



Primland Toms

Story by John Shtogren
Photos by Hay Hardy

My two-day turkey hunt could have been over in the first five minutes, but I blinked. My guide Marcus Heath and I had walked down the gravel road less than 100 yards from where we parked the truck, when he grabbed my arm and eased me into roadside thicket. I hadn't heard a sound other than our feet on the gravel and couldn't see a thing with the trees fully leafed out this late

in the spring. Marcus quickly positioned me with my back against a tree trunk and gestured for me to shoulder my shotgun and point it at the wall of rhododendron across the road.

Marcus made faint hen-like yelps on his box call, and a tom turkey immediately sounded off from his roost close by across the way. Marcus quickly took off his hat and ruffled it in the leaves to imitate the

sound of a competing tom landing nearby. The real tom flew down from his roost and began a series of thundering gobbles less than 30 yards in front of us but still invisible behind tree trunks and low growth. Then his bright red head popped up above the brush and was gone in less than a half second. Fifteen seconds later it popped up again and disappeared just as fast. Both times his head appeared in profile with his

one eye seeming to focus directly on me, as if clicking a picture for further analysis.

My arms were beginning to quiver from holding up my shotgun when his head popped up for the third time, neck stretched a little higher. Maybe I moved the muzzle a fraction of an inch or maybe I just blinked, but the next thing I heard was what no turkey hunter ever wants to hear, a loud “Putt!” In turkey talk it means, “Adios Jack, I am so outta here!” And he was.

As Marcus gave me a hand up, he remarked, “We’re lucky they can’t smell like a deer because, as good as they can see and hear, nobody’d ever kill a one.”

A Shooting-Sport Paradise

It was early May and I was hunting at Primland Resort, a 12,000-acre mountain estate tucked away in southwest Virginia a few miles north of the North Carolina line. The previous fall I’d had a fine pheasant hunt at Primland, and when I heard about its phenomenal 70%-80% success rate for spring gobbler hunting, I promised myself a return trip. I wasn’t able to get back until the season was already three weeks under way and the birds were educated and more wary than ever.

I can sum up Primland with a single word: “superb” or maybe “splendid.” If I was wordier I’d say, “As good as it gets and a whole bunch more.” I admit I am biased in favor of pristine woods, see-for-ever mountain views, elegant accommodations, exquisite cuisine, and Swiss attention to detail combined with Southwest Virginia hospitality. I suspect I’m not alone.

In addition to spring gobbler hunting, Primland offers pheasant, quail and chukar shooting and trophy deer hunting with a herd of over 1,000 deer and only 10 hunters each day. Also, there are sporting clays on one of the 25 best courses in the nation according to *Esquire* magazine, horseback riding, ATV tours and fly fishing on Primland’s own stretch of the Dan River. The 18-hole Highland Course is now open on top of the mountain, and both *Golf*



Guide Marcus Heath using a mouth call

Digest and *Travel and Leisure Golf* named it one of the best new public courses in the country. Be warned that you may need rappelling gear to retrieve balls that stray from the fairway.

Walkin’ and Talkin’

Drive-walk-call was the drill for the rest of the morning. We would drive a half mile or so, walk a few hundred yards up a side trail, and Marcus would check for toms in the vicinity by blowing a crow call. More often than not, toms would gobble in response to his raucous cawing for the same unknown reasons they’ve been known to gobble in response to chainsaw start ups, train whistles and distant thunder.

Most often I wouldn’t hear the gobble until Marcus pointed in a direction and whispered what I should listen for. “There’s a tom up on that ridge and another to his right. There are at least two hens

between them and us and the hens just gave a fighting purr to my yelp. The hens are telling me, ‘You stay the heck away, them boys are ours!’ The toms aren’t going to come courting to us across the valley when they’ve got two ladies in the front yard.” And when I listened hard as he called again, I heard it all—the gobblers sounding off, and the hens coming back quick at Marcus with their, “You shut up you—!”

I was impressed with Marcus’ acute hearing, a much-needed ability for locating toms in the mountains. Just before noon and the end of the shooting day, I became impressed with his vision as well. We were driving along the ridge road that runs 10 miles along Primland’s spine. The views east, down onto the North Carolina plain with Greensboro and Winston-Salem some 50 miles away, are as breathtaking as any you’ll see from the Blue Ridge Parkway, which passes Primland five miles to the west.

Marcus turned my gaze closer in on the green fields surrounded by woods 1,500 feet below and a half mile away. “Look at the two big birds with the three smaller ones in the middle field.” I couldn’t see what he was talking about until I looked through the 10x binoculars which he hadn’t used. Sure enough, there were five turkeys, dark specks against emerald green. “That’s where we’re going to be at first light tomorrow morning. Maybe we can start a fight.” The idea was to put out a young tom decoy and see if the dominant tom would come in and challenge the intruder as to who was going to rule the roost.

Laying Back

I spent the afternoon napping and flipping through the 100 channels of the widescreen TV in my room in a new fairway chalet near the clubhouse and conference center that will open next year. After a morning of climbing mountain trails, a laid-back afternoon is welcome. The chalet room with its vaulted timber ceilings, twin queen-sized beds with mounds of pillows



Moving on to the next place to call

and quilts is a fine place to relax. It was also a good place to enjoy the chicken and roast beef wraps and fresh fruit that had been delivered, without being requested, by a restaurant staff member on a golf cart: “Thought you might be a little too tired after climbing our mountains to come over to the dining room for lunch.”

I decided to switch shotguns for my second hunt. The first morning I had carried my 12-gauge Browning with its non-glare finish that wouldn’t catch the sun and spook keen-eyed turkeys. The next morning I would hunt with my father’s Winchester Model 12. He hadn’t made it down from Michigan to join me on a turkey hunt before his hunting days were over, so it seemed right that his gun should join me



(Photo courtesy of Primland)

even if he could not.

The Model 12’s 30-inch barrel was bright and shiny but wouldn’t be a problem since Marcus had said we’d be well-hidden. Other than its polished finish, the Model 12 is an ideal turkey gun, choked extra full to throw a tight pattern. I had tested a heavy three-inch magnum load of mixed #4s and BBs and found it would put 50 pel-

lets in the vital head and neck area at 30 yards. The general rule is that a good turkey gun will put at least 20 pellets in the kill zone at whatever the distance. Turkey hunters often differ on whether to use large or small shot, whether to go for maximum penetration or coverage. I take the middle road and load up with two big mixed-shot magnums followed with a light #7 ½ load in case I have to do any close range clean-up.

I made it down to the Saloon Restaurant in the early evening and was glad I did. Chef Britton Saylor’s dining room is top-shelf like everything at Primland. Dinner started with a cold seafood medley featuring fresh New England scallops and Gulf shrimp, followed by covina flown in from the West



Portable blind at the edge of the field



Young tom decoy set in front of the blind

Coast in a red wine reduction served over mashed potatoes with flecks of blue cheese, paired with a Stags Leap Chardonnay and then a chocolate concoction with strawberry swirls. I slept dead to the world until the alarm went off at 5:00 a.m.

In the Blind

Marcus had gone in after dark the night before, long after the turkeys had gone to roost, to set up our blind and the decoys. The blind was a portable igloo with a green camo pattern, complete with two comfortable folding chairs. We had parked the truck a half mile away long before first light and left the car doors ajar to avoid making the slightest noise. In the dark blind I loaded the Model 12 by touch, not taking the slightest chance of the flashlight throwing a stray beam a turkey might see.

As the sky lightened I could see the silhouettes of the two turkey decoys Marcus had placed in the field 20 yards in front of us at the crest of a rise in the alfalfa field. One was a short-bearded young tom and the other a hen. There would be no calling this morning. The idea was that if a dominant tom spied the young fellow with a pretty woman on his turf he'd come in to take over. If he came from either side, we'd see him a hundred yards off and be ready. If he came from in front, we wouldn't see him until he was up level with the decoys. I leaned the muzzle of the Model 12 against the shooting window, and the wait began.

From time to time Marcus nudged me when he heard a tom gobble far off up the mountain. My less than perfect hearing was further compromised by the breeze that whispered through the pines around us.

When the wind dropped off, I could hear better, but all I could hear was the gnats buzzing around my face. I resisted the urge to wave them away for fear of showing movement even with a dark-gloved hand deep inside the blind.

After an hour of waiting, Marcus eased out through the flap in the back of the blind to reconnoiter the woods behind us. I took a moment to stretch: somehow the blind had gotten smaller and smaller as the morning wore on. As I settled in again I heard the dreaded sound, a loud "Putt!" from the woods to my left. I immediately flipped off the safety and shouldered the Model 12, hoping against hope that it was Marcus signaling me that a turkey was near.

A heartbeat later a bright red head popped up over the crest of the field between the jake and hen decoys and was



Marcus clips the author's turkey tag.

The author with his tom and Model 12





Primland toms strut their stuff for the hens. (Photo by John Shtogren)

gone. It was as if the tom glared up at the jake and said, “Hey, boy, I’m going to kick your...!” I aimed at the spot where I’d last seen him and waited. Nothing. The heavy barrel began to waver. I was thinking, “He’s gone,” and then he popped his head up again, just high enough to see the top of his beard, and I squeezed down on the Model 12, and then he really was gone, out of sight back over the crest of the rise as the shot echoed off the mountains.

Without giving it a thought, I charged out through the window in front of the blind with my eyes glued on the spot where I had shot, racking in a fresh round as I ran. When I got to the crest of the hill I could see that I didn’t need a second round, but I kept the tom covered all the same. Dead turkeys are notorious for getting up and running off.

I still had a bead on him when Marcus came up and offered congratulations. I thanked him for the alerting me with the “putt.” “No, sir, that was real thing, the king of the mountain came down to the edge of the woods and saw something was wrong, and let us know he wasn’t about to be fooled.” My tom lying at my feet was not a 20-pound bird with an 11-inch beard,



Inside a new fairway chalet

but he was close enough for me, and he was my bird taken with my father’s shotgun, and that was more than good enough for me.

I said as much to Marcus, and he smiled as he handed me the empty shotgun shell that he had picked up outside the blind. “And you did it the hard way.” It was not one of my heavy magnum loads; it was my light #7 ½ backup load. When I had loaded the Model 12 in the dark I somehow managed to put it in last rather than first. I stared at the empty shell and didn’t know whether to be proud or embarrassed. “It’s a fine turkey load for a crack shot,” Marcus deadpanned, and then added with a grin,

“but I’d keep it 20 yards or under.”

For complete information on sporting opportunities at Primland, see www.primland.com.

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