Missouri Wild Turkey Hunting

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Introduction

The resurgence of the wild turkey in Missouri during the past 45 years has rekindled interest in this splendid bird. A new generation of turkey hunters enters the woods with hope of bagging one of the most prized North American game birds, while veteran hunters continue to participate in the challenge and tradition of turkey hunting. In addition, much of the information presented is for those who wish to enjoy and learn about wild turkeys. This booklet is intended to help turkey hunters enjoy the hunt and perhaps improve their chances of bagging a turkey.

History

The wild turkey is native to North America and is believed to have originated in Mexico. Six subspecies are currently recognized, with the Eastern subspecies occurring in Missouri. During the 1800s, the North American continent was home to an estimated 10 million wild turkeys. However, destruction of habitat and unregulated hunting reduced the North American population to approximately 300,000 birds by 1950.

In Missouri, wild turkeys were found in large numbers throughout the state. From 1840 until about 1900, historians recorded "too many wild turkeys even to consider raising tame birds" and "turkeys so numerous and easily obtained as to be scarcely worthy of consideration." Sixty years later the Missouri turkey population had been reduced from 250,000 to approximately 3,000 birds and most were limited to remote Ozark regions. With the destruction of timber by fire and ax, open grazing of the forest, and market hunting, the wild turkey in Missouri was brought to near extinction.

From 1925 to 1943, an effort was made to halt the decline in turkey numbers. Approximately 14,000 game farm turkeys were released to supply more breeding stock. The hunting season for turkeys was closed in 1937. However, turkey numbers still decreased and the release of game farm turkeys appeared futile. Research studies were initiated in 1938 to determine why the game farm turkeys failed. These investigations were interrupted during World War II, but resumed in 1951. It was learned that game farm birds, even of the wildest stock obtainable, were not the answer—only a truly wild bird would survive.

It became evident that restocking wild turkeys to unoccupied range was the solution to restoring the species, but it could not be done easily. First, a source of native wild turkeys was needed. Secondly, a method of trapping wild turkeys had to be developed, and finally, captured turkeys would need to be released in areas where their chance of survival was high.

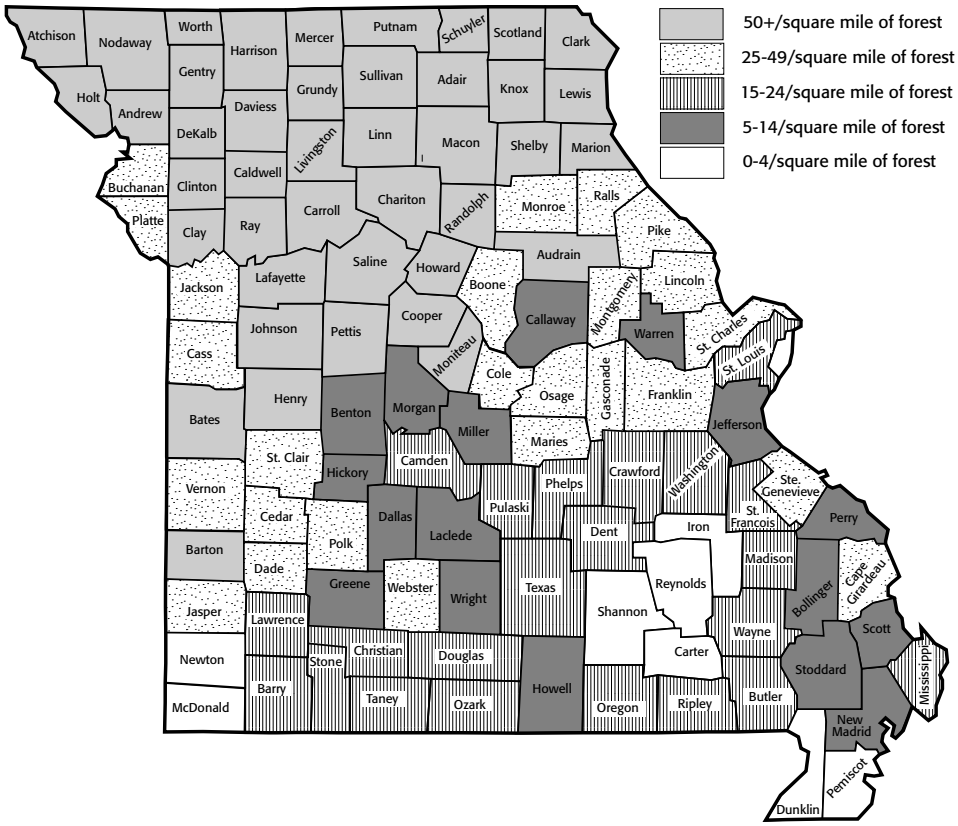
To ensure a source of wild birds, the Department of Conservation bought a large tract of land in the southern Ozarks where there were still a few native wild turkeys. Providing protection to the birds and restoration of food and cover on this tract of land paid off. By 1954, the population on the 23,000-acre Peck Ranch Wildlife Area had increased from nine turkeys to 32. Trapping began in 1957 on an 11,000-acre, intensively managed portion of the ranch that supported about 100 birds. Management practices on Peck Ranch demonstrated that turkeys could be abundant again.

An efficient method of turkey trapping still needed to be developed. A few turkeys were taken incidental to deer trapping, but the large cumbersome deer traps were not adaptable to an intensive turkey trapping program. The answer was an adaptation of the cannon-net trap used for capturing waterfowl. The only problem was to get the turkeys to the trap site; this was achieved by baiting.

Finding suitable release sites for captured turkeys involved many factors. An important component of the release site was strong public support. Communities were encouraged to submit a request for restocking and

In the 1800s, Missouri had "too many wild turkeys even to consider raising tame birds."

Turkey Densities in Missouri



the requests were evaluated for general habitat conditions. Early in the restoration program, optimal habitat for turkeys was considered to be a ratio of 70 percent timber to 30 percent open land over a minimum area of 15,000 acres. Because of the great number of acres required, people inside the area had to agree to protect the birds after a release. Department of Conservation personnel held town meetings to explain the program and outline community responsibilities. A "gentlemen's agreement" to protect the turkeys was then made between the Department of Conservation and the people living in the community.

The restoration program began in 1954 and by the spring of 1979, when the program was terminated, turkeys had been moved to 142 areas in 87 counties. A total of 2,611 turkeys were trapped and released in Missouri. The normal stocking rate was two hens to each gobbler, with 12 to 24 birds released on each site. Most releases were successful in re-establishing turkeys. All 114 Missouri counties now have huntable turkey populations with 101 of these counties having populations as a result of restocking.

Missouri has made important contributions to restoration programs in other states, as well, by swapping Missouri wild turkeys for other wildlife species. Since the early 1960s, Missouri has traded turkeys for ruffed grouse, otters, pheasants, prairie chickens and various kinds of fish.

As research continues and populations expand further, the understanding of wild turkeys in Missouri improves. For example, the ideas regarding optimal habitat have changed greatly. Highest turkey densities now occur in agricultural regions of the state where crop fields, old fields and timber are well interspersed. High turkey populations exist in counties with less than 20 percent timber. Obviously, the wild turkey is much more adaptable than previously thought and prospects for continued high populations of wild turkeys in Missouri are excellent.

Life history

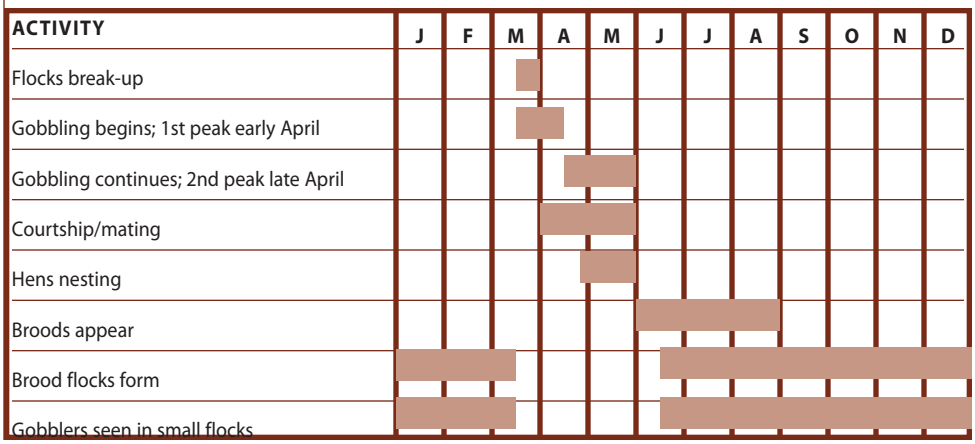
Eastern wild turkeys are part of a group of birds that include pheasants, grouse and quail. Wild turkeys are the largest of the North American game birds with an adult male weighing 17 to 30 pounds. An adult hen will weigh from 8 to 12 pounds.

Gobblers (or toms) are identified by a reddish-blue head and neck, a long hair-like appendage known as a beard, a sharp bony spur on the lower part of each leg and black-tipped breast feathers. Hens tend to be slimmer in appearance, have a less colorful head, and have breast feathers with light-colored tips and lack spurs. A few hens will have beards, but other characteristics help to distinguish male from female.

Wild turkeys differ from domestic turkeys in color and body form. Wild turkeys tend to be slimmer and more streamlined in appearance. Tips of the tail feathers on wild turkeys are usually deep chocolate brown; domestic birds generally have white tips. Also, the legs of wild birds are bright pink, while the legs of domestic birds are gray or black.

Wild turkeys are susceptible to many of the diseases of domestic turkeys and chickens: fowl diphtheria, fowl typhoid, cholera, blackhead,

Wild Turkey Life Cycle Timetable



trichomoniasis and coccidiosis. Fortunately, wild and domestic birds seldom come into contact with each other, thereby reducing the opportunity for disease to spread. Potential for the transmission of disease is a major reason why releasing domestic birds into the wild is not only discouraged, but is illegal.

In the winter, gobblers flock together and separate from hens and jakes (young males). Occasionally jakes are found with gobblers, but typically they remain with the hens until spring. In early spring, the winter flocks begin to break up and courtship and mating begin. Males travel greater distances seeking mates. Gobbling and strutting activity increases. Strutting displays are spectacular, with tail fanning and wing-dragging. Older, dominant birds do most of the breeding and one gobbler is capable of breeding with many females.

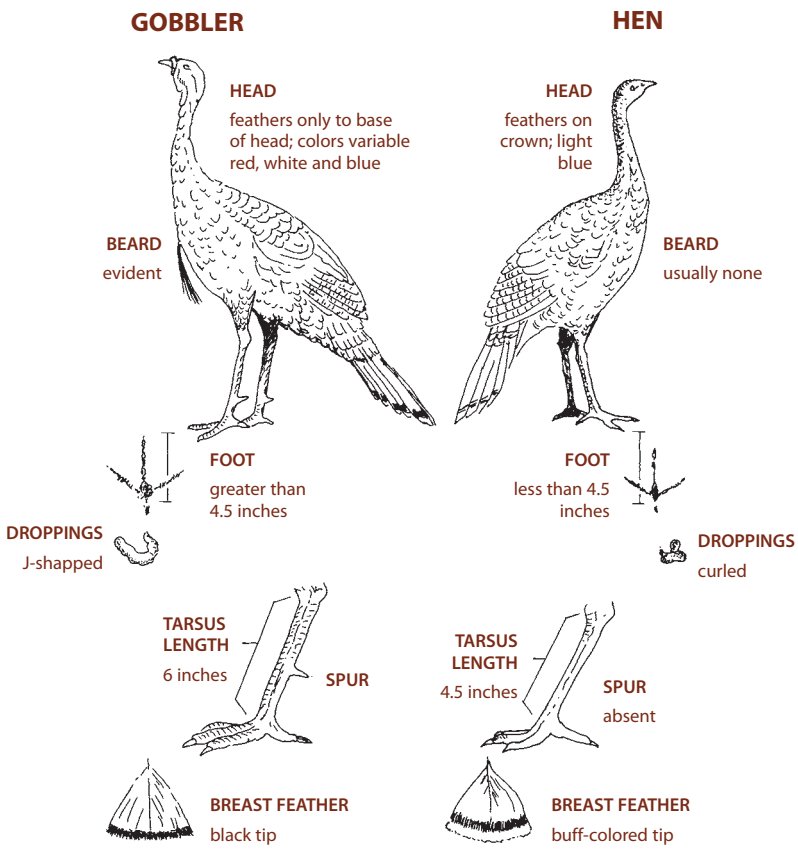
Peak time for gobbling in most years is late April. By this time most of the hens are laying eggs or incubating. The average clutch for wild turkeys is about 11 eggs and incubation takes 28 days. In Missouri, most young turkeys hatch in late May and early June.

Turkey nests are often located near the edge of woods, old fields and roadsides, but can be found in almost any habitat. As soon as the last turkey has hatched, the hen leads her brood away from the nest. During the first 3 weeks of life, young turkeys (or poults) are vulnerable to cold, rainy weather and must depend on the hen for protection and warmth. In addition, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, mink or great-horned owls may prey on young turkeys.

Young turkeys grow rapidly and need a diet high in protein. For the first week, approximately 80 percent of the poult's diet consists of insects. As they grow, their diet broadens to include grass seeds, dogwood fruits, wild grapes, acorns, corn, oats and wheat.

While too young to fly, the poults roost on the ground at night and the hen roosts with them. At approximately two weeks of age, the poults fly short distances and are soon roosting in trees with the hen. By 16 weeks, the young poults are hard to distinguish from adults at a distance.

Wild Turkey Identification



Habitat and management

Turkeys use distinct habitats during different periods of the year. Turkeys spend about one-half of the year (October to March) in winter habitat, which must provide adequate and reliable food, plus cover from bad weather. Prime winter habitat has at least 50 percent mature hardwood forest. Tree species important to turkeys include a variety of oaks. These trees, if mature, produce large quantities of acorns (or mast). Acorns and other mast are the staple of the turkey's winter diet. In agricultural areas, turkeys often depend on crop fields with waste grain for winter food. They also scratch through snow for other seeds. Therefore, supplemental feeding is not needed.

Nesting habitat is quite varied, but hens usually nest near the edges of old fields, along trails, in hay fields or in patches of briar or similar vegetation. Also, most turkey nests are located close to a source of permanent water. Turkeys are considered skittish nesters at best. During incubation, hens often abandon their nests if disturbed even once. However, adult hens (and sometimes juveniles) often attempt to establish another nest.

Summer and fall habitats consist of mowed hay fields, grazed pastures, glades or open woods. These areas are extremely important to hens and their poults. Low plant cover provides abundant insects and seeds.

In comparison to winter habitat, the size of summer and fall areas used by turkeys is relatively small, but vital. Acreage in openings may vary, but should make up more than 10 percent of the total annual range, with 30 percent approaching the optimum.

Wild turkeys require water and are not found in areas without permanent water. Construction of one small pond

per square mile, or preferably one per quarter section, where no permanent water exists, improves turkey habitat and provides additional nesting sites. Wildlife ponds built in timbered areas need not be large, but should be deep to provide water during the driest part of the summer. A good size pond to construct is approximately 30 to 40 feet across and 8 feet in depth.

Acorns are the most important food for wild turkeys. In Missouri, acorns are eaten by turkeys every month of the year, but in the fall and winter more than a third of their diet consists of acorns. To provide a dependable source of natural foods for turkeys, landowners should strive for an equal distribution of age and size classes of trees on their timbered lands. Or, try to manage woodlands so approximately one-third of a timbered tract is in small trees, one-third in pole-sized trees and one-third in mature saw logs. This sort of balance ensures a dependable mast crop, plus the openings created when stands of saw logs are harvested are an added benefit.

Food plots for turkeys only supplement natural food supplies. They can, however, be helpful during extremely bad weather or during drastic shortages of natural food. Winter wheat is one of the best crops for both ease of establishment and use by turkeys. Forest clearings of one acre or larger, when planted to wheat in August or September, provide green wheat all winter. Most turkeys use winter wheat in early spring just before hens begin to lay. Hens and poults will use the grain all summer. In August, half of the field can be disced and the other half left standing. Volunteer wheat provides a source of green browse and some grain remains in the other portion. Wheat also provides the very important winter green portion of the turkey's diet; the stubble, if left, provides a good place for a hen and brood to catch insects.

Corn and beans also attract turkeys and are especially important during periods of severe weather in late winter and early spring when food supplies are low. Sometimes, cornstalks are left in fields after harvest, but leaving a few rows standing next to timber ensures a food supply in case of deep snow. A portion of the corn left standing should be knocked down for better use by turkeys.

To establish permanent food plots in forest clearings, apply recommended amounts of limestone, rock phosphate and fertilizer and seed in the fall (one-half bushel per acre of wheat and 2 pounds per acre of orchard grass). Then overseed one-half of the plot in the fall or winter (2 pounds per acre of Ladino clover and 2 pounds per acre of red clover and the other half with 10 pounds per acre of Korean or Summit lespedeza). These plantings should provide attractive, nutritious food for turkeys, deer and other wildlife for 3 to 5 years without further treatment. Apply no more than 20 pounds per acre of nitrogen plant food to avoid excessive vegetative growth. Turkeys prefer thin stands of vegetation and may not use dense, lush stands.

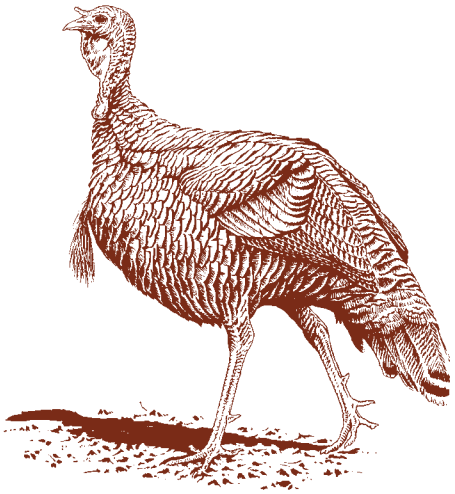
Abandoned fields surrounded by timber are an essential component of annual wild turkey range. The fields often include former house sites with bluegrass, an important food item during the spring and summer. Try to keep abandoned fields open and in a grass-legume mixture, if possible. Mowing or moderate grazing improves the quality of these fields for turkeys.

Hunting

After closing for 23 years, Missouri's first modern turkey season was held in April 1960. Hunting was permitted for only 3 days in 14 counties. By the 1985 spring season, the restoration program was successful in expanding the turkey range and all 114 counties were opened. Increases in season length occurred periodically as the turkey population continued to grow. Today, Missouri turkey hunters can pursue turkeys for three weeks in the spring and two weeks during the fall and archers can add almost another three months during the fall archery season.

Spring Season—Shotgun or Longbow

Year	Turkeys Harvested	Number of Permittees	Percent Hunting Success	Percent Sub-adults	Bag Limit	Days in Season	Counties Open
1960	94	698	12	23	1	3	14
1965	476	2,982	15	17	1	4	25
1970	1,607	10,073	15	29	1	7	41
1975	5,546	28,619	18	34	2	14	74
1980	16,722	55,565	25	35	2	14	93
1985	24,770	69,950	25	35	2	14	114
1990	30,056	92,094	27	34	2	14	114
1995	37,472	99,579	31	30	2	14	114
2000	56,841	112,003	39	20	2	21	114



Fall Shotgun Season

Year	Turkeys Harvested	Number of Permittees	Percent Hunting Success	Percent Sub-adults	Bag Limit	Days in Season	Counties Open
1978	4,374	16,072	29	63	1	12	40
1980	9,418	31,606	31	59	1	14	65
1985	12,181	36,218	35	70	1	14	86
1990	16,015	37,080	34	61	2	14	99
1995	13,866	33,642	37	49	2	14	99
2000	13,230*	31,968	30*	55*	2	14	106

Fall Archery Season

Year	Turkeys Harvested	Bag Limit	Days in Season	Counties Open
1975	54	1	31	74
1980	406	1	83	93
1985	624	1	83	114
1990	812	2	83	114
1995	1,113	2	83	114
2000	1,348*	2	83	114

*Numbers are preliminary

One out of eight turkey hunters (about 12 percent) was successful in Missouri's first spring season. Success rates improved as hunters gained experience and additional opportunities were provided with longer seasons and higher turkey populations. Hunting success on opening day has consistently been higher than for any other day of the season.

A weekday rather than a weekend opening was selected for Missouri's firearms turkey seasons to avoid heavy hunting pressure on opening day. This season structure has been successful because hunting pressure on opening day has been similar to that on the first Saturday of the season.

The goal of Missouri's turkey hunting program is to provide quality hunting opportunity consistent with the turkey population's ability to sustain harvest. The primary objective is to maintain and enhance the quality of the spring gobbler hunt. A secondary objective is to provide fall turkey hunting opportunity so long as the fall season has no measurable impact on the spring season.

Choosing a place to hunt

Missouri offers a wide range of hunting conditions. The Ozark Region of southern Missouri has large areas of timber. Central counties have cultivated land mixed with woods in about a 50:50 ratio. The prairie region of northern and western Missouri is mainly agricultural land with woody cover confined to woodlots or along streams.

Most turkey hunting takes place on private land and many Missouri landowners allow hunting. The U.S. Forest Service owns about 1.5 million acres in the Missouri Ozarks, and most are open to public hunting. The Department of Conservation manages more than 600,000 acres for public hunting. A list of these lands is available by requesting a *Discover Outdoor Missouri* map from the Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180. Also, some maps are available on the MDC web site at www.conservation.state.mo.us.

Wherever you decide to hunt, remember to follow the rules of that area, and always respect private property. Trespassing is a crime!

Equipment

Shotgun selection is the first concern of most new turkey hunters. Most turkey hunters use a 12-gauge shotgun. Few hunters use a smaller gauge because it may increase the chance of crippling. Some hunters use 10-gauge shotguns because more pellets can be delivered. However, added weight and recoil deter many hunters from using 10-gauge shotguns. Using a 10-gauge to ensure a cleaner kill is okay, but it's a mistake to think you can substantially increase your effective range. Shooting at a turkey at more than 40 yards is not recommended, regardless of which gauge shotgun is used.

Your choice of choke may make the difference between a clean kill and a crippled bird. The most popular is an extra-full choke, which gives the tightest pattern. A tight pattern is important in order to strike the vital head-and-neck area (see gobbler silhouette on back cover). Research has shown that after 18 inches the length of the gun barrel does not affect shot pattern. Therefore, many hunters now use shorter-barreled shotguns, which are lighter and easier to maneuver. The most common shot sizes are No. 6 and No. 4. Pattern your gun with both sizes and select the load and shot size that pattern best. *Missouri regulations prohibit the use of shot size larger than No. 4 for turkey hunting*.

Another method of hunting turkeys in Missouri is with a bow. Few hunters are successful because of the difficulty involved, but with practice you can bag a turkey. When aiming at a turkey with a bow, you should focus on the junction of neck and body. An accurate hit will break the backbone. To improve the killing efficiency of the arrow, you want the sharpest arrow possible that will remain in the body of the turkey. A broadhead design that inhibits full penetration generates more impact and kills a turkey more quickly.

Another important piece of equipment is a turkey call. There are a variety of calls on the market but basically they fall into two categories—friction calls and air-operated calls.

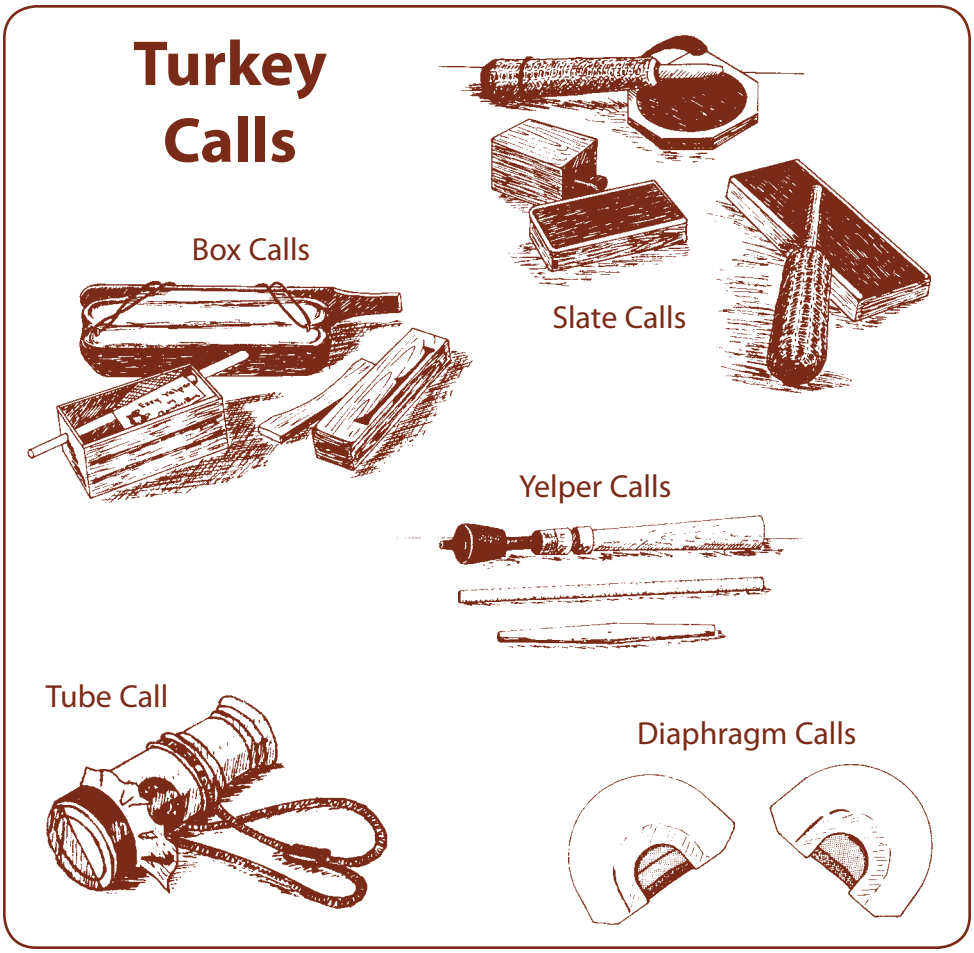
Friction calls are probably the easiest to use. Two surfaces are rubbed together, creating friction that produces sound. Box and slate calls are examples of friction calls. Air-operated calls create sound when air is passed through or over the call. The three basic air-operated calls are the yelper, the tube call and the diaphragm call.

All of these calls require practice to become proficient. There are a number of audio and video tapes available commercially to demonstrate the various calls of the wild turkey. These tapes can be of assistance to the beginner; however, learning from an experienced caller and from the turkey are the best methods.

Other equipment you may need for the hunt includes: a knife, compass, topographic maps, rope, first-aid kit, insect repellent, rain gear, camera and your turkey hunting permit. Camouflage clothing, including hat, gloves, face paint or mask, and coveralls, can be helpful, and is considered essential by some hunters. A blaze orange vest is recommended when moving in the woods, and another vest or orange sash is suggested for wrapping your turkey when carrying it out of the woods.

Proper equipment can make the difference between an enjoyable or miserable hunt. A good idea is to develop a checklist, especially if you are traveling a great distance to hunt. Be prepared for the unexpected.

One other important consideration before the hunt is—yourself. Missouri turkey hunting can be physically demanding. Prepare yourself for the long walks, steep hills and weather conditions. Pre-hunt scouting will help you get into shape.



Regulations

State regulations are intended to more evenly distribute hunting pressure. In Missouri, opening the season on Monday and restricting the bag limit to one bird the first week and one bird per day during the second and third weeks (for a total bag limit of two birds) helps reduce the number of hunters in the woods on any given day. Regulations restricting hunters to the use of shotguns and to shot size no larger than No. 4 are intended to reduce the severity of accidents.

Regulations may change from year to year; therefore, familiarize yourself with the regulations before each season. Turkey hunters are surveyed about every five years to determine their attitudes regarding regulations and other turkey hunting issues. Survey results are combined with established management principles to help shape future regulations and season structure.

Basic Rules for Safe Turkey Hunting

- Never walk through the turkey woods without first putting on hunter orange. Should you bag a turkey, always wrap hunter orange around it before carrying it out.
- Never identify a turkey by sound or movement. Always see the bird clearly.
- Never wave, whistle or make turkey calls to alert an approaching hunter to your presence. Always shout to reveal your presence to an approaching hunter.
- Never shoot at a turkey beyond the effective range of your shotgun. Pattern your shotgun, learn its effective range and learn to accurately judge distances. Always shoot at the head and neck and remember that 30 to 40 yards is about the limit for a clean kill, depending on how your gun patterns.
- Never wear red, white, blue or black in the turkey woods. Dress defensively and remember that partial or improper camouflage can be just as dangerous as red, white, blue or black.
- Be very cautious when approaching wild turkeys. Remember—the calling you hear may be another hunter trying to call in birds that have already been scattered.
- Never use shot sizes larger than No. 4. Missouri turkey hunters are restricted to No. 4 shot or smaller. Shot larger than No. 4 is unnecessary for turkey hunting and increases the chance of serious line-of-fire accidents.
- Never let excitement, nerves or panic guide your behavior. Always strive to remain calm and rational. Remember, there is not a turkey in the woods worth a human life or injury.
- Never assume you are the only hunter in the area. Assume every sound or movement is another hunter until it has been safely and positively identified.

Safety

Any hunting accident is tragic. The irony is that almost all hunting accidents can be avoided. Every hunter must have safety on his or her mind, first and foremost.

One possible reason for accidents is the misconception many people have of the turkey's mentality. Often the turkey is incorrectly portrayed as a "super bird." Its ability to avoid the hunter gives some people the impression that the bird cannot be fooled. Some hunters think that in order to harvest a bird, they will have to shoot the first chance they get. Because they do not act cautiously, these hunters are often responsible for hunting accidents.

Actually, the alert and cautious bird is merely a product of its environment. To survive, it must avoid being eaten by coyotes, bobcats and other predators. The more near-fatal encounters a bird has, the more wary the bird will become. Do not confuse the bird's wariness with intelligence. Turkeys do not have reasoning powers. They are best described in relative terms as cautious and wary.

Part of the safety problem also stems from people who want to get a turkey so badly that they risk making a mistake. They feel 90 percent sure that what they are about to shoot is a gobbler, so they shoot before they have a chance for positive identification. Hunters must think before they shoot—there is not a turkey anywhere that is worth a human life or injury.

Since spring 1987, a safety sticker attached to the receiver of the gun has been required of all hunters, and an intensified effort to raise hunter awareness regarding safety has been in effect. The result has been a decrease in the number of non-fatal accidents to 4 during the 2000 spring turkey season.

Carefully select the colors you wear in the woods during turkey season. Studies conducted during deer seasons have proved that wearing hunter orange reduces accidents in the field. However, turkey hunters have shied away from wearing hunter orange because they believe turkeys can see it.

If you choose to not wear hunter orange while working a gobbler, at least wear it when you are entering or leaving the woods, or when moving around during the hunt. Colors that should never be worn in the woods while turkey hunting are red, white, blue and black. Hunters may associate these colors with the gobbler. Black looks like the body of the bird. Red, white and blue are colors of a gobbler's head. Even the distribution of the camouflage you wear can cause you to be confused with a gobbler.

The most common type of spring turkey hunting accident is one in which the victim was mistaken for a turkey and subsequently shot. Usually the victim is wearing some sort of camouflage. Camouflage itself does not cause the accidents, but wearing it improperly can and does contribute to accidents.

Regardless, the hunter is responsible for identifying the target before shooting. Remember: shouldering your gun, aiming it at something, and pulling the trigger is a deliberate, "on purpose" act, not an "accident."

Camouflage does not make you invisible, but conceals only the parts of you that are camouflaged. A person who wears only partial camouflage may be concealing just enough of his body to make the visible parts look like those of a turkey. A shiny cheekbone, a shiny or light-colored gun stock or action, part of a shirt, tops of socks, handkerchiefs, hands, boots and boot soles are all items that, when left exposed, can lead to accidents. If you choose to wear camouflage, be thorough. You want an approaching hunter to see either all of you or none of you.

The tone of colors you'll want to wear will depend on the time of year and where you will be hunting. Camouflage tones for spring in Missouri

will be a little greener than the browns you'll want to wear for fall hunting.

Even though you sense that a bird is coming into range, remain perfectly still. Many people make the mistake of releasing the safety and putting their finger on the trigger too soon. They risk spooking the turkey by early movement, or worse, accidental firing.

Try not to get too excited when a gobbler answers your call. When the bird appears, first identify it as a legal turkey. Wait until the turkey moves his head behind a tree before you raise and aim your gun. Look beyond the turkey before you release the safety and shoot.

Once you have shot a turkey, he probably won't lie still immediately. Wild turkeys don't normally drop over dead, even when they have received a fatal shot to the head and neck. They flop around on the ground, flapping their wings. As long as his head and neck are down, you've got him. If he's flopping around and his head comes up, get ready to shoot again.

Be careful how you retrieve a downed bird. It's better to let him finish flopping and lie still before you try to pick him up or tag him. The spurs on an adult gobbler are sometimes more than an inch long. They are sharp and can cut you badly. It's better to put your foot on a flopping turkey's head to restrict his movement than to try to grab a flapping wing or foot.

Once you have him in hand, tag him immediately and be careful how you carry him out of the woods. If you harvest a small deer, would you throw it over your shoulder to carry it out of the woods? Probably not, because someone might mistake you for a deer and shoot you. If you were to kill a turkey, how would you get him out of the woods? Most people carry the turkey over a shoulder. Dressed in camouflage clothing, the hunter blends well with the woods. The warm, freshly killed bird is limp; its wings droop down and its tail fans out. This, combined with the fact that a person and a turkey sound much alike when walking through the leaves, adds up to an extremely dangerous situation. To be safe, wrap the bird in hunter orange before carrying it out.

Scouting

An important component of successful turkey hunting is being familiar with the area you choose to hunt. After deciding where to hunt, you should know the lay of the land and where turkeys are located.

Visit the area a couple of weeks before the season. Locate property boundaries, fence lines, thickets, swamps or any other barriers that may deter an approaching turkey. In addition, make note of where you will enter the woods. The forest looks very different in darkness. Topographic maps are helpful to locate landmarks and to record areas where you locate turkeys.

Look for turkey tracks along roads, trails, plowed fields and creek bottoms. Also look for droppings, dusting areas, scratchings, roosts and feathers. A heavy concentration of droppings under trees can indicate roosting areas. Scratchings help you determine if birds are in the area—if leaves are turned over and the ground is moist, birds are using the area. Leaves will often be piled directly behind a scratching turkey, indicating the direction of travel.

It's a good idea to scout multiple areas. Other hunters, weather or some other factor may require you to abandon your first choice. A major factor of ensuring success is having alternatives.

Spring gobbler season

The time of day you hunt and the number of hours you spend afield will affect your chances for success. Many hunters are in the woods before dawn, and most turkeys are killed before 8 a.m. However, turkey hunting after 8 a.m. can be rewarding. Most people leave the woods by 10 a.m. If you have the patience to stay late, there are fewer hunters in the woods competing for available birds.

Because you may not know how many other hunters are in the woods, it is important to start your hunt from a good location. Be careful not to hide too well. You want to be able to see in

every direction in order to spot approaching hunters. Consider any movement in the woods to be another hunter until you can positively identify the object.

Once you have reached your hunting spot, you will need to locate the birds. Hooting like a barred owl or cawing like a crow usually encourages a turkey to gobble, and are preferred ways to locate the birds early in the morning. If you use a hen call before shooting time, you may bring a gobbler to you too soon. In addition, if he finds you and not a hen, then you may have created a call-wise bird that will be harder to lure next time you try. Hooting and cawing may get him to gobble without making him look for you.

After locating a gobbler, select a strategic location and begin calling him to you. Variations of the yelp are the most frequently used calls. Most spring turkey hunters yelp from 3 to 7 times—it's not critical how many times, but rhythm is important. It really does not matter whether you are raspy or smooth, or using friction or diaphragm calls. Rhythm in your calls will make the difference. Prerecorded tapes of turkey calls can help you learn the various calls and associated rhythms.

Rhythm is the most important feature of effective calling.

Another type of yelp is a tree yelp—a very soft yelp that should be used when the gobbler is still on the roost. Turkeys hear much better than humans. Before the hen comes off the roost, she calls softly. After you get in position, try giving a tree yelp while the gobbler is still on the roost.

Another handy call to use is the cluck. Turkeys frequently cluck while feeding and moving around undisturbed. You can make the clucking sound on any of the calls. This is also one of the easiest calls to learn.

The cackle is a series of excited yelps that hens sometimes make as they fly down from the roost. If you can't cackle well, don't do it at all. The fly-down cackle of the hen has been called the true mating call. It sounds just like a yelp, except it gets faster and faster as she pulls off the limb and flies to the ground, then tapers off and slows down as she lands.

You can learn to cackle with most of the turkey calls available. Another cackle is the assembly cackle made in the fall when the hen calls in the young poults. It's just a slowed-down version of the regular cackle.

Cutting is a sound turkeys make that is similar to the cackle. Cutting consists of excited, fast, short, sharp yelps and is frequently made by adult hens.

The purr is the contented, soft call of the hen. Purring and clucking are the calls that will bring turkeys in the last few yards.

The putt is a sound both sexes make, and may be either soft, intermingled with purrs and clucks during contented chatter, or it may be a series of hard, short, loud putts, which serves as the alarm call.

The whine is a soft, high-pitched, drawn-out call of the hen, usually used in combination with putts and clucks.

The gobble of the male turkey can be imitated with your voice, a box call, a diaphragm call or a shaker-type of call designed specifically for gobbling. Beware of gobbling during legal shooting hours, because you might attract other hunters.

Gobblers also spit and drum (or thrum) while displaying for the hen. The drum sounds like a giant rubber band vibrating in the woods. It is a very soft call. If the drumming gobbler is hidden by brush, it can be difficult to pinpoint his location.

The lost call or assembly call is a series of pleading yelps that tend to get louder and more pleading. Both turkey hens and gobblers use this call, which makes the lost call or assembly call good to use late in the morning.

Other calls include the brood hen's assembly call and the kee-kee run. The kee-kee is the whistle of a young bird. The kee-kee run is the voice of a young turkey changing from a whistle to a yelp and is usually heard in the fall. The hen uses the assembly call in the fall to call in her poults after they've separated from each other.

Sometimes you can use every call in the book and you still have trouble getting the gobbler to come in those last few critical yards. This can be a tough problem to solve, as each turkey and each situation is different.

Possible reasons may be that there is a physical barrier, such as a woven-wire fence between you and the turkey or another hunter or predator may have caused him to abandon you for the moment. Also, you may have called too loudly. Generally, turkeys only call loud enough to be heard by another turkey. When your call is too loud, the gobbler assumes the hen is close and he begins to strut and display. Unfortunately, he may have stopped just out of your sight and range.

Try muffling your call, or turning your head to project the call behind you, and the gobbler may move closer. **Be patient**—you may be able to wait him out. Eventually the hens will leave and your periodic calling will start working on the gobbler's mating urges. Patience and perseverance will usually prevail.

How often and how loud you want to call varies with the situation and will come naturally to you with more experience. The key is to keep the turkey interested. If he loses interest, he may move out of the area or go to another hen. Remember, the gobbler responds to stimuli and to lure him in, you must emit the strongest, most seductive stimulus while interacting with him.

Fall hunting

Fall turkey hunting (both firearms and archery) is very different from the spring hunt. During the fall, there is little or no gobbling activity and gobblers are in small flocks (3 to 10 birds), while hens and young of the year are together in large flocks (10 to 20 birds). It is not unusual to find two to three hens together with all their young.

The basic strategy for fall turkey hunting is to find and break up a flock, scattering them in all directions. Then, locate yourself as near as possible to the spot where you broke up the flock and wait 15 minutes. Gobblers can be called back by using clucks and coarse yelps. Hens and young birds can be called back using hen yelps or kee-kee run calls. Young birds usually will return within an hour while an old gobbler may take 3 or 4 hours. Hens and their young tend to vocalize a lot as they return. Old gobblers tend to return silently.

Fall turkey hunting can be an extremely enjoyable experience. The sight and sounds of 20 to 30 turkeys returning to you from all directions can be as exciting as calling in a spring gobbler. However, the fall firearms turkey season has the potential to be more dangerous than the spring because either sex may be hunted. Therefore, less emphasis is put on positive identification. Remember to follow the basic rules of safe turkey hunting.

A hunter orange band, wrapped around the bird to keep its wings from flopping, helps make your walk out of the woods a safer one. If you don't want to make or purchase an alert band, try using a hunter orange vest. A little precaution may keep your bird from being shot a second time—and you with it.

Trophies

The wild turkey is a beautiful bird and can be mounted in many different ways, allowing you to enjoy the memories of your hunt indefinitely.

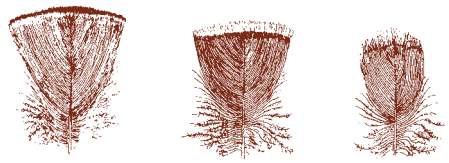
The beard needs no special treatment to be displayed. The fan should be spread out and pinned to cardboard to Styrofoam. Sprinkle salt and borax on the fleshy part of the tail. Allow the fan to dry for several weeks and it will remain fanned out. The fan, in combination with the beard, makes an attractive trophy.

A taxidermist can mount the full body of your turkey in a strutting, standing or flying position, or just about any way you desire. To protect your turkey mount from moths, rub borax into the feathers.

Fall Turkey Identification

Radio telemetry studies of wild turkeys in both northern and southern Missouri indicate that hunters harvest less than 4 percent of the fall turkey population. By contrast, research-based population modeling indicates that up to 10 percent of the fall turkey population can be harvested without adversely impacting the turkey flock or reducing the quality of spring turkey hunting.

Monitoring the age and sex of harvested turkeys through check stations provides a valuable measure of the composition of the fall harvest. Aging and sexing turkeys is simple—use these illustrations as a guide.

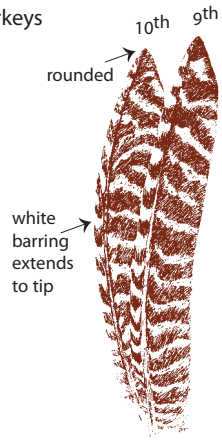


Gobbler Breast Feather

Hen Breast Feather

Juvenile Breast Feather

Juvenile



Adult

Primary Feathers of Adult Wild Turkey

ART BY DAVE HAMILTON

Cleaning a Turkey

Novice turkey hunters are often intimidated when it comes time to clean the large bird. Just like a chicken or other fowl, there are two basic ways to clean a turkey: plucking and skinning.

If you want to help keep the moisture in the turkey while cooking it whole, then you should pluck the bird. Remove feathers from the turkey just as you would pluck a chicken. This method does take more time than skinning and it is messy.

Skinning the turkey is faster and cleaner, but you will need to wrap the bird in foil or place in a baking bag to cook whole. Here are some tips to make skinning the turkey easier:

❶ Hang the turkey by both feet at chest level. The turkey should hang so the feet are 12 to 18 inches apart.

❷ If you want to save the beard, remove it now. Grasp the beard as close to the body as possible, give it a half-twist, then sharply pull it away from the breast. The beard will pull away with a little tissue on it.

❸ Now remove the fan by cutting the skin away from the tail.

❹ Cut off the wings at the elbow or second joint.

❺ Grasp the skin at the tail and begin pulling it down. Work the skin off around the wings and pull it down to the neck.

❻ Cut off the neck and the skin. The feathers and head will come off in one piece.

❼ Open the body cavity and remove the entrails, if you have not already done so in the field. Be sure to remove all lung material from the backbone, as it tends to spoil quickly.

❽ Cut off the legs at the knee or second joint. If you don't want to cook or freeze a whole turkey, consider cutting it up into smaller portions. Remove the breast and other meat from the carcass and cut off the legs and wings. Package in appropriate servings for cooking. The turkey is ready for cooking or freezing. Double-bag the turkey in plastic freezer bags and seal as airtight as possible to prevent freezer burn.

Cooking the turkey

As you decide how to prepare the wild turkey, keep in mind whether your turkey is an older, tougher bird or a younger, more tender bird. Older birds should be cooked with a moist-heat method, while younger birds can be grilled or fried.

Roasting Turkey in a Baking Bag

Roasting wild turkey in a baking bag helps seal in the delicious juices. Baking bags are available from your supermarket in the section with foil and other food wraps. Instructions for using the bags are included with the packaging. Follow the directions for the bag and place the turkey (with or without stuffing) in a roasting pan or baking dish.

In general, most bags call for adding flour to the bag and shaking it inside to protect the bag, then placing it in a roasting pan at least 2 inches deep. Place turkey, brushed with oil or butter and seasonings, inside the bag. If the turkey is skinless, add a small amount of water and close with a tie. Slits are cut in the top of the bag and it is baked for 1 1/2 to 3 hours depending on size (10 to 12 minutes per pound without stuffing). Most bag instructions recommend baking the turkey at 350 degrees F. For greater accuracy, place a meat thermometer in the turkey's thigh. The turkey tests done when the thermometer reaches 180 degrees F.

Turkey Stock

If you want to make stock for soup, noodles or dressing, boil the legs, wings or other less meaty pieces with seasonings (such as salt, pepper, garlic or onion) for one to two hours. Remove pieces of turkey and strain broth.

Grilled Turkey

For a light meat to serve with salads or in burritos, try marinating strips of turkey about 1/2- to 1-inch thick in prepared Italian salad dressing or Wine and Lime Marinade (recipe follows). Refrigerate for 1 to 6 hours, then grill until done.

Wine and Lime Marinade

1 lime, juiced
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1/2 cup white cooking wine
1/2 teaspoon black pepper

Tenderize meat on one side. Sprinkle with garlic and place in bag to marinate. Juice lime in bag and add wine, remaining garlic and pepper. Seal and refrigerate at least 1 hour.

Turkey Fingers

Tenderize strips of turkey breast meat. Combine 1 cup dry breadcrumbs, 1/4 cup Parmesan cheese, 1 tablespoon fresh parsley (or 1 teaspoon thyme or oregano), 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Whisk one large egg. Coat the turkey with flour. Dip in egg, then roll in breadcrumbs. Pan fry in a small amount of butter or olive oil until lightly brown, 2 to 3 minutes on each side.

Wild Rice and Mushroom Soup

3-4 cups cooked turkey, cubed
3 stalks celery, sliced
1 pkg. mushrooms, sliced
1 cup long grain and wild rice
1/2 cup white wine
2 cups milk
1 clove garlic
Salt and pepper to taste
1/2 cup sliced green onion
1/2 teaspoon thyme
2 tablespoons parsley
3 chicken bouillon cubes
1/4 cup Parmesan cheese
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons cornstarch

Cook the rice as directed. In a skillet, melt the butter and add the garlic, onion, celery and mushrooms. When tender, add turkey, wine and seasonings. Mix cornstarch and part of milk and thicken. Cook until bubbly. Combine rice and turkey mixture in large pan. Add remaining ingredients and enough water to make slightly soupy. Simmer for 20 minutes.

Roast Turkey and Dressing

If turkey is not young, parboil or pressure-cook it for 1-2 hours. Rub the turkey with butter and turn breast down in pan to roast in slow oven. Cook the neck, wings and giblets together for dressing broth.

Dressing
2 to 3 quarts soft bread crumbs
1 to 2 teaspoons poultry seasoning
1/2 to 1 cup celery, chopped
1/2 to 1 cup onion, chopped
1 teaspoon salt
2 eggs
Pepper to taste
Broth or milk to moisten

Combine all ingredients and place in turkey cavity. Pour some dressing around the turkey and roast until dressing is lightly brown. Baste turkey occasionally while baking.

Modified from *Cy Littlebee's Guide to Cooking Fish and Game*

Roast Wild Turkey in White Wine

with Mushroom Pate Stuffing

Pate Stuffing *(amounts are for 10-12 pound bird)*
1/4 cup butter
2 medium onions, chopped
1 cup chopped mushrooms (about 1/4 pound)
2 quarts fresh white bread crumbs
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1/4 cup chopped parsley
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1 teaspoon dried marjoram
1 pound chicken livers, finely chopped

Ingredients for basting and later use:
1 tablespoon salt
1 teaspoon pepper
1/4 cup olive oil
1 small onion, sliced
1 clove garlic, halved
2 whole cloves
1 bay leaf
1/4 teaspoon dried basil
1 can (10 1/2 oz.) condensed chicken broth
1/2 cup white wine

Melt butter in skillet and sauté onion and mushrooms until onion is tender, about 5 minutes. Turn into large bowl. Add chicken liver, breadcrumbs, parsley, salt, thyme, marjoram and pepper. Toss until thoroughly combined.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Wash and dry turkey inside and out. Mix salt and pepper. Sprinkle part of mixture inside turkey. Spoon stuffing into neck and body cavity. Use twine to close cavity, fasten wing tips to body and tie ends of legs together. Place turkey, breast up, in a deep roasting pan with a tight-fitting cover. Brush with oil and sprinkle the remaining salt and pepper. Roast uncovered for 30 minutes or until lightly browned.

Remove from oven. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees F. Insert meat thermometer in turkey thigh at thickest part. Add onion, garlic, cloves, bay leaf and basil to roasting pan. Pour chicken broth and wine over turkey. Cover pan tightly. Roast, basting every 30 minutes, for 2 1/2 hours, or until thermometer reaches 185 degrees F. Leg joints should move freely. Remove turkey from roasting pan and remove twine to serve.

Modified from *Cy Littlebee's Guide to Cooking Fish and Game*

Barded Wild Turkey Hors de Oeuvres

1 pound wild turkey cuts
Italian salad dressing
Jalapeno pepper slices or water chestnuts
Bacon slices, cut in half

Cut turkey strips about 1 1/2 inches wide by 3 to 4 inches in length. Marinate in Italian salad dressing for 1 hour or more. Roll turkey strip around the pepper or chestnut. Wrap with bacon slice and secure with toothpick or bamboo skewer. Grill or broil until done.

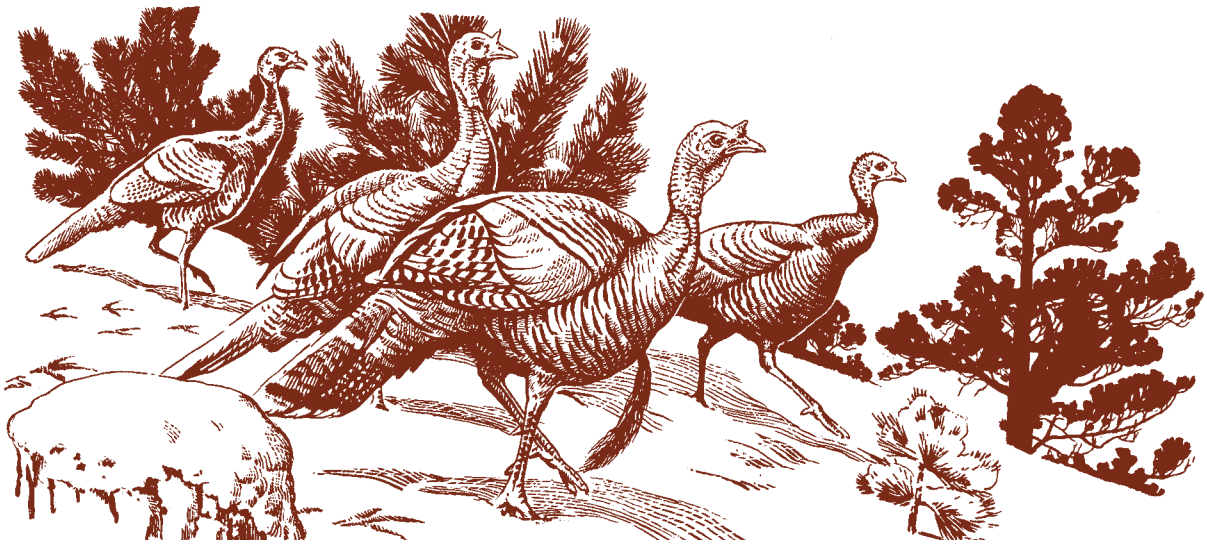
Barbecued Wild Turkey

Cut turkey in serving size pieces; sprinkle with garlic salt and salt.

Barbecue Sauce
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 tablespoon dry mustard
2 teaspoons salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1/4 teaspoon ginger
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
8 ounces tomato sauce
3/4 cup balsamic vinegar
1/4 teaspoon hot pepper sauce
2 tablespoons grated onion
1 1/2 cloves garlic, crushed

Mix dry ingredients in medium saucepan. Add the remaining ingredients and simmer 15-30 minutes or until slightly thickened.

Cover each piece of turkey with sauce. Baste often on grill, cooking 4 to 5 minutes or until done.



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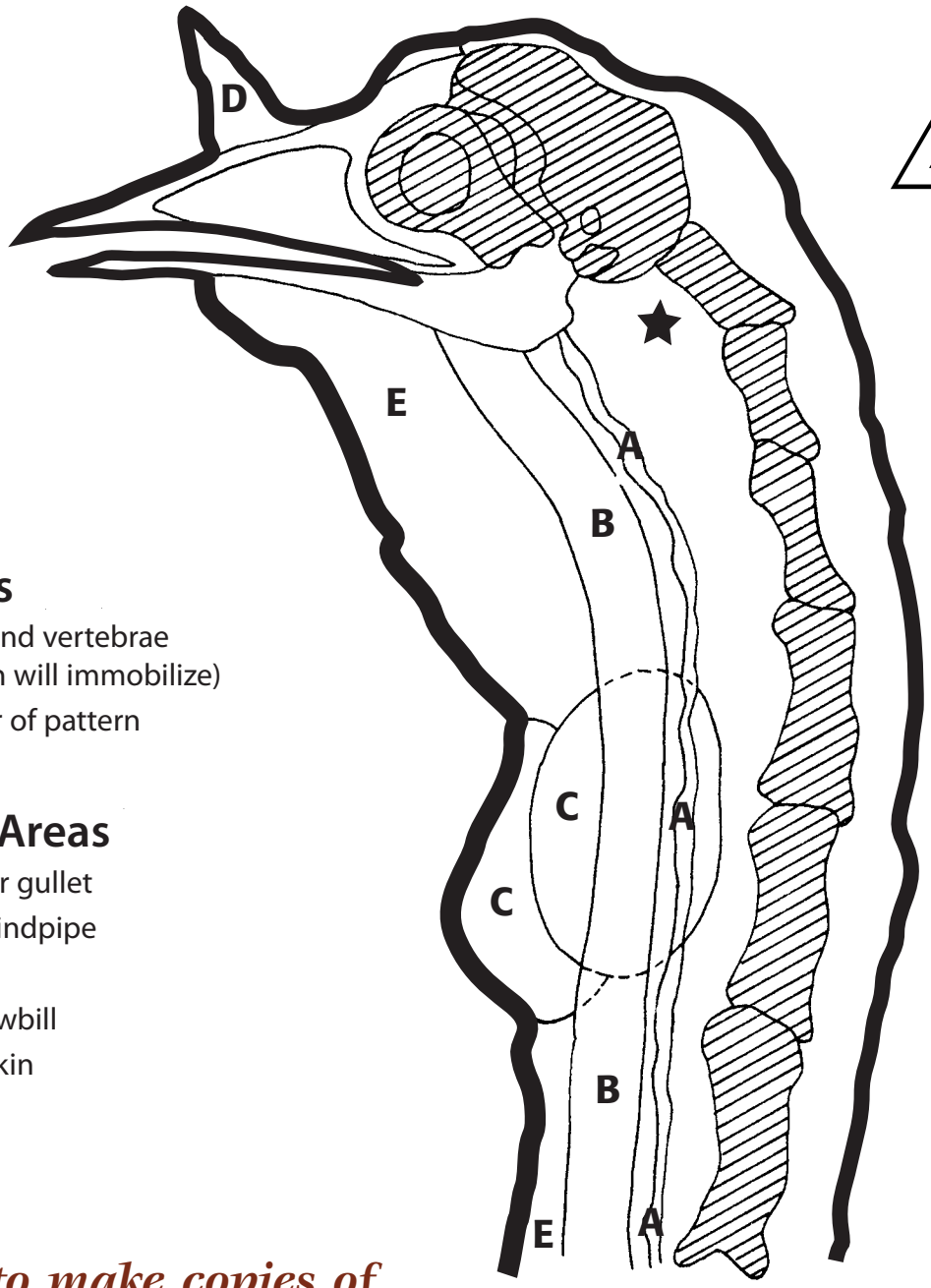
Gobbler Profile

Help make turkey hunting a safer sport — test your shotgun pattern on this actual size turkey head.



Vital Areas

Bony skull and vertebrae (Penetration will immobilize)

★ Ideal center of pattern

Non-vital Areas

A Esophagus or gullet
B Trachea or windpipe
C Wattles
D Snood or dewbill
E Loose neck skin

Feel free to make copies of this for you and your friends.

Drawing by John M. Idstrom from x-ray of adult spring gobbler by Paul H. Pelham, D.V.M.
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W071 3/2001