

Targeting Fall Gobblers

by Ray Eye

Spring hunting is great, all that gobbling and strutting and all, but to tell you the truth, fall hunting for gobblers is my greatest love, It's the one time of year when turkeys act like real turkeys. They're not breeding or split up. They're in their flocks, gobblers with gobblers, hens with hens and poult, going about their business from day to day.

Given there isn't a great deal of inter-sex interest between turkeys in the autumn, fall calling is about talking from turkey to turkey. To call a hen, you should sound like a hen. And to call and kill a gobbler, you must sound like a gobbler.

This sort of calling is highly demanding. In the spring, a gobbler might overlook an out-of-tune call due to the fever of the breeding urge, but in the fall, there is no urge. It's just day after day looking for food, and sleeping. And without the breeding urge to give hunters an edge, hunters need to fall back on disciplined calling, to sound exactly like a gobbler and say exactly the right thing.

I use the gobbler yelp more than any other turkey sound. The yelp is somewhat longer and slower in rhythm than the hen yelp, but can be fast and loud when excited. Box call slate call and diaphragm all duplicate the gobbler yelp.

No doubt about it: fall calling can be tough, I know; I've been doing it for over 30 years. But I can tell you this: because it's tough, what I call real turkey hunting, because it demands more precision with tone and rhythm in the calling, it will make you a much better caller. And that will make you a much better spring hunter as well.

Whereas in the spring, when all dialogs between turkeys (and hunters and turkeys) have the subtext of sex, in the fall it's all about who's the boss. Listen to turkeys coming off the roost and you'll hear the same things day after day: birds start talking off the roost, then they fly down and spend the first part of the day moments figuring out who's the boss. They're sorting out the social order of the entire flock and they do it through out the year. When it comes time to hunt that's what you work with: it is all about the pecking order.

Scouting

As with spring hunts, I prepare for fall excursions by scouting. Food sources are an especially hot commodity in the fall, find the food source turkeys or using at that time, scout through the hardwoods and along agricultural fields, look for scratching.

I particularly like to hunt gobblers in the fall, do not just settle for any turkey sign look for scratching made by a handful of turkeys, not large family groups, and study each scratching carefully. I look for big tracks and big droppings; There's only one kind of turkey that leaves those.

Once in an area where I know there are gobblers, I turn my attention to roosting. For a

fall hunt, you must get as close as possible to birds on the roost. I mean, 50 to 60 yards. Droppings and a density of feathers under a stand of mature hardwoods indicate a probable roost. Turkeys use the same roost night after night until they change food sources.

Find the food and the roost and you're in business. I also prefer to sit at a distance at dusk and just watch and listen. Roosting fall turkeys can make all the difference in success. Later in the fall with the leaves off the trees, you can hear a long way, much better than in the spring.

I also use an audio enhancement device, like a Walker's Game Ear, because it allows me to hear distinct wing beats. That's important: If you really key into the actual sounds of birds flying up, I mean the actual wing flaps, you can tell the difference between gobblers and hens flying to roost. Hens have fast, lighter wing beats; gobblers sound heavier with much louder flaps.

The Hunt

Just like in the spring, the fall hunt starts early, well before first light. After pinning the gobblers to specific trees, I get in early and sets up tight. In the fall, the tighter the better. In the spring, you can have those gobblers that come hundreds of yards to the call, but that's not likely in the fall. Here, you're going to pique a gobbler's curiosity or challenge his dominance, and to be most effective, you have to be right there.

Set up around 50 or 60 yards from the roost and wait for light. When the birds start talking, talk right back, matching the turkey sound for sound--yelp-to-yelp, cluck to cluck—but increasing in volume and intensity with each exchange. I want to sound like a new upstart turkey in the group, every flock has a leader and usually that leader is the biggest bird. Challenge that bird--and any bird that answers--and the flock will come looking, especially when you're only 50 yards away. That's why I call loud and often, way more than I call in the spring. I want to wreak havoc with the pecking order.

When the birds come into view, fall off the aggressive calling to purring and clucking. "If you watch turkeys get together, they'll usually purr and cluck to signal contentment and that everything's okay. Purring is a visual call, especially in the fall. By that I mean turkeys purr once they've seen each other. I use that to my advantage: When a turkey is just out of view, I purr at him. He thinks a turkey is not only close, but has also seen him. Usually, he'll break and come right in,"

If things don't work off the roost, take your show on the road, slowly. Whereas in the spring, I might go running-and-gunning, in the fall move through the woods almost as if he were still-hunting deer. Call often, but listen just as much, Maybe you'll pick up the sound of yelping bird. Maybe you'll just hear birds feeding through the leaves. Whatever sounds you hear, it's better to hear them before the birds hear you.

If that approach still doesn't pan out, fall back on scouting, do a series of setups through areas that have shown signs of feeding activity. Thirty to forty-five minutes per setup, a creep to the next, and set up again. However at each setup, let the calls fly. Turkeys call

loud in the fall; I've heard hens assembling their brood yelp 40 times straight. If they can do it, I can too, and that includes gobbling.

True, fall gobbling doesn't have the intensity it does in the spring, but gobbling is part of the turkey's vocabulary and has a place year round. In the fall, gobblers use it, and strutting for that matter-- to show dominance within the group; they'll use it off the roost; and they'll use it if they become separated. I have called in entire Gobbler flocks with the gobble, and killed a lot of "fall" Toms, called in with the gobble call.

Putting it All Together

So without the more intense gobbling and strutting of spring, just how much fun can gobbler hunting in the fall be? Well, I can offer one of hundreds of fall Gobbler stories. It was a terrible cold windy morning out and I was supposed to be taking my friend J.B., out for a hunt. But when I went into his room to wake him, J.B. took one look out the window, pulled the covers over his head and rolled over.

So I left him there and went down to a big deep, wide ditch out of the wind. I'd been watching some gobblers use often; especially the huge Cotton woods for roosting. I got out of the truck, loaded up the vest, and grabbed my gun., something I do not get to do much these days.

By the time I slowly and quietly got into position, it was getting close to light, and I could here early morning soft talk and the sound of turkeys shifting in the trees. Slipping below the turkeys in the draw, I worked my way up the wash toward them and at about 60 yards, picked a tree behind a blow-down and settled in.

When the birds started talking, know doubt they were gobblers, I hammered on them with my call to the point where the turkeys and me were going back and forth at full volume. I heard the birds fly down, one by one, and the loud heavy sounds, which mean one thing, big Gobblers. The way they were talking off the roost I could tell that I had definitely gotten under their feathers.

Once they were all on the ground, we were calling back and forth...and I mean hard. Then, before I know it, I look up the ditch and here come two big gobblers out in front of the pack on a dead run. Beards swinging. Bodies rocking back and forth. When I shot the lead bird at about 20 feet, they were still coming strong. Good thing I got him when I did: he weighed 24 pounds, with an 11 1/2-inch beard and 1 1/2-inch spurs.

There's no telling what he would have done to me if I hadn't brought the gun. Just like a turkey; get all mad, run in to fight and whip me all over that ditch, too bad for him he didn't know I had a 12 gauge.

