

# The Birds of Autumn

## Fall Turkey Hunting Basics

By Ray Eye

Fall turkey hunting: the sights, sounds and aroma that are but once a year. The beautiful orange and red colors of autumn and the unmistakable sounds of wild turkeys awakening on a frosty morning welcoming a new day. I quickly but quietly move closer to the soft yelping of the large roost of birds.

While listening to a wide range of flock vocalization, I set up and exchanged good mornings with my mouth call. I pulled my gun up to my shoulder as I listened to the last of the birds fly down. As I finished my last series of yelps, I heard the unmistakable crunching sounds of some twenty plus birds in the frosty leaves running toward my set up. I am a fall turkey hunter and have been for some thirty-five plus years and yes, I enjoy each and every season even more than the one before.

Fall hunting will make you a better caller; a better turkey hunter and just maybe, it could make it real difficult for you to decide which you enjoy more, spring or fall. One thing about the fall season is certain for me, hunting and calling fall gobblers is my passion, there is nothing in turkey hunting I enjoy more.

Actually the fall hunt is turkey hunting for real turkeys. Their actions and behavior are typical for 300 days out of a year. Behavior in the mating season is the exception.

Understanding and knowing how to take advantage of the bird's gregarious nature is the first step to success. But always keep in mind that there are no absolutes in turkey hunting, especially in fall flocks.

The important idea to remember is that each bird out there has its place in the pecking order. The hunter who knows how to use that fact to his advantage can have a great hunt in the fall.

During the spring season you usually call from one sex to the other, but in the fall you call from like bird to like bird, such as from poult to poult or tom to tom. (One exception is calling like a hen to regroup a scattered brood.) All, and I mean *all*, types of birds can be called in the fall if you simply speak their language.

## Flock Calling

I like to move and call much as I do in the spring. I'll pick an area that scouting has shown to have a good population, then work the ridges, setting up every few hundred yards or as far away as my last calls may have carried.

The basics are the same: try to set up where your calls can be heard simultaneously in several good areas. Get comfortable and let the woods settle down before you start calling. Start off with soft and short calls in case there's a flock just over the ridge. As time progresses, make your calls more aggressive.

If you get a response, do whatever that turkey is doing but with a little more intensity. If a turkey yelps three times, you yelp five times. If it starts cutting, you cut right back.

As in the spring, you can expect each turkey to respond to calls in different ways. Some open up and come in screaming like kamikazes. Others take their time and come in without muttering a sound, until right on top of you.

If you have some confidence in your location, be prepared to wait forty-five minutes to an hour. Always scan the area thoroughly before getting up quietly and slowly moving to your next calling station.

Keep moving and calling until you either strike birds or run out of daylight. But don't give up. The turkeys have to be somewhere, it can happen at anytime.

## Scatter and Recall

Even though finding and scattering a flock is not my first choice method, it's technique that can't be overlooked. I've used the scatter method when a shot has been missed, when the birds hang up just out of range, or the birds make us.

The key to a good scatter is to get the birds to go in as many different directions as possible. I like to rush the flock barking like a dog, clapping my hands, try to get as close to the center of the flock as possible and watch the direction of flight. The easiest calling tactic is to set up right at the scatter point. I usually don't call until the turkeys begin to recall.

Sometimes the scattered birds will start calling to regroup within a couple of minutes, but sometimes they may not call for an hour or more. If the woods are fairly open and they can see well, they may regroup by sight. Even more disheartening when a scattered flock flies to open pastures gather quickly and leave without making a sound.

Once you get a bird to call you can usually imitate him, only making the sound more pleading. If you're working young birds you can do well with the kee-kee, and you can often get by just whistling it. If you use hen yelps, try a long, lingering, lost call of twenty to thirty yelps.

## **Fall Gobblers**

I've saved the best of the fall season for last: hunting fall gobblers. Some hunters have said it is impossible to call in gobblers that were lacking the passion of the mating season. Those hunters are missing out on turkey hunting's greatest thrill and adventure.

There are really no secrets to calling fall gobblers. The basics are the same as calling young birds or hens. Call gobbler to gobbler and try to break into the existing pecking order as the cocky new kid on the block. Get a bird to respond, imitate his calls with a little more intensity to get him fired up, and you may see things you never expect to see in the fall. I've heard some excited turkeys gobble once and others gobble every step of the way, just as they do in spring.

It's even more common to see toms strutting as they broadcast their roles in the pecking order. Over the years I've seen fall turkeys get so excited that they break into a fight. Remember that gobblers... sometimes call with a little slower rhythm and sometimes-deeper tone than hens. It depends on the excitement level; there are times an excited Tom yelping is difficult to tell from a hen yelping. My favorite tactic, working gobblers off the roost is extremely effective, but you can also do well all through the day by moving and calling.

I seldom intentionally scatter a bachelor flock of fall gobblers. When I have scattered toms, for whatever reason, I've had pretty good success getting them to recall and regroup.

The most important tools hunting fall gobblers are confidence and patience. Even if it takes you some time to call in a fall gobbler, stick with it. Sooner or later you'll be sitting in the frosty, full-colored woods with your heart in your throat as you watch a gobbler flock so excited that the birds are shoving each other back and forth as they come running in with beards swinging.

Experience it once and you'll be hooked on fall turkey hunting for life. That's one of turkey hunting's few certainties.

