

*The bird that makes a thousand hearts race  
each spring. The sound of a thundering gobble  
and the sight of a strutting tom will turn your  
knees weak and your palms sweaty.*



**GETTING STARTED**  
HOW TO BEGIN ENJOYING OKLAHOMA'S WOODS, FIELDS AND WATERS

# TURKEY HUNTING

BY COLIN BERG





As the darkness turned to light, the woods began to come alive around me. I heard an owl hoot in the distance and watched motionlessly as a squirrel jumped from tree limb to tree limb. A few

moments later I felt the wind from a cardinal's wings as it nearly landed on my head.

Out of a pale sky came the faint gobble of a tom turkey. Opening day of my first turkey season was

shaping up to be an unforgettable experience.

Although it was my first turkey hunt, I was confident I could call an old tom within shotgun range. Two months before the season opener I purchased a box call, two mouth calls and an instructional cassette tape and then practiced while driving to and from school. It took me about one month to get used to the mouth call. In fact, I nearly gagged the first time I tried to use it. By opening day, I could duplicate nearly every call on the tape.

I knew the old tom would be roosted somewhere along the creek bottom just as he had for three weeks before the season. The old gobbler continued to gobble as I eased my way down the creek bank. As I crept closer, I realized he was on the edge of the property.

I was within 100 yards of the old bird when I realized I'd better call before he flew down and headed the wrong direction. I stuck the mouth call in and blew, but it didn't make a sound. I blew again and again with no response from the call. As I reached for my box call, I heard the tom fly from his roost to a clearing just 80 yards from my location. His beard swung from side to side as he strutted back and forth in the clearing.

I was struggling to get the box call out of my pocket when I heard a hen begin to yelp just behind me. It wasn't until I had been turkey hunting for a couple of years that I realized just how lucky I was to have a real hen between me and that old tom. In the heat of the moment, however, I thought I should do my

*Success! With a few basic pieces of gear, you too can call a tom into shotgun range. Once you do, you'll know why so many people are hooked on the sport.*



NELS HOEFELD



own calling. The first note from my box call sounded like someone had a turkey by the throat. To my surprise the old tom gobbled not just once, but three times. My heart nearly leapt out my chest. I raised my dad's 16-gauge Ithaca and aimed toward the sound.

The old tom was getting closer, but so was that hen. I could hear her coming in the dried leaves directly behind me. She stopped and yelped softly as if looking for the other hen. This time the old tom gobbled and began running straight for the hen. If he continued on his selected path, he would run within five yards of my gun barrel. As he approached, I faintly heard the landowner say, "When he stops, shoot him."

Evidently the hen heard him speak and she began to pert and putt just as the cassette said an alert turkey would do. The tom slammed on the brakes when he heard her erratic putting.

Boom!!!

Turkeys took flight in all directions after the shot. At that point, I realized there had been turkeys all around us. I could hear something rolling in the leaves in the direction of the old tom.

Did I get him?

"You got him all right," the landowner bellowed! "I've never experienced anything like that."

The old tom had a 9 1/2-inch beard, 3/4 inch spurs and weighed just under 20 pounds. Since that first turkey hunt, I have harvested a number of birds and have called several birds in for other first-time turkey hunters, but it wasn't always so easy. In fact, it took me two more springs to harvest another bird.

Each spring, as I sit in the woods, I relive hunts from years

## PATTERN TESTING YOUR SHOTGUN

Since turkeys are very large birds, you need to be able to hit the bird in the head and neck with a lethal amount of shot. All shotguns pattern differently with different loads so before heading afield you need to pattern your shotgun with your selected hunting load.

### Steps to pattern test your shotgun:

1. Purchase a box of shells.
2. Draw or purchase several scale-size turkey targets.
3. Travel to a shooting range or find a safe area to pattern your gun.
4. Pin a target up at designated yardage. (Be sure to mark the yardage on the target in the upper corner. A 1/4-inch sheet of plywood can be used to pin your target on.)
4. Shoot at the head and neck of the target and count the pellet holes in the lethal area of the bird (head & neck). A minimum of seven pellets should strike the target.
5. Follow steps 3-4 at select yardage (20, 30 and 40 yards).
6. If you are not satisfied with the performance of your selected load, try a different load until you find one which patterns well out of your shotgun.



past. My first hunt was memorable, but I vividly remember the hunt in which a doe calmly browsed just inches away from my ground blind, or the hunt when a squirrel ran across my legs, and the hunt when a coyote ran in and grabbed my decoy.

Many of these experiences have been shared while hunting with friends I introduced to the sport of turkey hunting.

Turkey hunting opportunities abound across the state, and with a little practice, you can enjoy experiences such as these. If you want to get started turkey hunting, there are a few things you should know.

## TURKEY IDENTIFICATION

When I talk about turkey hunting, I am referring to spring turkey

season. You can hunt turkeys in the fall, but once you hear a tom gobble on an early spring morning you will quickly fall in love with spring turkey hunting.

During the fall you can harvest either a hen or a tom in a few counties, but during the spring you can only harvest males, called toms or gobblers. According to the *Oklahoma Hunting Regulations*, a tom turkey is any bearded turkey regardless of sex. It is not uncommon for hens to have beards, and bearded hens can legally be harvested.

## TURKEY CALLS

The best call for a beginner is a box call. With a little practice, you can quickly learn to imitate a variety of turkey calls with this call (yelps, clucks, purrs, cackles etc.). Another perfect call for beginners is





*Calling a gobbler in for your son is perhaps one of the greatest events in a seasoned hunter's life. Getting to this point takes teaching, patience and practice – all of which provide quality time together for both father and son.*



Slate Call

the push button call. These calls can be attached to your gun with some tape, and with a little practice you can produce convincing yelps, purrs and clucks.

Some hunters prefer to use a slate or glass call. This call consists of a striker and slate or glass base. Calls are made by scratching the base with striker. Every call comes with specific directions and when followed properly, beginners can effectively use this call in a couple of short practice sessions.

Mouth calls are the most difficult to use. The first few times I tried to blow my call on opening morning resulted in silence. This

commonly happens to hunters just getting used to a mouth call.

Avid turkey hunters generally prefer a mouth call because they can call without making any noticeable movement. A variety of calls can be made with a mouth call, but it could take months for you to get used to holding the call against the roof of your mouth. If you want to use a mouth call, you need to begin practicing months before the season begins.

I highly recommend purchasing an instructional tape and practice duplicating the calls before you head afield. If you practice a little every day for two months, you will



Box Call



Mouth Call



have the basic calls down before opening day.

Every time you go turkey hunting you will encounter a different calling situation. I still learn something every time I am in the field. That is one of the reasons why I love to turkey hunt.

I think you will find turkey hunting to be a challenging, exciting, unforgettable and addictive sport. Remember, the most enjoyable times will be those spent with a friend or relative so always hunt with someone else. If you start now, you will be ready for the general spring turkey opener on April 6. ♣

## BASIC EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

Turkey hunting is relatively inexpensive and if you are able to borrow a shotgun from a friend or relative you can get started for even less. The following is a list of essential basic turkey hunting equipment:

(Single Shot) 12 gauge Shotgun w/ full Choke.....	\$70.00
<i>(or \$0 if borrowed)</i>	
Camouflage Pants .....	\$25.00
Camouflage Shirt.....	\$25.00
Turkey Permit .....	\$7.75
Annual Hunting License.....	\$12.50
<i>(Under 16 No annual license required)</i>	
Box Call.....	\$15.00
Shells .....	\$8.00
<i>(Shot Size 2,4,6)</i>	
Hunter Orange Tape .....	\$1.00
Camouflage Headnet and Gloves.....	\$7.00
Hunter Education Course.....	(Free)
<b>Total .....</b>	<b>\$88.75 to \$171.25</b>

## TURKEY HUNTING SAFETY

The key to all good hunting trips is safety. In most cases, spring turkey hunting involves imitating a hen's calls. This is why it is very important that you follow the following 10 safe turkey hunting tips:

1. Never stalk turkeys.
2. Don't wear anything with white, red or blue (the colors of a tom turkey's head).
3. If you use a decoy, never sit directly in line with the decoy and place some cover between you and the decoy.
4. Hunter orange tape should be placed around the tree against which you are sitting.
5. Some hunters gobble at birds, but this is not safe in the spring since an unsafe hunter could mistake you for a gobbler.
6. If a hunter walks into your area, let him or her know you are there by yelling. Don't wave your arms, because they could mistake you for a bird.
7. Never shoot at an unidentified target.
8. Always know what lies beyond your target.
9. When transporting decoys, carry them in a sack or wrap them in hunter orange.
10. Always hunt with a buddy, or be sure someone knows where you are and when you plan to return.

Turkey hunting accidents are uncommon, but those that occur could be avoided by simply following these safe hunting tips. Beginning hunters should take a hunter safety course before heading afield. See a copy of the *Oklahoma Hunting Regulations* for complete information on hunter safety requirements. Call 405/521-4650 to receive information about hunter education courses scheduled near you.

### COMMON QUESTIONS ASKED ABOUT TURKEY ID:

Q. What if I see a red head? Should I shoot?

A. No! Remember the only way you can be sure you are shooting a legal turkey is if you see the bird's beard.

Q. Can I shoot at a bird if I see it fanned out and it is in the strutting position?

A. You should not take this shot unless you can see the bird's beard. Although it is rare to see a hen fan out and strut, I have witnessed hens in half-strut. To ensure a quick, humane kill, it is also best if you wait until the bird's head and neck are exposed.

Q. Should you shoot a bird that is gobbling?

A. No. I have never witnessed a hen gobbling, but I almost shot a hen once when I thought it was the bird I heard gobble. When the tom that actually made the noise appeared from behind her, I was relieved I had not pulled the trigger.



# TALKIN' TURKEY

*As Oklahoma's turkey flocks continue to grow, public land hunters are enjoying more opportunities than ever before. Here are some of the best places to "gobble" up some good hunting this spring.*

BY BRYAN HENDRICKS

Next to actually bagging a bird, some folks say the hardest thing about turkey hunting is finding a place to hunt.

That may be true in some places, but not in Oklahoma. We have plenty of birds, and we also have some of the nation's finest public turkey hunting on the multitude of wildlife management areas scattered across the state. Managed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, these WMAs offer a wide array of habitats in which hunters can pursue the abundant Rio Grande subspecies, as well as the wily and ever-popular eastern subspecies.

Of course, there's a fair amount of competition on the WMAs, but that's to be expected on areas where the hunting is so good. Otherwise folks wouldn't keep coming back season after season. With a little homework, you can find any kind of hunting experience you desire on one of Oklahoma's wildlife management areas. Chances are, you'll find it close to home.

## THE EASTERN WILD TURKEY

After suffering some lean years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the eastern wild turkey has mounted a

remarkable comeback in the southeastern part of the state, generating considerable excitement among hunters in that region. Combine the comraderie of hunting with good friends with the thrill of matching wits with a wary eastern turkey, and you've got the fixins for a great springtime trip to southeast Oklahoma.

During the 1998 winter turkey surveys conducted by the Wildlife Department, biologists indexed eastern wild turkey populations in the southeastern counties at nearly 2,250 birds. To provide additional opportunities for hunters in this region, the Wildlife Department has lengthened the spring season to 21 days, compared to 16 last year.

"Although this area was hit hard by drought and forest fires, last summer's harsh conditions were actually beneficial for turkeys," said Bill Dinkines, southeast regional wildlife supervisor for the Wildlife Department. "Poult were fairly well developed by the time the drought arrived, and dry conditions also facilitated a massive grasshopper hatch that provided plenty of food for poult and adult birds alike.

"I think the entire southeast in general is going to be good," Dink-



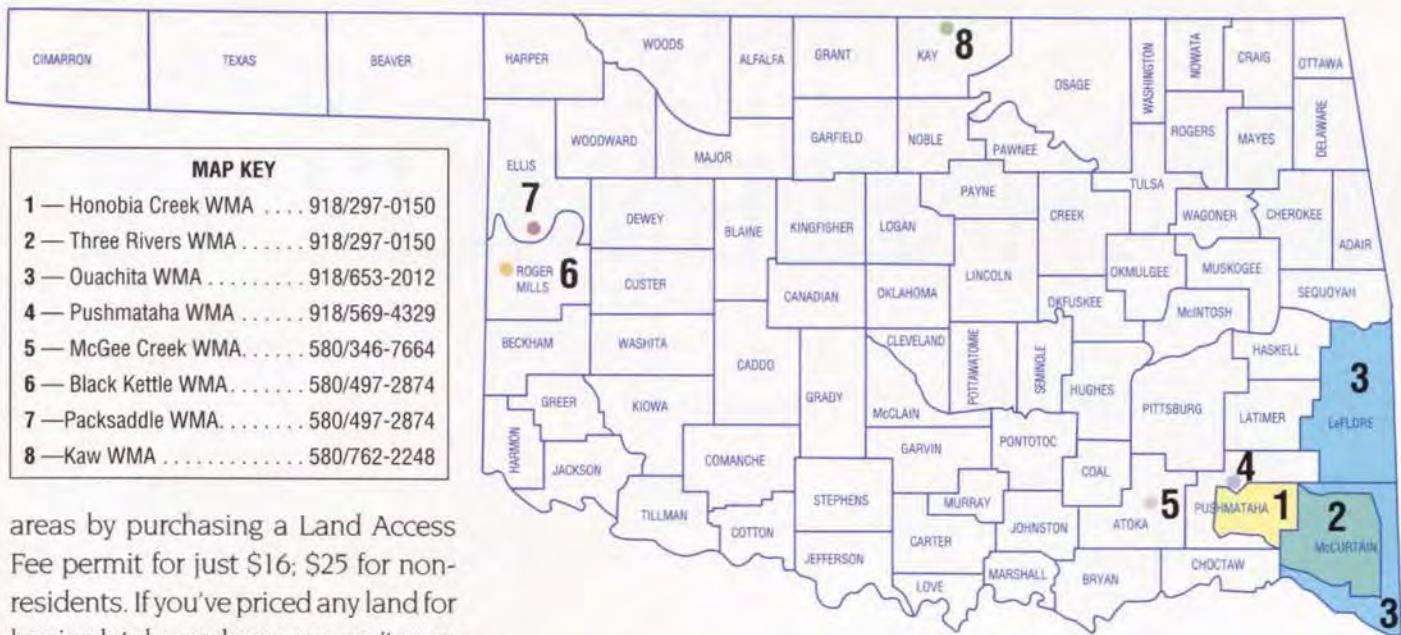
ines added. "We've been lucky to have good reproduction and good survival of young birds the last several years. With restrictive bag limits, that translates into a lot of older birds."

One of the most attractive features about the southeast region is its vast amount of public hunting land. Two of the best areas, without question, are **Honobia Creek** and **Three Rivers wildlife management areas**, which comprise 725,000 acres of outstanding eastern wild turkey habitat.

Owned by the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, Honobia Creek WMA covers 275,000 rugged acres, primarily in Pushmataha County, that cover a series of ridges and hollows running east-west roughly from Octavia to Rattan. Three Rivers WMA, owned by Weyerhaeuser Co., encompasses 450,000 acres in McCurtain Co. Both areas are managed by the Wildlife Department under cooperative agreements with the two landowners to provide continued public access to these priceless hunting grounds.

If you're an Oklahoma resident, you can enjoy unlimited access to both

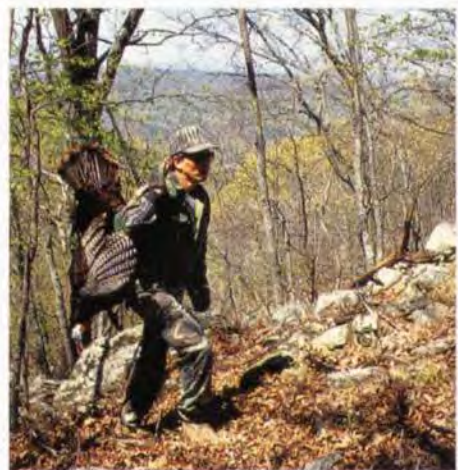




areas by purchasing a Land Access Fee permit for just \$16; \$25 for non-residents. If you've priced any land for leasing lately, you know you can't even come close to touching that price in the private sector.

Of course, these areas contain the most mountainous, most rugged country in the state. You have to work just to get in position to harvest a bird here, and the ultra-wary eastern wild turkey won't give you any breaks. On the other hand, a successful hunt in these areas requires supreme woodsman skills, and a bird taken here is the mark of an expert.

In addition to those areas, hunters also can enjoy fine turkey hunting at



The rugged mountains of southeast Oklahoma are home to two huge public hunting areas – Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs, both of which offer good opportunities to harvest a wary Eastern wild turkey.

**Ouachita WMA** (323,263 acres), **Pushmataha WMA** (18,200 acres), and **McGee Creek WMA** (10,000 acres).

**RIO GRANDE WILD TURKEYS**

Estimated at more than 62,000 during the 1998 winter turkey survey, the Rio Grande subspecies is Oklahoma's most abundant and widely distributed turkey. Like their eastern brethren, Oklahoma's "Rios" enjoyed excellent reproduction and recruitment of younger birds into the flock last year, as well as excellent carryover of mature birds. If early forecasts hold true, Rod Smith, southwest region wildlife supervisor for the Department, said that turkey hunters can expect excellent prospects this spring.

For total numbers, **Black Kettle WMA** led the state's public hunting areas last year with a total harvest of 161 birds. Covering more than 30,000 acres, Black Kettle is actually a patchwork of individual parcels scattered over a wide area within the Black Kettle National Grassland. The terrain consists of low, rolling hills exhibiting a mixture of grasslands and shinnery oak that provide excellent turkey habi-

tat. Creek bottoms are forested with cottonwoods and other bottomland hardwood species that provide excellent roosting cover.

Another good area is **Packsaddle WMA** (14,500 acres). It's similar to Black Kettle except that it covers one large, contiguous parcel. Interior access is limited to walk-in traffic only, so bagging a bird here takes a little extra work.

If you're looking for a place to hunt turkeys in northeastern Oklahoma, try **Kaw WMA** (16,254 acres), where hunters bagged 36 turkeys last year.

Remember, turkeys harvested west of I-35 will not be checked at hunter check stations, but turkeys harvested east of I-35 must be checked at the nearest check station.

To find a spot near you, consult the *Oklahoma Wildlife Management Areas* atlas. It can be purchased for \$10 at one of the Department's offices, or you can purchase it through the Outdoor Store on page 46.

Wherever you decide to hunt this spring, you should expect to enjoy some excellent hunting. The only crime would be not trying. ■