



Showing remarkable presence of mind, I flung away the non-essential items and fired the 20.
Photo by Phil Burkhouse

LOOKING BACK

By DON R. WEBB, D.D.S.

DURING THE PAST ten years turkey hunting numbers have mushroomed. Books, stories, and articles on turkeys have grown rapidly. Until the 70s, it was not often one could find this type of reading material. Some out-of-print classics were around but were largely unnoticed.

There are probably built-in hazards connected with writing about wild turkeys and the chasing of same. So much has been printed that a new approach to the subject is difficult. Before you realize it, you will have described how you gave a few "seductive yelps." The old boss gobbler came on like a latter day kamikaze pilot and threw leaves in your face as he came to a screeching halt five steps from the muzzle of your trusty turkey eliminator.

Come to think of it — this is one trap which will not catch me! I speak of the "seductive yelp." I'm

not sure I've ever heard one and even more certain none of my sack full of calls has ever emitted one. There are bound to be many other pearls of wisdom and cliches that should be avoided in such writings. However, being too concerned with such trivia would probably take much of the enjoyment out of the whole project anyway.

Any writer worth the powder it would take to blow him up should get the attention of the reader, bring him to an excited pitch and then flashback to more mundane events. Not true in this case. My spine-tingling moments while dealing with the subject at hand were not only sparse but nonexistent when this tale was born.

There is need to flashback at this point though — back to my first exposure to *Meleagris gallopavo*. Surely you will recognize this lofty sounding name for the American wild turkey. And certainly you, like

I, have heard many much more descriptive terms used by friends and acquaintances.

To be perfectly honest (a rare state of affairs for a turkey hunter) the above mentioned "exposure" was hardly the proper word. What really grabbed my attention at the time were black swarms of Mississippi River bottomland mosquitoes and a liberal sprinkling of cottonmouth moccasins. The time in question was an unseasonably warm spring day. If you have not experienced mosquitoes in the mind-boggling numbers to which I refer, then you would not believe an attempt on my part to describe it. If, on the other hand, you are acquainted with such sights and sounds they need no further explaining. Just to keep the record straight — you soon forgot the snakes because the mosquitoes demanded all your attention.

Our state wildlife agency had worked for several years to bring the residue of a native turkey flock to huntable proportions. In the early 50s they felt they could open a short season to allow the harvesting of a few gobblers. The key word here is "few." There had probably not been a wild turkey killed legally or even semi-legally in this state since the late and venerable Tom Turpin roamed the area many years before.

After several two day hunts on two widely divergent wildlife management areas, it was discovered that fourteen gobblers had been taken. It would be interesting to have had the box score on how each of these birds met an untimely death. Surely the fourteen successful gunners would have been happy to relate a blow by blow account of how they called the old boy up with that "seductive yelp." It is even remotely possible that one or two were brought to bag by calling. We'll have to give them all the benefit of the doubt. It will never be known which were bush-whacked, shot off the roost, or just plain stumbled upon while the hunter was wandering around the hardwoods and happened to be hopelessly lost at the time.

Yours truly can speak to this last type of encounter. Having been waging a highly unsuccessful campaign against both the turkeys and mosquitoes, I was headed in the general direction of the car. At the

moment, not being lost, but having just recently recovered from one of the many such episodes of the morning, my mind was on food, shelter from the bugs, and possibly a well earned nap. Knowing, at that time, about as much about turkey hunting as a hog does about astronomy, I was ill-prepared for the huge gobbler that suddenly appeared from behind a tree and dared me to shoot! This thought did occur to me, but being somewhat encumbered with what had seemed to be the necessities of such a hunt, a dove shooting stool and an antique G.I. canvas bag and shotgun, getting off the shot was difficult. Showing remarkable presence of mind, I managed to drop the nonessential items and held on to the gun. As it worked out, it would have been as well to have let the old fowling piece go too. By the time the gun roared (if a model 12 20 gauge can roar), the turkey might possibly have been able to hear it if his wings were not muffling the sound at the time.

Had my shot been quick and sure, it would have been a toss-up

whether I left the woods with the gobbler or the mosquitoes carried him away into the swamp. Probably the only useful bit of turkey hunting lore that had not escaped me on this maiden voyage was that this is a one-person activity. Recovering my gear but not my damaged pride, it did seem appropriate to feel grateful not to have had an eyewitness to the fiasco. Up to this point some of my associates had witnessed misses at quail, doves, ducks, geese and a deer or two. But to have something as awe-inspiring as a full grown turkey gobbler escape without a scratch was a bit much.

Being of strong heart and weak mind, I dove into the swamp again, shutting out all thoughts of mosquitoes and snakes.

Finally arriving at the car and having rehearsed all possible excuses to tell my buddies who were scattered about the woods, I was due for one more shock. One of these stalwarts had managed to locate the starting point before I did. There he was — lolling beside the car with a big turkey at his feet and an even bigger grin (spelled SMIRK) on his face.

Listening to the exploits of a first time turkey hunter who has been successful is bad, but to be a captive audience within thirty minutes after having been nearly trampled by a turkey yourself is a fate worse than death!

Being of strong heart and weak mind I gamely dove into the woods again, determined to tag one of those magnificent birds. The thought of the mosquitoes, snakes, water, and other inconveniences paled compared to hearing the replays of my friend's prowess.

This is the place where any self-respecting gobbler hunter would write a glowing account about how they sallied forth and, with a great display of woodsmanship and unerring accuracy, dispatched an even bigger bird than Fred had bagged. Not this time. What I found was the mother lode of the mosquito population, some sloughs that always managed to be between me and where I thought the turkeys had to be, and thickets a cape buffalo

would cull. What I lost was me. That's not so strange since it is infinitely easier to lose yourself in a 12,000 acre river bottom than in a woods lot after grey squirrels or in a series of sedge and bean fields hunting quail. At least in the latter instance your bird dogs will eventually find the car for you. Fortunately, few hunters stay lost for long. Such was true in my case and darkness and I arrived at home plate at about the same time. There would be little to be gained by telling you how, by cool reasoning, I returned to civilization. You would probably surmise that what got me out was hearing the traffic on a main road after having wandered within earshot. So be it.

What has been recounted hardly qualifies as a gem in the annals of turkey hunting. Actually this saga should have ended here, but all hunters ooze confidence and optimism. Clearly next year would see that ten inch beard go to the wall.

More than thirty years have come and gone since this first turkey hunt. In spite of the various drawbacks encountered then, I was solidly hooked. Further, it pleases me to say that my share of "truly spine-tingling moments" have come, and yes, that ten inch plus beard is actually on my den wall, though not that very next year. And a sprinkling of some lesser lengths don't look half bad.

I once accused Tom Kelly, the sage of South Alabama, of causing me to "lose a crop" because of reading his turkey hunting books and stories. He denied any guilt by saying, "If you did, it was only because you were predisposed." And honest evaluation tends to show he was right about this flaw in my character.

My long-standing advice to those who ask me about whether or not to start hunting turkeys is, "Are you reasonably happy not hunting them?" If the answer is "Yes," then a simple "Leave well enough alone" is my reply. Otherwise you are in danger of losing all of that wonderful springtime once devoted to fishing, golf, gardening, yard work, and all other worthwhile avocations. However, if one persists in a non-turkey hunting way of life, he misses out on one of the most fascinating, exciting, yet frustrating pursuit known to man or woman.

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