

# Killing Turkeys That Won't Gobble

by Terry Madewell



No one likes to hear a gobbler hammering deep-throated gobbles as he saunters serenely all the way to the gun more than I do. It is one of the reasons I am so passionate about the sport of turkey hunting. It is the gobbled response to my calls, calls that make a gobbler think there's a 'lady in waiting' just down the woods a bit and the gobbles that make me feel confident about my calling.

A lot of times, it happens just like that and all is right with the turkey hunting world.

But there's another part of the sport that actually transcends the gobble and has become one of my favorite ways to harvest a turkey. It is something that is vastly overlooked by most hunters and it can be a very effective way to kill a turkey. While the gobble is what we yearn for during the spring hunting season, it is not always what we get. But even on days we don't get the gobble, we can still get the gobbler.

There are countless times when mature gobblers approach a hunter's calling without gobbling. For most hunters, they never know that gobbler was coming, or that he left the area sight unseen. In fact, how many times have you heard the oft repeated story that a hunter, who called from a particular location, waited a couple of minutes then moved off a couple hundred yards and again called. Then, and only then, did the longbeard gobble and the gobble was precisely where the hunter had been only minutes before? It is probably the most common story told by unsuccessful turkey hunters... well, other than simply missing the shot.

Taking gobblers that do not gobble actually speaks extremely well about your calling and woodsmanship qualities. You may miss the adrenaline rush of a bird hammering at your calls. But if you have a game plan and understand what may be happening, you can still end the hunt with a gobbler slung over your shoulder and a grin plastered on your face.

But taking a gobbler that doesn't gobble can require much from a hunter. It has become one of my most cherished victories in the sport of turkey hunting. To take a gobbler that doesn't gobble back at your call, but does respond to those calls by slipping in, means you have to do everything right, and then some.

The good news is there are things you can do to stack the odds in your favor to get those silent gobblers. Plus, the other really good news is that very often it will be a long-spurred gobbler. He has been hunted and he is wary. But he may honor your calling and he can be had. You will, however, have to change your strategy.

Most veteran turkey hunters who have a reputation for consistently taking long-spurred gobblers have one thing in common. They kill gobblers that do not gobble. It is a very select and honored group to be a member.

The first rule for killing a gobbler that doesn't gobble is to see if there is a gobbler that will gobble. I rarely, if ever, go into the spring woods before dawn hoping I don't hear a gobble. But I have become prepared to deal with the situation in several ways when it happens.

First, go about your turkey hunting business as usual in terms of trying to elicit a gobble. My routine is fairly standard among turkey hunters using owl calls, tree calls then more aggressive clucks, cutts and yelps. If none of these elicit a gobble I have to make a decision and it's usually based on experience and the confidence I have that gobblers are present in the woods I'm hunting.

If I've have seen plenty of turkey sign, have heard gobblers there recently and am confident that there are gobblers within hearing distance, then staying put for a while may be the best course of action. This is better if you heard even one gobble for any reason that morning. Even if the gobbler did not gobble to your owl call, tree call or fly-down calls, he may be an ideal non-gobbling candidate to kill and perhaps kill quickly.

I do not know why on some mornings gobblers simply do not gobble or gobble once for no apparent reason and then seem to get lock-jaw.

But I do know that walking around the woods in a turkey-rich environment early in the morning with no clue where the gobblers are located is a recipe for disaster.

The first rule of calling in this situation is to keep is soft and subtle. Use contented calls, such as clucks purrs and low volume yelps. Try to sound like a contented hen just going about her business. The idea here is to ensure no red-headed monster gobbler is already close by.

The key to success are divided into four parts. In this scenario it is one part patience and one part perseverance and two parts being alert. The two-part alert is both with your eyes, scanning the area in front and as far to the side as possible without moving your head. The second is to use your ears. While the gobbler may not gobble, there are sometimes

almost indiscernible sounds that should put you on high alert. It may be footsteps in the leaves or crows cawing at an unseen creature that give you a clue. Another is a single cluck in the distance. If you think you heard it, you probably did; at least base your reaction on that premise. It may be his lone signal he is approaching and now you now have a general direction.

The calling technique can vary but most experts I've hunted with have the same basic pattern: start loud and finish soft and subtle. Make one aggressive call that can be heard at a distance. Then about five minutes later, if after scanning the woods thoroughly you see no sign of a gobbler, use a much more subdued calling technique, just low yelps and clucks. It's a good idea to use a different call this time, to simulate multiple hens. For example, make the first call with a slate or box. Then follow-up calls can be with a mouth call, which unlike the first two types of calls does not require you to move. Being able to call without movement at this point can be helpful if a bird is close.

Also, these gobblers are not always silent, they just don't gobble. Gobblers that don't gobble are notorious for working in slowly, but in strut. If you know the sound to listen for, you can hear him drumming. Obviously, the key in this situation is to know what the drumming of a gobbler sounds like. If need be, before you hunt, get a tape of a gobbler drumming and play it repeatedly. If you know what to listen for, you can hear it and can often get a feel for the gobbler's direction and how he'll approach.

If you cannot distinguish the exact direction, which is sometimes difficult to do with drumming, just don't move. At this point, you should have the gun on your knee, head down nearly on the stock of the gun and basically be ready to shoot if the opportunity arises.

If you have heard something suspicious, such as a cluck, that sound could of course be from a hen, but you should be on high alert nevertheless: Many inexperienced hunters think only hens cluck, but that's not so. Clucks can be a key component of a gobbler's vocabulary. Upon hearing a sound such as a low-volume cluck or drumming, you can figure the gobbler is close and likely approaching your location.

Furthermore, he is seeking you, so do not move.

Unless you can see the gobbler or know for certain you have ample cover, stop your calling. Odds are good he is coming close enough to put his eyes on what he perceives to be a hen. If he gets close enough to be where he should see the hen, you should be able to see him. But your eyes still scan the woods for any movement and your ears tuned for any sound. Sometimes you will finally hear footsteps as the gobbler approaches.

At this point, if you see him first, you are very much in the game although the outcome is still in doubt. Odds are good he'll slip on through looking for the hen. If his course is going to bring him within gun range, then simply wait. He has responded to your call, you have worked him in; if you are silent, you have the advantage, but if you make any additional calls, he will then have you pinpointed and your options then are extremely

limited. If you have to make a gun angle correction for the shot, wait until the last moment to do it. Push the safety off and move the gun simultaneously when you make the shot. His first reaction to the movement will likely be a split second delay when he pops his head up and looks. He will analyze the situation as 'bad' and be in 'high-gear gone' mode. But in that half-a-heart-beat of time, you will likely have time to get the shot.

This is only one scenario and one that occurs early in the day. Let's quickly run through a few more where you can apply the same basic principles as above but under different situations.

A favorite trick of some old longbeards is to use another turkey that is gobbling as a decoy. For example, you are set up and have a bird gobbling but he is not approaching, or approaching very slowly. When you call, he gobbles, but nothing else much changes. You are committed to him but the reverse is not necessarily true. Most hunters will focus only on the direction of the gobbling gobbler. But don't stop there.

Stay very still and scan the woods around you from all directions that you can see. Quite often another gobbler will sneak in quietly to get first dibs on the hen while the other gobbler is just gobbling, perhaps occupied with hens at the time. I have had gobblers slip up quietly, sometime even walk in fast, and on a few occasions run in directly to my location completely silent, just to beat out the other tom.

Once I learned this is actually a fairly common occurrence, I started looking for them. The other gobbler I had a good location on anyway so by spending time looking for the sneaky, silent type I've managed to bag birds that never gobbled at all: They just came to the calling. But you have to be looking for them. It took a few years and a couple of lucky sightings before I learned this, but if the object is to kill a longbeard that comes to your calls, this is actually a fairly high percentage opportunity.

Another trick here is to get to the high ground in the area, wherever it is and set up for a while. Continue to call and make the bird gobble, if for no other reason than to ensure you know his location. If you call to him and he gobbles back with more emphasis than his previous gobbles, then call again in an aggressive manner. You are now hoping for a negative response. His hen breeding may be over with those hens and he's ready to move on.

In other words, don't be discouraged if a bird you are working suddenly stops gobbling back. Many times when a gobbler has been responding to a certain call then suddenly stops responding, that means he has made a decision, and that decision is to head for your position but with no more gobbling.

The first thing an old gobbler will do is seek the high ground and approach from that angle. If you have already taken the high ground, you are in good position. He will have to come to you at least on your level. You do not want higher ground to your back or blind side. Then apply the same tactics of looking and listening as noted earlier and keep

calling to a minimum. If you see him at a distance, out of range, you'll have to make the decision whether you need to lay a subtle finishing call on him. The vegetation, his posturing and terrain will dictate that. But if he is moving, even ever so slowly, in your direction, just wait him out until he gets into range.

And by the way, as a side benefit, you will also often be rewarded with a gregarious two-year old longbeard that enters the game late and gobbles his head off on the way in. But be mindful that the reality is that by playing the non-gobbling gobbler game, anticipating the silent treatment, you will vastly increase your odds of getting a gobbler without reducing your chances of getting a talkative one to respond.

So while you're waiting for the sneaky one to slip in, the best news is you can just shoot the one that gets there first!

It is a win-win situation for the hunter.

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