



Spring Gobblers with Bow & Arrows

By Gene Thorn

Lonnie B. Sneed

Taking a spring gobbler with a bow and arrow may be the ultimate hunting challenge available to West Virginia hunters. Turkeys are not a pushover when a shotgun is used. Their keen eyesight and hearing, plus quick response to danger, has caused many veteran gobbler chasers to say that there are a thousand ways to mess up a set up on a bird. If you are an experienced turkey hunter that has harvested many gobblers, perhaps you are looking for a new and greater challenge. Until recent years it is safe to say that very few, if any, turkeys were taken with the bow in West Virginia for more than 200 years. Delaware, Shawnee, Cherokee and other Native American hunters, during the 1700s and prior history, roamed what is now the Mountain State with their bows. Turkeys commonly fell to their flint-tipped arrows. It is a challenge that is attainable.

Taking turkeys with a bow takes a different set of strategies in some areas. The biggest obstacle to overcome is drawing the bow without spooking the bird when the moment of truth comes. Decoys help distract the bird, and bring them in to closer range. Decoys placed properly can also position the bird for the shot and can serve as a yardage marker. When hunting with a bow, decoys should be set close, about five yards away. If the bird hangs up you still may get a reasonable shot. If he comes all the way in, it is a slam-dunk shot.

A portable blind is a good way to achieve success. A properly blacked-out interior will allow you to draw your bow at any time. Turkeys don't usually pay any attention to a blind set up, even in a wide open forest setting. They will sometimes literally walk within inches of the walls. Choose a blind that does not flap and cause noise in the wind. If you decide to use a blind, make sure you practice shooting from inside as the perspective of looking out from a dark interior can be different. It is impossible to see some sights. A good fiber-optic sight or instinctive shooting style will get the job done.

Another strategy is to use 3-D camo, a Ghillie suit, or good patterned camo from head to toe. Don't move to draw unless the bird's eyes are behind a tree or he is directly faced away from you in full strut with his tail fan blocking you from his eyes. This plan is used effectively by many hunters that use traditional

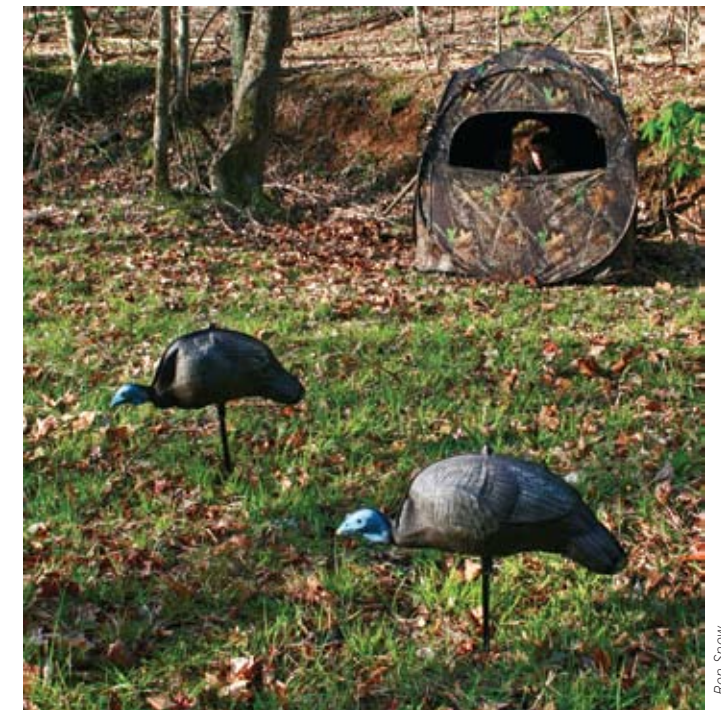
A blind provides concealment, especially when drawing the bow back, but restricts movement when the back panel is closed.

Photo by Ron Snow

◀ Lonnie J. Sneed with his bow-killed gobbler.

recurves and longbows as the shot can be taken faster. Larry Long, a turkey hunter from North Carolina, has taken 26 gobblers with his longbow and has called in over 100 birds that other hunters have killed. Larry uses a snap-shooting technique successfully. The surprised gobblers weren't able to outrun his arrows delivered at short ranges even though he does not wait for their eyes to be averted. His success speaks for itself.

I asked Larry Long what he felt was the most important factor in his phenomenal success. He quickly answered that scouting turkeys and knowing the exact ground they use when they fly down off the roost and start gobbling is the key. Where are their strutting



Ron Snow

Taking a turkey with a bow typically requires setting decoys up close to a blind.

zones? What is their morning routine? If you nail that down, you can call the gobbler in and more readily position yourself for the shot. It takes a lot of extra mornings of early rising to put in scouting time but it will pay off. Scouting is a combination of listening in the morning, studying topographical maps, marking the location of gobblers heard, and going in later in the day to walk the ground the gobbler is using. Do not call to birds when scouting. All you do by calling to them is educating them and lessening your chances later. When you go in to hunt the gobbler during the season, have a plan for where you are going to set up on him.

The same bow you use for deer can be used on turkeys, but a lighter-weight bow is optimal. A bow of

moderate poundage is more likely to cast an arrow that will not pass through a gobbler. It is better to have the arrow stay in the bird. Many hunters use a washer or commercial impedance device behind the broadhead to slow penetration for the same reason. Use as large of a broadhead as you can get to fly accurately and make sure the blades are razor sharp. Broadheads designed just for turkey hunting are available. One is an extremely wide cutting four-blade head designed to be shot at the head and neck. The blades project at close to a right angle, and if very sharp will cause an instant kill if they connect.



Ron Snow

Box calls continue to remain a favorite among turkey hunters.

Arrow shafts should be non-shiny or camouflaged and feathers need to be drab if hunting without a blind. Sharp-eyed gobblers will pick them out if they are gaudy. Especially stay away from red, white, or blue fletches because of the safety factor -- these are the colors of a gobbler's head. Some hunters use string trackers attached to their arrows to help retrieve a hit bird that gets out of sight.

Practice shooting with all your gear and make sure you have your facemask, gloves and vest on. Practice while sitting on the ground, or on a stool if your plan is to use one. If any problems arise, that will give you a chance to solve them before they cost you a bird. Your effective range is the distance you can hit inside a tennis ball every time in every possible scenario – usually under 20 yards.

Turkeys have a small vital area in the body that is the size of a softball or grapefruit. The kill zone sits immediately above where the legs join together, low in the body cavity. The target should be this spot on a directly broadside shot. If you take out the legs and vitals, he is not going anywhere. The preferred target used to be the wing butts but this is a smaller target, it doesn't disable the legs, and the arrow may pass over top of the lungs and heart. The base of the neck on a bird facing you is the best shot to angle the broadhead into the vitals. A gobbler that is strutting faced directly away from you should be shot right in the O beneath the tail to hit the vitals. The head and neck are the best

shot of all, if you are using an appropriate broadhead and take close shots. It is safer to keep the shot tucked close to the base of the neck because a turkey is continually moving its head, but the neck at the base stays in the same place. A 3-D turkey target that has the vitals outlined properly is a good investment. Always wait for the best shot angle.

Calling is the easiest part of the puzzle to solve. Larry Long and many other veteran turkey hunters I know agree with me in saying that many hunters call too much. A couple soft yelps and wait is all it takes most of the time. The gobbler knows exactly where the call came

from; give him time and he will come. If he is with hens, he will come and investigate later in the morning when he separates from them. If you have done your scouting and know where he lives, hang with him.

The seconds after a shot are critical to recovering a hit bird. There is an initial period of shock and confusion by the bird that will usually allow you to jump up, run and pounce on him. Watch out for the spurs, and especially the broadhead-tipped arrow, but get hold of his legs if at all possible. If you allow him time to recover, even on a mortal hit, he may well get out of your sight. That is not a good thing, as turkeys leave notoriously sparse blood trails. If he gets on wing he can put a lot of distance between you and him before he dies. If a hit turkey does get out of sight, follow the blood trail as far as you can, and then conduct a grid search. Go and get some help if you need it.

The challenges and rewards of turkey hunting are many. The sound of a gobble resonating from a hillside crowned with dogwood and redbud, in the early morning of a fine spring day, will renew the spirit of a person who has gobbler hunting blood in his veins. Hope springs forth to the prospect of calling a gobbler in and seeing that gloriously colored head bobbing toward you through the underbrush. The feel of a familiar bow in your hand and a quiver of arrows is all that is needed to set forth on a new adventure.

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