

# The Most Beautiful Hunt

Story and Photography

by  
Jack Randolph



There are those who say that hunting deer in the early autumn woods with a muzzleloader is the most beautiful hunt of the year. They have a point. Yet as long as dogwood blossoms hang suspended in a bright green early spring forest, as long as redbuds blush in the early morning light; and as long as an entire choir of songbirds provides the music, the spring turkey hunt gets my vote.

The spring hunt has something else going for it too. No hunt, not even a waterfowl hunt in a shared blind, allows good friends to enjoy hunting together more than a spring gobbler hunt. In fact, it is such hunts - some successful and many not - that rank among the best memories this old hunter has collected over the years.

In the Sixties I was a soldier, and while stationed near Washington, D.C. I had a spring ritual. I would take three days off, and my son and I would hunt turkeys at dawn at Fort A.P. Hill. Then, after a late breakfast, we would cap of the morning with shad fishing in the Rappahannock River in Fredericksburg.

Fort A.P. Hill has lots of turkeys, but it also has lots of turkey hunters, which makes hunting there a bit of an adventure, so a successful hunt was a matter of sheer luck. You never knew when someone would wander in on you, messing up anything you had going with a bird.

I remember one morning in particular. My then 9 year old son, John, was with me, and we found ourselves in a highly unusual turkey hunting situation. There was a gobbler, yet unseen, strutting and gobbling not far from us, and just to our rear a hen turkey was whispering sweet nothings back to him.

“Why don’t you call, Dad?” urged my son.

“I can’t do a better job of calling



Assortment of turkey calls. Many hunters carry several calls.

than that hen," I replied. "Let's just wait it out and see what happens."

Well, the mountain did not come to Mohammed. It worked just the other way around. The hen went to the gobbler, and we went fishing.

Now we move to another spring morning thirty years later. Lots of things have changed. I am retired from the Army and from most everything else. My son, among other things, has become one of the best turkey hunters I have known. He has a reputation for calling in birds for other hunters.

On this particular morning we were on a farm in Prince George County. Nature had done her part, decorating the rolling forestland with all sorts of pastels. Birds chirped and sang their songs, crows cawed and guffawed, and occasionally a gobbler would add his booming voice to the chorus.

To our immediate front John had

placed a pair of turkey decoys while he manipulated a whole battery of calls. He had a mouth diaphragm call, a box call, a slate call, and who knows what else. He felt the different calls goaded a gobbler into making his decisions a bit sooner. The decoys, not only lured approaching birds in close; they also attracted their attention, distracting them from looking too keenly at the surroundings where we were doing our best to become invisible.

It was plain that the gobbler was approaching our set-up. John apparently was saying just the right things because, without too much hesitation, the big bird came within shotgun range where I dropped him with a high brass load of number 5 shot.

Over the years I have found the number 5 shot to be perfect for turkey hunting. Back in the days when it was legal to use lead shot for waterfowl, the 5's were my favorite duck load - plenty of pattern density, and the shot was big enough to do the job. When the non-toxic rule for water-

fowl shot came in, I was caught with a good supply of 5's - probably all I'm ever going to need.

The gobbler I shot was dead, and John and I took a good look at it. The spurs and beard were enormous, and it was a big turkey weighing 22 pounds. It wasn't the biggest gobbler I had ever bagged; I had shot one that weighed 27 pounds at A.P. Hill on a deer hunt in the Fifties. But turkeys weren't scored in those days.

As it turned out, our bird scored over 78 points, enough to win the Eastern Division and the State Trophy Shows the following fall. Normally I'm not one for trophies and mounts, but that bird's fan, beard, and legs on a plaque with several blue ribbons occupies a place of honor in my den because my son and I bagged it together. The shoe is really on the other foot these days. My son is the teacher and I am the pupil.

Both of us are extremely fortunate when it comes to turkey hunting, because we were given our turkey primer by the late Ellsworth "Eggy" Hatch of Petersburg, who was the finest turkey hunter I ever knew. He owned some of the best turkey woods in Prince George, and his constant companions were a pair of English setters that were trained turkey dogs. We'll save the story on hunting turkeys with dogs for this fall.

Eggy made his own turkey calls. Similar calls are sold these days, called diaphragm calls. They fit in the mouth and it takes a bit of skill to use them. Eggy could imitate just about any species of game bird with one of these calls.

He made his calls out of a couple of cold blowout patches, a piece of surgical glove, and a short length of wire. He would cut the patches into the shape of a horse-shoe. Then he would stretch a piece of surgical rubber into the space between the

**Pink feet are trademarks of wild turkeys. domestic birds have gray feet.**



arms of the horse-shoe. He bent the wire into a horseshoe shape to fit between the two patches to keep the arms taut. He used to carry his calls in a Bayer aspirin tin. He said that kept the headaches out of turkey callin’.

I once asked Eggy how close he ever called a turkey. I shouldn’t have done it.

“Well,” said Eggy, “I remember once I stepped into the woods and hit a lick on the call, when all of a sudden this gobbler started gobblin’ and runnin’ towards me - gobblin’, it seemed, every time its left foot hit the ground. It was coming so fast I had to flop down behind a log to keep it from seein’ me.

“Did you shoot it?” I asked.

“Naw,” said Eggy. “I just reached under the log and grabbed it by the legs. But I had a problem. I couldn’t pull that turkey under the log.”

“Then you shot it!” I offered.

“Nope, I didn’t want to mess up that bird. I just let go, called it around to my side and grabbed it again.”

You had to be careful around old Eggy, bless his memory.

**The author and a nice turkey. The turkey is the one without the shotgun.**



I sat on the Game Commission in the ‘70’s when spring turkey hunting in Virginia was first legalized. In their arguments supporting the season, the biologists mentioned that when turkeys are hatched they are about 50-50 male to female. As they grew older, some males became more dominant and gathered harems of hens, leaving many males without hens. These disgruntled males would break up nests and do anything they could to keep the hens in the mating mode. This hurt turkey reproduction. By cutting down on the numbers of gobblers in the spring hunt, the competition between them diminished, resulting in better reproduction.

The spring hunt centers around the mating activity of gobblers. Dogs are not allowed in the spring. Until this year spring turkey hunters had to be out of the woods by noon, but this year, during the final two weeks of the season, all-day hunting is permitted.

The key to a successful hunt is to locate an active gobbler. Gobblers are known to respond to calls of other animals, particularly owls. They may also gobble in response to a slammed car door, a locomotive whistle, or other night sounds. Hunters often use an owl hoot the night before to discover where a gobbler is roosting. An owl hoot is also somewhat effective in the morning before daylight.

On a typical spring morning, songbirds greet the dawn. The forest has become quite light before the crows sound off, and it has been my experience that this is the time the gobblers start calling to gather their harems. If you hear a gobbler, the established method is to move in as close as you dare, set up your decoys, and then select a spot where you can hide. A spot where you can sit in front of a large tree trunk with a bush or two in front to conceal you is about perfect.

Once you are set up, you start call-

ing. Most hunters use the yelp call and not a heck of a lot more. The “ki-ki run” and the squeal seem to be better fall calls. Every hunter had his own technique and does what works for him.

There are tricks. Sometimes if a bird refuses to come to a call, it may be a good idea to leave a hunter in place while the caller moves away from the gobbler, calling as he goes. The gobbler may follow and get himself in trouble.

As far as shooting a bird is concerned, I always look for a certain head shot within a good range. I don't take chance shots. There is usually another day. I am not particularly fond of eating spring gobblers. I don't care to deal with the soft jelly mass in the chest. Fall killed turkeys, to me, are much better. But there are few hunting adventures that will equal a spring turkey hunt. Try it. I bet you'll like it.

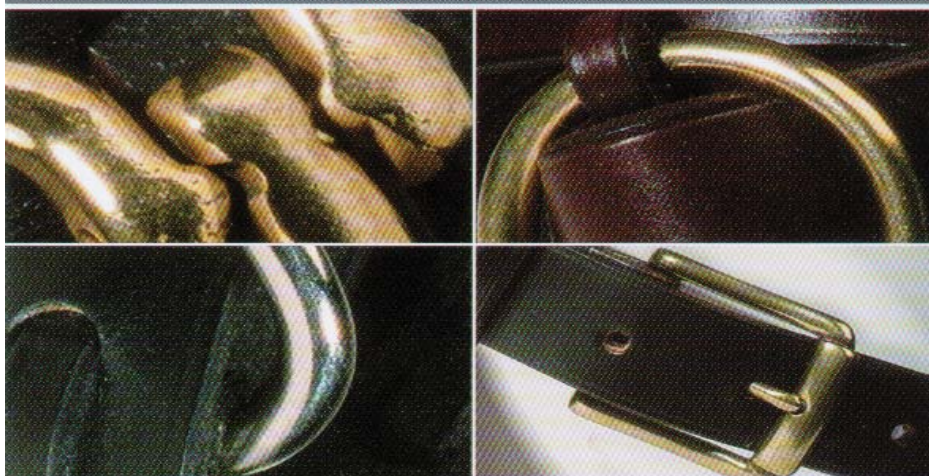
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An outdoor writer since 1948, Jack Randolph is also a retired Army Officer and is a retired Assistant Director of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland fisheries. His work has appeared in Sports Afield, Outdoor Life, Virginia Wildlife, the Baltimore Sunday Sun, Richmond News Leader and others. He was the outdoor columnist for the Stars & Striped Pacific and the Army, Air force, and Navy Times . Jack has traveled to Africa and Alaska several times. An avid outdoorsman Jack also participative in fly tying, rod building, amm reloading and other related hobbies. He resides in Colonial Heights, Virginia with his wife Chris.

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