

Teasing Toms To Death: Late Season Turkey Tactics

by Bruce Ingram



The 1930s and '40s actress Mae West was famous, or infamous, for her line: “Why don’t you come up sometime and see me?” I’ve been thinking that this tantalizing approach is one that we turkey hunters should use more often, especially late in the season when toms have been exposed to a wide variety of calls and experienced their share of hunting pressure. Instead, now’s the time to tease a tom to death, and here’s how to do so.

FIRST, ROOST HIM

Chris Walls is a pro staffer for Hunters’ Specialties and believes successful late season hunts start with what has become an increasingly underutilized tactic — roosting.

“Of course, you can roost a gobbler anytime during the season, but few people do anymore at any stage of the season,” he told me. “But roosting is a great tactic for late-season, heavily pressured birds because when the gobblers are becoming increasingly unresponsive that’s when I want to find them the evening before. That way I can crowd

them when I set up the next morning. I want to make it as easy as possible for a gobbler to fly down and have to walk just a short distance to check me out.”

From previous encounters with a longbeard, Walls hopes that he will have a general idea of where a tom is roosting, that he will hear the turkey fly up for the night, and that he won't have to utter any sounds to cause a gobbler to sound off. But if he isn't fortunate enough to hear a gobbler flap his way to a roost tree, he forgoes the hen chatter that he would normally make early in the season and instead uses barred owl, crow, and coyote calls to cause a tom to shock gobble. As a last resort, Walls will gobble a few times in order to elicit a response.

Once he successfully roosts a gobbler, Walls waits for full darkness to descend in order to ease out of the area.

“The next morning, I move in really close, I mean within 40 or so yards if the terrain and conditions permit it, and I set up well before sunrise in the pitch dark,” he continued. “If a gobbler does hear me walking to my setup, I want him to think that it's just the normal movement of animals in the night.”

The next morning it's time to begin to tease the tom. Walls will emit some soft tree yelps then transition to a few tantalizing yelps and the odd cluck or two. Then perhaps the next best step in the teasing process is just to go silent as Walls is often so close to a roosted bird that future calling — because the “hen” is not visible — may cause a longbeard to become suspicious since no visible cues exist to prove that a hen is in the vicinity.

“I want the gobbler to feel that he has to take just a few steps to find that hen,” explained Walls. “Then when he flies down and walks just a little ways toward me, I've got him!”

LATE SEASON CALLING IS LIKE RATTLING FOR BUCKS

Jerry Paitsel operates Struttinbird Turkey Calls and compares late season calling for gobblers to hunting for trophy bucks.

“One of my best deer hunting tactics for big bucks is to rattle,” Paitsel told me. “My usual calling routine is to rattle very softly, then wait for an hour-plus before starting another sequence. Some big bucks prefer aggressive rattling, some prefer soft rattling, but many bucks of both categories and even does can be curious about soft rattling and come check it out.

“Late season gobblers are the same way. Then, some gobblers will respond to loud calling, but most won't. Both of those categories of late season gobblers can be lured in with soft calls.

“Now, sometimes those late season gobblers will come roaring in, gobbling every step it seems. That can be true especially if the hens have just recently left the toms to nest. But it's more likely that you will only hear a gobble or two and a bird will slip in, maybe

strutting, maybe not. After you set up, make a couple of soft calls, then prepare to remain motionless for an hour or so. I've killed a lot of late-season birds by just sitting still."

Paitzel states that a soft, seductive tempting yelp is a superb initial sound to make. But equally good are light clucks and purrs.

"I prefer a slate for light calling," he continued. "I might make a soft cluck or two, then add in a few purrs. Maybe a half hour later, I'll offer up a few little yelps. Again, it's just like rattling: call a little then wait a lot. That buck or gobbler knows where those sounds are coming from. If they want to, they'll come check out those sounds. And a suspicious turkey can come slipping in just like a suspicious buck."

Paitzel says deer hunters who rattle often make the sounds of scuffling in the leaves. This can be done, of course, with the antlers themselves or simply a stick. Similarly, turkey hunters can mimic a hen scratching among leaves by using a hand to overturn the forest duff or a handy tree limb.

"Leaf scratching is an especially good tactic if an unresponsive gobbler is still on the roost, is nearby in his strut zone, or if he has been heavily pressured," continued Paitzel. "Hunters should definitely use this tactic more often in the late season."

CROWD HIM WHEN SETTING UP

Both Walls and Paitzel suggested that hunters should also crowd a gobbler, not only on the roost but also when they set up later in the morning. Admittedly, this is an extremely risky gambit and runs the risk of spooking a longbeard. But it's late in the season and frankly, what have you to lose?

Both sportsmen also suggested that hunters use the terrain to enable them to position themselves closer. If you hunt in terrain with any relief in it, you can set up within 30 to 40 yards of a lip of a peak or ridge or even a ditch. If you go afield in the foothills, you can utilize a hump or some other rise to move close. Even in the flatlands and swamps of the country, hunters can use hummocks, small rises, dense creek bottoms, and various forms of vegetation to ease tight enough to a tom to tease him.

Paitzel also proffers another scheme after he has set up near an old monarch.

"Let's say you have heard a tom gobble, but maybe he is only doing so every 30 minutes or so or maybe even more," said Paitzel. "It's getting late in the morning, and frankly you're getting desperate. So quietly get up, move about 30 yards away from the bird, perhaps over a ridge or the other side of a hump, then make some light clucks and yelps.

"Don't wait to hear a gobble. Move as quickly as you can back to your original setup. You had better be fast on that transition because that gobbler could think that hen is leaving and come in quickly.

“If you think a gobbler is too close for you to walk away from him, merely turn your head away from where you think he is, then make some barely audible purrs and clucks. Turn back around, scan the woods, and be ready in case a gobbler comes easing in.”

MORE STRATEGIES

Several years ago, friend and turkey hunting mentor Larry Proffitt showed me another way to tease a tom. Despite my protests, he insisted that we set up on some gobblers an incredible 90 minutes before official sunrise. From an earlier encounter, Larry had determined that a trio of longbeards regularly roosted just under the peak of a hillside and typically pitched down onto an oak flat about 60 yards below.

Sleepy and grumpy, I set up a few feet from Larry on the oak flat. Why, I thought, if the toms were likely to be roosting on the hillside, and likely to fly down to the flat if they were perched in those trees, was it so necessary that we come there so early? We might as well, I wanted to whine, have arisen at 11:00 p.m. and arrived at midnight. but I soon found out why we had slipped into the woods so early.

Not long after we reached the flat, Proffitt began owl hooting, but soon he launched into some of the most muted turkey talk I have ever heard. The turkey sounds he was making, I found out later, were tree pits, also known as roost pitting. I would describe this sound as having elements of both a yelp and a cluck, featuring a little of the sharpness of the former and a little of the flatness of the latter uttered in an almost imperceptible way to the human ear but obviously in a very audible way to the turkey males.

For not long after Larry made his initial few tree pits, one of the gobblers, to my great stupefaction, sounded off in the ebony darkness.

“He’s answering me now, but what I want is for me to answer him when he gobbles,” whispered Proffitt. “Then he’ll be ready to be killed. I’m done calling for a bit until he has gobbled a few more times and I’ve ignored him and caused him to stew about things. Then, he’ll gobble out of frustration, I’ll tree pit, and he’ll go nuts.”

By now I was wide awake, my heart was pounding, and it was still extremely dark. Gradually, though, the sky began to lighten, Larry remained silent, and the gobbler continued his outbursts until the two other toms joined in.

At last, Proffitt answered one of the trio’s gobbles, and the sexual energy of the threesome exploded into a paroxysm of gobbling.

“You’d better start easing your shotgun up to your knee,” Proffitt whispered. “It won’t be long now.”

The time was about 25 minutes before official sunrise, legal shooting time for sure though barely, and I had rarely observed any turkey hit the ground so early on a spring morning. But the longbeard had not read the official sunrise chart, and I harked to the

sounds of heavy wing beats and glimpsed a black shape landing on the hillside about 40 yards away.

In a flash, the gobbler began marching toward us, and I waited until he was 20 yards away and the sun's light had illuminated things just a little more before I shot him. His 1-inch spurs showed him to be a 2-year-old tom, a gobbler I will take any time. Since Proffitt's initial tutoring, I have killed three turkeys by using roost pitting and have found it one of the best ways to tease a tom.

MAE WEST AND TOM TURKEYS

In the 1933 movie classic "She Done Him Wrong," Mae West starred with a very young Cary Grant, and she spoke for the first time the "Why don't you come up sometime and see me?" line. The film's dialogue was so risqué that it was one of the reasons the movie censorship board of the time began enforcing what was known as the Hays Code.

Of course, no one is going to censor your turkey talk if you try to tease a tom into ambling within range of your favorite load of 4s or 6s. In fact, you might just deserve the turkey hunting version of the Oscar.

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