of Petersburg shares a turkey blind with his English Setter.

If you are setting out to hunt turkeys in the fall, the first thing you must find is sign of actively feeding flocks. Experienced turkey hunters have no difficulty identifying areas where turkeys have been scratching away the leaves to expose acorns, bugs, and other turkey goodies.

The next thing you must do is find and scatter the flock. If you have no dogs, you need lots of endurance and even more luck to accomplish this chore. With a good turkey dog, the task is much easier.

When I write about turkeys I almost always write about the late Ellsworth (Eggy) Hatch of Petersburg who forgot more about turkeys that I'll ever

know. Eggy's constant companions the year around were a pair of English setters that inhabited the open trunk of his sedan wherever he went. They were his turkey dogs, and in a pinch, they could scrape up a quail or two as well.

Eggy's dogs, like most turkey dogs, were trained to find and flush turkeys. Inasmuch as they were often out of Eggy's sight when they flushed, the dogs were trained to bark loudly when they flushed turkeys. They were also trained never to leave well enough alone. If the flock broke up into little bunches of threes and fours, the dogs would attempt to scatter those birds as well.

After the birds were scattered to Eggy's satisfaction, he would call the dogs in. Eggy used a rule of thumb. If he flushed turkey in the morning or early afternoon, say before 3 pm, he would continue the hunt that day. If the birds were flushed late in the day, he would return at dawn the following day to continue to hunt.

Once the birds were scattered, Eggy built a blind at the point where the flock was first found. He believed the birds would work their way back to that area as they attempted to reestablish the flock. He figured that it would be at least an hour before they started putting the flock back together.

Eggy had a way of using almost any available cover as a blind. His dogs were trained to lie in the blind with him, staying as still as rocks, even when turkeys were coming close. In fact, Eggy told me that watching the dogs, the way they often cocked their ears, would serve as an early warning that turkeys were approaching. If the dogs were not trained to lie still in the blind, the hunter would have to take his dogs back to his car and then walk back to the flush site before he could resume the hunt.

Another thing Eggy taught me was that a turkey marching through the dry leaves sounds almost exactly like a man walking through the woods.

A favorite blind was built backed up to the roots of a wind-fallen tree. Because of the half-round shape of the roots, Eggy called these *pie blinds*. They were perfect for a hunter and a dog or two. He usually had to add some holly or pine boughs to complete the blind.

Another blind Eggy liked employed a *stump hole*. If you are unfamiliar with stump holes, they are holes created when the stump of a tree, usually a



**A turkey in flight**

pine, rots out. The hunter puts his feet into the hole and sits on the edge. A few bushes completes the blind.

One of the things some veteran turkey hunters like about the fall season is that they can use such a variety of calls to fool the birds. They can use their yelps, kee-kee runs, light putts - all kinds of turkey noises. When the turkeys are trying to get together, they generally yelp or putt softly. If the birds are moving in the right direction, a quiet wait will do the trick, but if you must coax them to come your way, a little calling can go a long ways.

Can you use turkey decoys in the fall? Once you have flushed a gang of turkeys and have set up to ambush them as they get back together, I think a decoy or two could be a help. To be honest, I have never used decoys in the fall myself, but logic tells me that they may help bring the

turkeys into the range of your shotgun in a clear spot where you can get a shot.

In the fall of the year, especially in the East, turkey hunters often are hard put to find a piece of woods untouched by deer hunters and their dogs. This can make serious turkey hunting tricky. A turkey hunt is very difficult on wildlife management areas or military bases where there are lots of people in the woods. Turkeys are best hunted on private lands, or if on public lands, the odds are best on weekdays when there are fewer hunters in the woods.

I have come to appreciate the wild turkey. It is truly a noble bird that is capable of testing the mettle of any hunter. In my opinion the true trophy of turkey hunting is not merely a dead turkey. It is the hours learning to hunt them and the days spent actually hunting them that are

the true rewards of the hunt. A turkey kill after a dedicated hunt is one of the most satisfying experiences hunting has to offer.

Unfortunately, lots and lots of turkeys are killed by guys sitting on deer stands or are accidentally flushed in the woods. These, by any standard, are cheap kills. The hunter never really had the thrill of the hunt and the solid feeling that comes from hunting a turkey successfully. I believe the hunter has been cheated out of hours of great hunting sport. This is why I can't abide the rationale behind the one-day hunt on Thanksgiving. On this day the woods are too crowded to really hunt turkeys. The vast majority of the birds bagged are cheap shots. In addition, the biologists have made a clear case for limiting the numbers of birds bagged in the fall, mainly because too many are hens. The Thanksgiving hunt flies in the face of

this logic.

However, a point in favor of the fall hunt is the quality of birds bagged as table fare. I much prefer a fall-killed gobbler on the dinner table to a mushy-breasted spring gobbler. In any case, if you take on an autumn turkey hunt, and if you bust up a flock, build a blind and call them back together, I'll bet you that the one you bag is (or just was) a lonesome bird.

---

An outdoor writer since 1948, Jack Randolph is also a retired Army officer and is a retired Assistant Director of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. His work has appeared in major national publications, such as *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life* and in such newspapers as *The Baltimore Sunday Sun*, and the *Richmond News Leader*. He was the outdoor columnist for *The Stars & Stripes Pacific* and *The Army, Airforce, and Navy Times*. He is a frequent contributor to *Virginia Wildlife* and other publications. An accomplished photographer Jack has traveled to Africa and Alaska several times. An avid outdoorsman, Jack also participates in fly tying, rod building, ammo reloading and other related hobbies. He resides in Colonial Heights, Virginia with his wife Chris.

[www. VaSportsman.com](http://www.VaSportsman.com)



**WHERE TRADITIONS BEGIN**

Fly Fishing Outfitters  
Men's & Women's Clothing  
Gifts Luggage Accessories

977-6882

Open Seven Days a Week

*The Albemarle Angler*  
Outfitters & Sporting Goods

**ORVIS**

**Barracks Road Shopping Center**

Irvington, Virginia    1-800-843-3746    [www.tidesinn.com](http://www.tidesinn.com)



*A return to the good life.*

The Tides Inn is truly the pinnacle of Virginian hospitality. Remodeled in a British Colonial motif, the Tides Inn offers the attendant pleasures of a deluxe resort, yet in a more intimate setting. Enjoy championship golf, delightful dining at four distinctive restaurants, plus a full-service spa and marina, all humbly at your service.

*the Tides Inn*  
A Chesapeake Bay Tradition



A member of The Leading Small Hotels of the World