

Fishing & Hunting

By Richard Seale



April in North Carolina is a month with many things on the move. New leaves are sprouting on everything. First light and sunrise are getting earlier. Mosquitoes and other bugs emerge in growing numbers. Farmers are putting in long hours discing, cultivating and seeding fields. And, as previously written, the NC 2022 Wild Turkey seasons open.

In the pre-season, turkeys were being seen on our Beaufort County farm daily so I figured I would hunt that property first. Several gobblers were sounding off after first light, indicating they still were in their overnight roosting trees but before fly-down. Gobblers do this to start their day of seeking hens with which to mate. Wild turkeys have the unusual protocol that gobblers sound off to tell the hens where they are, and hens are supposed to respond with yelping and then move toward the gobblers. A pre-fly-down gobbler that generates a hen's yelp response gives the gobbler a pretty accurate idea from which direction and distance a receptive hen should be coming to him.

Wild turkeys seem to have an unusually good sense of echolocation. When a gobbler gets a hen's yelp response, he often flies down to ground in that general direction. Sometimes he starts to move toward where he thinks the hen is. To partake in all this pre-dawn turkey talk is a key element of turkey hunting. However, it requires being in the woods well before first light of any kind. So my days started with a 4 a.m. alarm and walk to my hunting site in the dark. Besides great hearing, wild turkeys have exceptionally keen vision. Since they are up in trees overnight, they have the advantage of long distance surveillance when first light starts to occur. In the first few weeks of the NC season, sunrise is around 6:15 a.m., so first light is about 5:45. That means you are walking at least 300 yards to your hunting site. You will be toting a fair collection of weighty and bulky gear and a gun. The turkey's sharp eyesight predicates this be done with no flashlight. Your walk and setup need to be finished, and you need to be ready to hunt by no later than 5:30 a.m.

In the first two morning hunts, I did have hens respond to my yelps and walk through my decoys—so that was fun. I did hear gobblers call, but only from very far off. I did try to yelp back to gobblers but it was windy so I guess my replies were lost in the other sounds of the waking day. The fact was no gobblers were coming to my calls nor getting within my preferred shotgun range of 50 yards or less.

At last, on April 13, a gobbler started communicating with me 15 minutes before sunrise. The wind was dead calm so his gobbles carried and so did my slate call hen yelp replies. My yelps to his gobblers made him gobble back every time, so we had an active conversation going on. This is certainly the most exciting aspect of hunting wild turkeys.

The best I could tell, his gobbles were coming from a patch of woods more than 600 yards to the north of me. Between us was a 25-acre, recently plowed and wide open field. Getting him to cross that open field would not be easy.

Turkeys know they are targets for predators out in such open conditions. Remember, the gobbler is expecting the hen to be coming to him. His echolocation skills have provided him with a very good sense of place where he ought to physically see the hen. His keen eyesight aids in that. Any movement on a hunter's part is usually detected by the already suspicious gobbler. Gobblers are notorious at

“hanging up” at about 80 yards from where a hunter is, but where there is no real hen for him to see. My calling would have to be reasonably good for a long time to get him across that open field and into gun range. My expectation was for a long morning hunt with a high probability the gobbler would manage to find other hens of interest before reaching me. The good news was he still was answering my yelps with gobbles. More importantly, the sounds seemed to be coming closer and crossing the field. His route was obscured from my vision by a bunch of vines and small trees along a ditch. Seeing him was impossible and any movement on my part was not a good idea.

At about quarter to 7, he was sounding ever closer, but he then ceased gobbling. Banking on past hunting experiences, I hoped he had decided to check out my decoys and was coming at a run. I got my gun ready and watched the area around the decoys. All was quiet. From my right, suddenly he quietly burst into my limited view and then into gun range. He was headed for the jake decoy for a battle to teach this interloper to stay clear of his harem of hens.

His track was right between me and the decoy, making a shot impossible since it would destroy the decoy. He gobbled and strutted as a warning to the jake. Anxiously, I had my gun follow his motion. I knew my movements risked detection. My concern was he would somehow smell a rat and zoom off. Long seconds ticked by slowly. After a quick fly-up attack at the jake with his spurs slashing the decoy and making very audible sounds, he made a running circle to the left of the decoy. He was ready for another attack—but his change in position gave me a clear shot relative to the decoy, which I took. The single shot to his head and neck put him motionless on the ground, where he stayed.

As I retrieved him, I saw his head and feather colors were spectacular. The white top of his head contrasted sharply with the vibrant blue of the sides of his head and the red of his neck. The morning sun made his body feathers iridescent green, orange and bronze. A successful turkey hunt so soon after my meeting with Tom Kelly the week before made this a special turkey harvest to me. On future evenings in front of a fire I will relive this hunt many times over. It qualifies as a great April 2022 memory.

Black bears routinely share the farm with us. For reasons unknown, they love to destroy fabric blinds. Being that they are nocturnal, we seldom go eyeball to



Fabric turkey blind destroyed by bears in Beaufort County, NC

—Photo by Richard Seale

eyeball with these critters; however, I have taken daytime photos of them. Mostly we know we are not alone due to fresh paw tracks in fields and muddy paw prints on wooden blind doors.

A couple of days after the hunt above, my plan was to hunt a fabric blind I had put up. Due to previous bear problems, I usually surround a fabric blind with a circle of two-foot by four-foot

(Continued on page 29)