



TACTICS THAT TAKE THE TOUGH ONES

by Chris Tambe

Most experienced turkey hunters realize that not all gobblers are created equal...especially the tom that's survived a hunting season or two. In my experience, both with eastern and western turkey hunting, dealing with an "experienced" turkey requires a little extra effort and, sometimes, advanced tactics to hang the tough ones on the lodge pole. I'll attempt to outline a few tricks that may have given me an edge over my 30-plus years chasing longbeards around the woods.

One simple thing that's been instrumental, especially back east, is good camo. How many times have you been sitting, gun up, at the base of a tree with a tom roaring at you just out of range, only to have it suddenly shut up and disappear without a trace? This behavior can be the result of many factors, but one thing that I know has caused it was simply the bird seeing an outline or otherwise picking Mr. Hunter out of the surroundings. It just silently slipped away, maybe putting a tree between us and, decoys or not, we're left sitting there wondering what the hell just happened. We try a call or two, but the only response is the silence of defeat.

If I'd had 3-D camo back in the early 70's when I first started hunting turkeys in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia, many a longbeard would have bitten the dust. I'm not saying good conventional camo doesn't work — sure it does. But when it comes to coaxing a savvy survivor into gun or bow range, looking like a bush has helped me a lot. I've even gotten away with mistakes like small movements and still walked out of the woods with the old boy over my shoulder.

Another tactic that I know makes a huge difference on older birds is accurate calling and using appropriate calls for the situation. The best way to learn turkey talk is to spend a lot of time in the woods with the genuine article, even before or after the season. Listen to how they communicate, especially the subtle quiet calls that they make to each other all day as they go about their daily routine of feeding, breeding or whatever. Mastering the little feeding purrs, clucks and super soft yelps is an extremely valuable skill when attempting to convince a wary tom you're the real

thing. As far as I'm concerned loud yelping after you locate a gobbler is just not needed unless it is half-mile away or so, then you better be heading in its direction anyway. If he hears you and is interested, you'll know it. Often in my experience, just a few soft yelps and some "come get me clucks" is all you need to get him into range, especially when using decoys.

I prefer almost exclusively mouth calls myself, but there are plenty of hand-operated calls that work equally well in skilled hands. Of course, the ability to use a mouth call gives you the distinct advantage of being able to make another call to "seal the deal" when the tom is in sight and you're attempting to remain frozen in an exposed shooting position.

Though sometimes easier said than done in actual hunting situations, making yourself available to a tom without spooking it is an invaluable tactic in the woods. What I mean here is to be able get yourself in a position where there's a good chance the tom will come to you. Although I have called them across rivers, up and down brushy mountains and across canyons, most of the time a mature tom will only come to you when it's convenient for him to do so. There are exceptions of course, but as a general rule of thumb this is true...especially with a older bird. They tend to avoid dark thickets and brush and will quite often get to where they want to be then just stand there and gobble, waiting for the calling hen to come to him as he expects. And, if this goes on for awhile and the hen doesn't show up in a reasonable amount of time, the tom simply shuts up and disappears.

When you've located a tom and it appears hot, try to create a "level playing field" by setting up in a spot where you judge he'll feel safe and stroll on in. If you're set up in a small meadow and a tom is sounding off 200 yards above with a belt of timber between you, do you think it will come running down the hill in a flash to check you out? Maybe, maybe not. Most likely an experienced bird will not. My answer in this situation would be to move (without being seen, of course) up to the same level or slightly above the tom. The ability to get close to a gobbling turkey unseen and unheard, then employing soft, subtle calls, maybe just raking the leaves to mimic a feeding hen, is exactly the sort of tactic that separates the fellow walking back down the hill with a limbhanger over his shoulder from the immobile throng below cranking away incessantly on loud box calls.

Of course, the "X factor" is the unpredictable nature of the wild turkey itself. You never really know what they're going to do — that's why it's called hunting. Case in point, a friend and I encountered one of these contrary gobblers last spring. He was a wary old survivor that did everything exactly opposite of what you'd expect.

We'd located this bird, along with some hens and a jake on their way to roost the evening before and, rather than push it and chance getting busted, we backed off with a good idea of where they'd be in the morning. We were set up well before daybreak on the edge of an old clearcut below the timbered ridge where the birds were roosted. The morning turned

out to be cloudy and a misting rain fell from time to time, inconvenient but not too heavy to prevent hunting. The turkeys stayed in the trees for long past daylight and finally the hens started flying down, their cackles echoing across the bowl. It's always one of turkey hunting's most rewarding moments to witness a classic flydown.

Soon after the hens hit the ground, the toms followed and, while we saw the jake land near to hens, the big boy dropped unseen from his tree. It's cool, we thought. We had decoys out and were thinking he'd show up soon and that would be that. Not so.

It appeared the jake and the hens assembled together, but the big fella had a different plan. As soon as that tom hit the ground it started heading up a steep thick timber-covered ridge. The next time we heard him gobble, it sounded like it was a quarter mile away. Just goes to show, real hens don't necessarily mean the old tom is going to stick around and play. After a quick parlay we decided to go after it and see where it was going, as it definitely had a place it wanted to be.

We climbed the ridge and found ourselves on an old logging road that ran along the ridge, going who knows where. I made a quick loud locator yelp to try to hear where the bird went. Sure enough, he sounded off probably a quarter mile away... and still moving. After calling and chasing this bird for at least a mile we finally got to within several hundred yards of the answering tom and realized it went into a thick 20 foot-tall older clearcut well-stocked with Doug fir, tamarack and Ponderosa pine. This choice of habitat selection baffled me as it had all the ingredients turkeys generally tend to avoid, but that's where it went and continued to answer my soft yelps from within.

We ended up skirting around to the top end of the thicket and called that old bird to where the short timber gave way to a scrap of meadow and an old road. We had a decoy tempting him to step into the open and solid rests (and concealment) on old stumps just across the road. Wary to the last, this grizzled warrior got just close enough to peek around one of the little planter pines and, as is often the case with experienced gobblers, only presented a momentary opportunity before starting to duck back into his fortress of timber. My old 870 Special Field spoke and a hot load of 5's brought down the curtain on the final act of this play. So there's another mini-lesson: be ready to shoot quickly — it may be all you get.

The morning's adventure turned out to be as unusual a hunt as I've ever experienced. The tom's coloration was that of a pure Eastern gobbler and his impressive spurs told us he'd been fooling hunters for at least three years. We took a knee and a thankful moment to honor him (and Him) for the privilege being in the glorious turkey woods of Idaho this fine spring day.