

Bowhunting Turkey Made Easy

by Patrick Meitin



In most cases (except where they are forbidden by law) a wide-cutting mechanical broadhead is the best avenue to bringing spring gobblers to hand. Cutting diameters of 1 1/2 to 2 inches turn marginal hits into kills. Photo by Patrick Meitin.

Last spring I tagged my 60th archery gobbler, a total assembled from across the nation and including all the North American species (once in a single spring). Now understand I don't consider myself a master turkey caller by any stretch of the imagination. I'm rather impatient when it comes right down to it, and on any given day my archery shooting could be considered quite average. So what's the secret? First, put away the darn shotgun and just do it.

Bow-bagging turkeys isn't as difficult as many bowhunters believe. It's true you'll need some special gear inherent to bowhunting restrictions, a decent place to hunt (working harder to hike well away from crowds to find less educated birds) and an ability to shoot straight and talk turkey. Otherwise, your first bow gobbler's a goal you can accomplish this spring.

GO FOR IT!

Finding a good place to hunt is important to successfully bowhunting turkey. You need naïve birds — not those made neurotic by hunting pressure — if you expect to enjoy even semi-regular success with archery gear. Wheedling or buying your way into exclusive private lands, seeking fringe areas others overlook or working harder to pack into true wilderness or backcountry few have the gumption to explore on public lands is half the battle. In my experience, traveling well away from metropolitan areas normally means farmers and ranchers are subjected to less harassment and are more open to granting private-lands permission after polite inquiries.

Turkeys are small (relative to other “big game”) and rarely hold still long. In other words, they can prove highly challenging to hit with an arrow. Being a proficient shot is an important contributor to success, but more important is understanding that shots must be close (under 25 yards is best) and conditions as ideal as possible.

The bowhunter gains a decided turkey-hunting edge by adopting wider-cutting broadheads, increasing his margin of error and turning marginal shots into killing ones. Standard deer-hunting heads result in more lost birds than tagged. Mechanical broadheads with 1.5- to 2-inch cutting diameters (and body shots) work best when spring gobblers are your target. Such wide-cutting designs also impart a bit of shock and slow penetration. Having your arrow remain in the bird after impact is, in fact, highly desired, slowing the bird’s progress through thick brush and restricting flight. The other solution (especially if mechanicals aren’t legal in your area) are Arrowdynamic Solutions’ and Magnus’ wide-reaching “head loppers” with 2- to 4-inch cutting diameters, designed specifically for neck/head shots. They most often require larger fletching to maintain predictable accuracy and intimate ranges (under 25 yards) to assure killing hits.

Shot placement is what bowhunting’s all about, of course, and this also applies to turkey. It goes without saying a 2-inch mechanical through the pump-house spells instant death to a 25-pound gobbler (remembering turkeys’ small stature permits accessing vitals from any angle). Yet, in turkey hunting you have other options. The head/neck shot’s predictably deadly, but offers a smaller aiming point. It’s a small, darting target and a challenge even with 4-inch-wide, head-chopping broadheads. Another lethal option is the drumsticks, breaking a bird down instantly and preventing escape via flight or running. The drumsticks are fed by large arteries that spill blood liberally, resulting in quick death — especially after a 1.5- to 2-inch mechanical broadhead slices through.

Turkeys are also relatively small and fragile. That’s where a big mechanical comes into play. Even a gut shot typically results in a tagged gobbler, so long as you choose the correct follow-up approach according to observed shot placement. The dilemma is always whether to charge and pounce or sit tight and give a bird time after a hit. Much depends on terrain. Atop high ridges or mesa edges, even a mortally-hit bird that gets its feet beneath him and takes flight is easily lost. On flat ground or bottoms, a marginally-hit bird can often be run down, granted you’re in decent physical shape and vegetation’s not overly restricting. Thinking on your feet is always important. In very basic terms, if you’ve knocked your bird for a loop, opt for the charge-and-tackle approach (being

especially careful if your arrow's still in the bird). On gut or similarly marginal hits, I've had better luck leaving birds alone, trailing a couple hours later. When a bird takes flight, do everything possible to keep him in sight, gaining better insight into where to start a grid search. Note: Bird dogs are extremely helpful in recovering marginally-hit birds or those that have glided into distant cover (check regulations to assure legality).



It's vitally important to practice shooting from your pop-up blind before taking to the field. Sending an arrow cleanly through shooting ports can prove tricky without proper initiation. Photo by Patrick Meitin.

CALLING ALL TURKEYS

There are those in the sport who put forth the proposition that turkey calling is some sort of secrete code. Don't fall for such baloney. Basic calling skills are all you need to succeed; even with a bow. Normally, it's not how well you handle your call, but understanding timing in relation to what is being related by your calls. Most turkey hunters call too much. Call just enough to keep a gobbler interested and moving your way — no more, no less. Keep it simple and listen to what a gobbler's telling you.

Most importantly, understand the only three calls you need to master are yelps, clucks and purrs. Yelps say "Come here" in turkey talk; clucks "Look;" and purrs "My food or space." Simple yelps get the job done most of the time — asking a gobbler to come to you. That's pretty much the point, right? Clucks are confidence calls to put a tom at ease but can also tell him you see him, causing him to stall and strut instead of moving closer. Purrs tell a gobbler that there's more than one hen on hand.

Volume's also important. Soft, seductive yelps might translate into something like "Come here, big boy." Loud yelps become more of a demand; fine if there are a lot of birds competing for attention, incongruous in a peaceful, one-on-one setting. Soft clucks imitate hens maintaining contact while traveling or feeding. Loud, sharp clucks become

alarming putts. Always think a situation through; don't just throw random noise out there hoping something will stick. Finally, choose the call that works best for you, be it a diaphragm, box or slate. It's really that simple.

If you're still daunted, watch turkey-hunting videos to learn more.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

Turkeys live in a visual world dominated by color (avoid a red kerchief tied around your neck, for instance) and movement (hold still). Getting close is what bowhunting success is made of. Given that getting your bow drawn undetected is the biggest obstacle to overcome, a turkey's keen eyesight is your greatest enemy.

This was once successful bowhunting's biggest obstacle — until pop-up blinds. Pop-up blinds are the single development allowing me to say without jest that archery turkeys are now “easy.” Pop-ups remove the biggest challenge to achieving archery turkey success — setting up and drawing for the shot. Blind models from Ameristep, Eastman/Gorilla and Primos/Double Bull Archery — to name only a few — are completely portable and “instantly” deployable (most erected in less than three minutes). You can set them up in likely places (feeding or strutting grounds) well before the hunt, or tote them along for effective run-n-gun action. By strategically deploying or blocking shooting-port windows around a 360-degree radius, setting up for the shot and drawing your bow undetected is made easy.

The extreme backcountry turkey hunter's at a disadvantage here; the extra weight of a blind being prohibitive in even the lightest models. Enter Rancho Safari's Shaggie Shield (preferably combined with Shaggie “ghillie” suits). The Shield's free-standing and instantly-deployable; a wall of screening 3-D material with dual, height-adjustable shooting ports. It's a 1-pound package that rolls into the space of a 2-liter soda bottle for easy transport.

Pop-up or Shield, it's wise to practice shooting through constricted shooting ports before actual hunting, assuring clean pass-through while delivering your shaft whilst kneeling or sitting on a stool or stump. The backyard's the place to work this out, not while a trophy gobbler's strutting into range.

Truth be told, I get a bigger kick out of running-n-gunning turkeys from the ground, without the benefit (or hindrance) of a blind. In fact, I've killed more gobblers bowhunting this way than from inside blinds. Be that as it may, I accomplish this by religiously donning a 3-D or ghillie suit, outfits with leafy tatters or camo-material hanks that break up the human outline and create the illusion of depth better than flat camouflage material possibly can. This allows me to “throw down” on an unexpected gobbler who otherwise wouldn't have allowed the time or commotion of erecting a pop-up or Shield. They're spooky-effective. I've had hens scratching pine needles at my feet. I've drawn on gobblers in plain sight without them fleeing in terror.



The author enjoys the freedom of run-n-gun hunting from the ground, without the hindrance of a pop-up blind. To give himself an edge, he uses a "leafy" 3-D outfit such as this Rancho Safari Shaggie System suit. Photo by Patrick Meitin.

Just like shooting from a blind or Shield, preseason practice leaves you better prepared for encounters in the field. To succeed while operating outside a blind you must obviously be able to draw and shoot flat from your rear, as well as those awkward, twisted positions that arise should a gobbler show up somewhere other than where you've planned. Sitting flat can also make drawing a heavy bow difficult. You should be able to point your bow directly at the target and bring the string to anchor in a slow, smooth, fluid maneuver.

DEPLOYING DECOYS

Decoys can help or frustrate your efforts. Here's how: When a gobbler's lured to your calls he clearly expects to visually encounter a hen. Decoys provide that obvious point of attraction. Yet, this can actually work against you. In the natural order of things, the hen is actually supposed to move to the gobbler. This is especially true once visual contact is established and the reason gobblers often "hang," strutting their best just out of range. Savvy decoy placement helps you avoid these situations. Too, besides attracting wary gobblers within range, the decoy's meant to direct his attention away from you. This is especially important when operating outside a blind.

"Savvy" decoy placement means placing decoy(s) in a way that urges responding toms to move past your position while attention is directed forward. This normally entails a side-on arrangement with decoys set beyond where you wait. There's no way to foresee every scenario, but your job is made easier in areas where obstacles (thick brush, logs, fences, ranch roads) or terrain (ridgelines, draws or water) more predictably funnel birds past a particular position. It's more problematic in featureless topography. Blinds make it easier, simply staking decoys directly beneath shooting ports. Even reluctant gobblers are likely to pause in range.

Here we are discussing single birds. When more than one gobbler is involved, the spirit of competition is more likely to bring birds on the run. This also makes a hen/jake pair

highly effective — jealousy overriding reason as a tom observes the youngster stealing his thunder. Decoys depicting jakes mounting hens take this to the next level, often eliciting outright attacks. Gobblers confronting any decoy will normally work to meet the fake eye to eye. Situating decoys to face your position can also set up a gobbler with a tail fan obscuring his vision, making it easy to draw your bow unobserved. On a final note, unless you're dealing with an obviously mature and confident tom, you need to understand that gobbler decoys have the potential to repel rather than attract gobblers.

Turkey hunting's filled with a great variety of variables space does not permit exploration of here. Every region subjects turkeys to various degrees of hunting pressure, whether human or predator. Gobblers often have "personalities" that make them individuals and immune to rules of thumb. Bowhunting turkey is a learning process requiring patience and persistence. Yet it's far from impossible. Put away the shotgun this season and find out how fun — and productive — bowhunting turkey can truly be.

(Article Courtesy of Gameandfishmag.com)