

# Fishing & Hunting

By Richard Seale



## An unusual realized success and a hopeful coming success

The North Carolina spring Wild Turkey season ended on May 8. As usual, there are always new things to learn about techniques and the wildlife creatures involved. This year's "lessons" included hunting over winter wheat and the innuendos of hunting wild turkeys with beards.

Eastern NC farmers seem to have trouble making a profit from crops of winter wheat. I do not have all the details of this situation properly defined, but generally the yield does not justify the effort and costs. Continuing poor results mean farmers often skip, going for a two-year, three-crop rotation of soybeans, corn and winter wheat. Up until this year, none of my turkey hunts have been at a winter wheat field. My hunts have been in the woods, along the edges of cattle grazing lands, fields left fallow or fields with corn or bean stubble.

Last fall, winter wheat was planted in the fields around which I have had good hunting success in past years. I prepared blind sites at the edge of those fields. In the early spring the wheat stayed low. In March, the farmer gave the wheat a stiff shot of liquid nitrogen fertilizer. It is my guess the wet spring we had, combined with the nitrogen, made the wheat stalks jump up significantly in height. When regular turkey season opened on April 10, I found that the wheat was tall enough that turkeys that might have come into the field to feed on bugs were hidden in the tall wheat foliage. My blind setup sites that had brought turkeys to me in the past produced no turkeys—and my newly learned lesson was that tall winter wheat can be a real problem for a successful turkey hunt.

In the last week of the season, I still had not had a gobbler come into range. Three-quarters of the season had slipped by before I finally had a chance to set up a blind on a farm lane away from the wheat fields. My calling did bring in some hens, but long beard gobblers did not show up. The only gobblers I heard were very far off, but it still was fun to have hens coming to decoys that were just five yards from me. Sitting very still became a real challenge with a wary bird that nearby. For a couple of days in a row, hens had come into the decoys and spent as much as 10 minutes feeding right next to the decoys, actually bumping bodies. I felt certain a gobbler would show up.

I set a square blind at a 45-degree angle so the viewing/shooting windows had good vision down both lane directions; however, the corner fabric created an area of blocked view directly in front of me. This came into play a couple of mornings later: I had been gently yelping for a while when a good-sized turkey jumped across the drainage ditch and started walking down the lane to my decoys. Her greyish head colors told me it was a hen. I let her walk toward me, hoping she would be a live decoy and bring a nice gobbler to me. Since she was acting quite skittish, I pulled my cap down low to my eyes and kept my head down. I could occasionally see just the top of the bird's head, and as it got right up to my hen decoy it entered the right side of the blocked vision area. Nothing happened for probably five minutes. I could hear the bird, but could see nothing. Suddenly, a bird with a small beard came out of the left side of the blocked vision area. How it got there, I had no idea. Since the season was running out on me, I figured I would harvest this immature male, called a jake, based on the beard. At least that

would give me some good eating turkey meals. Quickly, due to the closeness of the bird, I aimed and fired my shotgun with a head/neck target point to prevent damage to the turkey's breast meat. The bird flopped down out of sight into a drainage ditch. I had not noticed where the hen had gone when I shot.

I got out of the blind and went to where the bird had gone into the ditch and reached down and picked up the dead bird by its legs. I immediately noted there were no spurs on the legs. Male birds have hard sharp spikes on the back of their ankles that are used as weapons against other male birds in the mating rituals—in effect, turkey "cock fights." Puzzled with this fact, I spread out the fan of the tail feathers and discovered the feathers were

much shorter than those of the gobblers I had harvested in past years. Further, the shorter feathers made a concentric, evenly long feathered fan. Jakes have a tiered tail feather pattern of four shorter feathers on each outer side and four to six longer feathers in the middle of the tail fan. This analysis of facts led me to the conclusion that I had harvested a bearded hen. I have never seen one before. After I sent cell phone photos to several turkey experts, their responses confirmed I had indeed harvested a legal "bearded hen." So my turkey season had been successful but in a most unusual way. It is my hope to find some accurate information about bearded hen turkey biology.

Our local fishing family out on the osprey nest has been hunkered down for almost four weeks as I write this. The change in the activities of the birds clearly indicates they are tending eggs. We are hopeful their work will be successful and soon osprey chicks will hatch. We should be able to discern when this happens since the adult birds will again change their daily patterns.

**Freedom is not free.** As I write these articles, I am reminded of the many American service personnel whose lives were lost or changed in conflicts around the world and through the years. I am saddened that they did not have the opportunities for outdoor adventures with friends and family like I have had. With a turn of my head, my eyes can see photos of my 19-year-old Uncle Roy Nilsen and the ship he and 101 others went down with in less than a minute, the US Coast Guard Cutter *Escanaba*. That happened off of Greenland on June 13, 1943, while on WWII convoy duty. He and his twin were the first members of my mother's Norwegian immigrant family siblings to be born in America. Memorial Day, which kicks off the summer season, was approaching as I was writing this article. Even though we will have passed that recognition day when you are reading this, I invite you to still take a moment to give thanks for the blessings of our American freedoms. And it's always appropriate to take the opportunity to say a hearty "Thanks!" to our fellow Americans who have preserved these freedoms for us with their last full measures of devotion. Painfully and sadly, our freedoms are not free.



Realistic decoys showing jake with beard and hen coloration differences.—Photo by Richard Seale