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TAKING HILL COUNTRY TOMS

Fall turkey hunting in the Hill Country may be some of the country's best — but that doesn't mean that it'll be easy. Unless you're following this advice, of course!

by Mary O. Parker

If your mouth's watering for a Rio Grande longbeard on the Thanksgiving table later this month, lots of folks will tell you to be prepared to swallow disappointment.

But while bagging a true Hill Country gobbler in the fall can be notoriously difficult, it's not impossible. Not by a long shot.

If your mouth also waters for the chance to put your scouting and calling skills to the test, this is your game, and this is your season. And, according to veteran Central Texas hunting guide Jim Roche, fall 2008 could be *your* year.

"This should be the best season in years because of all the rain we had last year," said Roche, president of Magnum Guide Services. "Conditions will be ideal for harvesting 1 1/2-, 3 1/2- and 4 1/2-year-olds."

Notice anything about that last statement? Because of the drought in 2006, there are fewer 2 1/2-year-olds. In fact, Roche said, it's been nine years since he's seen such a bounty of true longbeards — those older than 2 years — in Central Texas.

But that doesn't mean hunting will be *easy*. Most gobblers you'll find this fall will be the 1 1/2-year-old jakes because of the prime conditions from last year's abundant rainfall.

Robert Steenbeke, the owner of 1A Hunting In Texas Guide Services in the Hill Country, said that if getting a gobbler — any gobbler — is your goal, that should be pretty easy, since there are, as he puts it, "many, many jakes running around due to the per-

fect reproduction conditions last year."

But if it's a true longbeard you're after, the challenge will be greater.

MUCH DIFFERENT FROM SPRING

Larry Proffitt, a calling judge for the National Wild Turkey Federation, said that, contrary to what "they" say, old gobblers can be called to the skillet in the fall.

Proffitt, who's been hunting turkeys in the autumn for nearly 30 years, said he finds it "a great challenge to call the old bearded men in the fall." But, he warned, "In all fairness — and to be very truthful — hunting old gobblers in the fall can be a very frustrating thing. It requires an extra measure of patience, determination and the willingness to study and practice year 'round."

In spite of the challenges, fall turkey hunting is becoming more popular in the state. "Fall turkey hunting is gaining in popularity," said Roche, who noted rising autumn requests for his guide services, "because hunters are looking for more of a challenge. It's more about the hunt than the kill. It also gives hunters another way to get out there — get outside."

Not only is the weather warming up in the spring, but so too is the level of activity. When the frenzy of spring mating arrives, so does a plethora of hunters. In fact, the popularity of spring hunting can sometimes make Hill Country hunting areas crowded, causing the birds to grow gun-shy and

wary as the season wears on.

Overall, however, bagging a turkey in the spring is much easier compared to the fall, one reason it's historically been more popular. Because of the mania of mating, flocks are more vocal and the birds, especially toms, tend to be less cautious — at least early in the season.

In the fall, nature doesn't help out with a mating ritual. "Spring turkey hunting is very different from fall," said Roche, "You engage the birds a lot with one-on-one calls and tap into that sex drive. But in the fall, you've got to tap into other drives."

Nature also makes fall turkey hunting more of a challenge because, by November, most deciduous trees and bushes in Central Texas have begun shedding their leaves. When they lose their leaves, hunters lose much of their cover.

But in spite of the difficulties, said Lionel Kolb, who comes to the Hill Country each autumn from the Panhandle, "Hunting in the fall can be just as exciting. You've got to be smarter than the average bird to bag a tom in the fall, because he's not distracted by the hens."

Instead of trying to pair up with a

"It's nice to be outside when the weather's cool," said Kenny Riggs, a dedicated turkey hunter who comes to Texas every autumn to hunt the birds. He pointed out that the fall season's a great time for taking a tom to mount. Photo courtesy of Magnum Guide Services.



hen, longbeards are content in the fall to hang out with the boys. These boys can include jakes and, said Kolb, that can help with scouting. "When the older toms congregate, it's not unusual to find some of the younger jakes with them. Since jakes are a noisier bird, their vocalizations can help give away the location of toms."

Cover for hunters and bird behavior are not the only aspects that make a fall hunt different from spring. Gobbler appearance is significantly different during the autumn as well.

If it's a mount you want, you'll find that beards are thicker and longer in the autumn after the birds have had some time to recuperate from spring flings. "Their beards get pretty beat up when they're mating," said Roche, "So you'll find better-looking beards in the fall."

The downside to autumn longbeard appearance is that the birds are molting in the fall, so their pinfeathers are not at their finest. To Steenbeke, however, this isn't really a problem. "Gobblers don't molt all at once," he noted. "It's a drawn-out process, occurring throughout the summer and fall, so they never really get ugly, in my opinion."



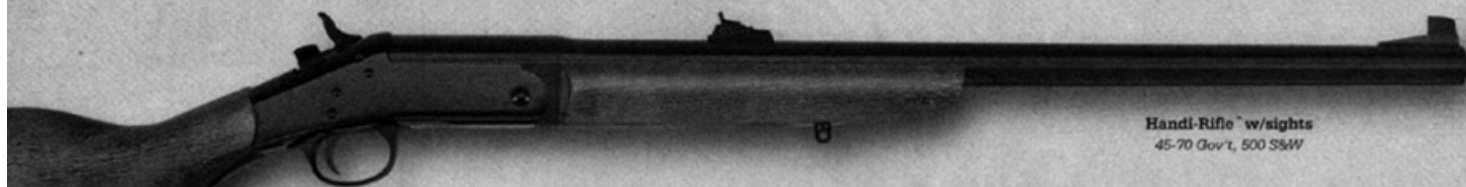
Long, sharp spurs are a sure sign that a Rio Grande tom has some age on him. They make fine mementos of your fall hunt. Photo by Larry Proffitt.

In spite of their differences, spring and fall turkey hunting have two things in common: the need for good scouting and the need for good calling. It's how you go about these things that make the two seasons completely

different.

FALL SCOUTING

Hunting veterans say that pre-season scouting is much more important in the fall, primarily because turkeys are much less vocal. Thus, the invest-



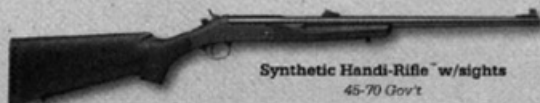
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ment in time required of the fall hunter is greater, and maybe that's one reason the season has been slow to attract enthusiasts.

Increased pre-scouting is also important in the autumn because the Central Texas habitat in which the birds live changes, and you've got to be aware of those changes' effect on flock behavior.

Two of the region's reasons for reduced cover in the fall, the deciduous San Saba pecan and the red oak, also produce some of the birds' favorite foods — pecans and acorns. The concentrations of food sources littering the ground beneath the trees attract wandering diners and are obvious pre-scouting destinations.

"To selectively kill old gobblers in the fall," said Proffitt, "the hunter must first find the birds by scouting. Listening for heavy wingbeats of heavy turkeys flying up to roost. Observing them in certain areas. Blind-calling in areas gobblers are known to be using."

One well-known goal of scouting is to try to find the roost the night before you're set to hunt so that you'll



Spring or fall, you still have to beat the sharp eyesight of an old long-beard. This "pose" is a great one if your shot needs to be taken with a deer rifle and you want to avoid destroying meat by breaking the old boy's neck. Photo by Jeff Parker.

know where to wait for them the next day. Finding a roost, said Steenbeke, will make your job a lot easier, because the old scatter-and-call-back

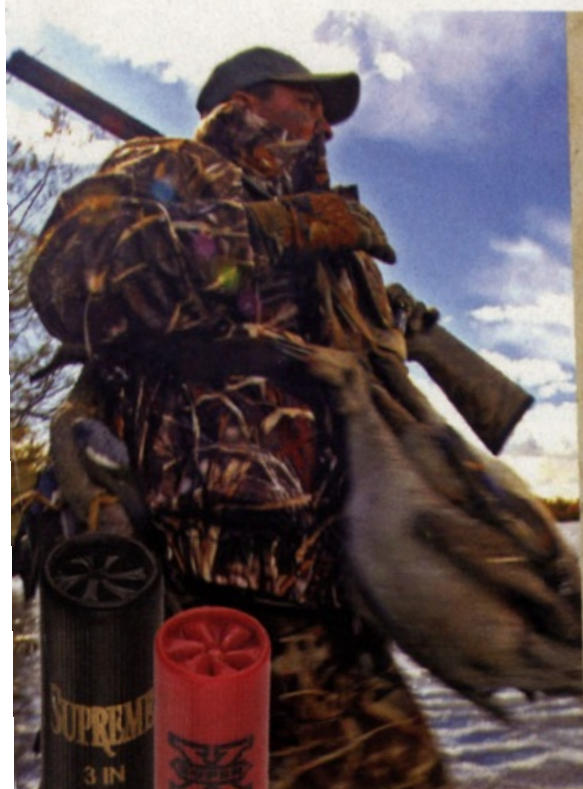
tactic works best with fall toms after morning assembly.

According to Roche, roost sizes are typically much bigger in the fall than in the spring. "It's not uncommon for them to house 100 birds or more," he said. But, he added, "While you'll want to locate the roost so you know which direction the birds are coming from in the morning, it's really important that hunters don't shoot too close to the roost. If a roost is disturbed they'll move it."

Since many Hill Country properties also offer deer hunting, feeders are often a hotspot for turkey activity. But, veterans will point out, the mere presence of feeders on the property doesn't exempt you from pre-scouting, as some feeders get more bird activity than do others. According to Jim Schmidt, manager of the Wildlife Ranch in Mason County, "The locations that work the best are usually near a water source."

Remember too, advised Kolb, that favored water sources can be in different locations in the fall than in the spring — another reason that he

Continued on page 52



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agrees that pre-scouting is more important now.

Mixing milo with deer corn in feeders can be fruitful, said Schmidt. "The deer will pick up the larger kernels of corn while leaving the small grains of milo for the turkeys. The turkeys enjoy scratching around and picking up the small grain."

Roche agreed that feeders are one of the best ways to both attract turkeys and to observe their habits and behavior. "In the fall, since it's not mating season, you tap into those other instinctual drives, food and water. We call our feeders the 'yellow yelpers,' since their timers tend to do much of the turkey calling."

While feeders are probably one of the most effective means of observing turkeys and ultimately bagging a tom, Steenbeke noted that they're "also the least fun and the least sporting."

Proffitt fully agreed. "I don't hunt the feeders," he said, "because I like calling for gobblers."

FALL CALLING

Calling in fall toms is part science, part superstition, and fully a personal

choice. Coming up with the right calling formula holds a certain mystique. As Proffitt will tell you, "A lot of them old turkey hunters can be pretty secretive about their methods."

One turkey call that most seasoned hunters agree on is the *kee-kee* run, which is often cited as the most typical of fall calls.

Schmidt, who has lived and hunted in the Texas Hill Country his whole life, said that *kee-kee* runs are very effective for older toms reluctant to gobble. "A tom will usually gobble to a high-pitched call, and the *kee-kee* run has a high pitch to it. A crow call is another high-pitched call and a tom will generally gobble in answer to it as well."

Proffitt uses a custom-made call geared specifically to gobblers, "I use my gobbler *kee-kee* run a lot. It's a slate one made by Roger Parks from Pennsylvania."

Another call often touted as a must-have for autumn hunts is the fighting purr, though fewer agree that it's truly effective if an old tom is the goal. Some, like Steenbeke, would only use it if no other tactics worked. "Gobblers

rarely fight in the fall," he said, "In fact, longbeards tend to flock together, away from hens and young birds throughout the fall and winter months."

Roche agreed. He doesn't think that a fighting purr is the call of choice if you're trying to bag a true longbeard. "Only jakes seem to respond to fighting purrs, so if you want a Jake it'll do the job, but if you want to call in toms it's not very effective."

Along the same lines, some hunters swear that staging a fake fight works wonders. But, said Kolb, "That works on jakes, not old toms. The gobblers that do respond are usually the younger ones who are most sensitive to the flux in the pecking order rather than the older guys. If it's a longbeard with some good spurs on him you're after, the tactic of staging a fake fight won't help you out much."

Roche also doesn't think fight-staging is effective for the older birds and explains that in the fall longbeards get along fine "since it's not mating season and there aren't any women to fight over."

One calling "truth" on which everyone seems to agree: You have to sound like a gobbler to bag one. "What works the very best," said Roche, "is to mimic the exact sounds they use with each other."

Steenbeke offers some suggestions for doing just that: "I usually use a mouth diaphragm and two pushbutton box calls, alternating from one to the other, like they were answering one another. It's not easy to find a mouth diaphragm that is deep enough to do gobbler calls though. Paddle-type box calls typically come with one side that is quite a bit deeper and meant to imitate the gobbler. They work well, but get two different models and practice switching quickly between them with a minimum of movement and noise. It takes plenty of practice."

According to Proffitt, who has developed his own routine over the years, the bottom line comes down to "rendering old-gobbler talk." He explained: "It's ultra-important to have the correct instruments and ultra-important to render correct calls."

One of his most successful calls, the cluck on a wing bone, was taught to him by an old turkey hunter from

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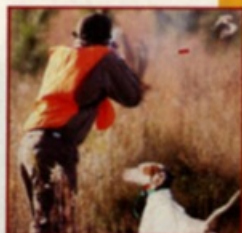
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Texarkana. "I have found no other instrument that renders this call as well as a wing bone tuned for a certain call," he stated, "I tune my bones for old gobblers to that caller."

Proffitt, who has himself become known as an "old turkey hunter," shared more: "For gobbler yelps and kees I use trumpets by Zach Farmer, Ralph Permar and Billy Buice. I also use Billy Buice boxes for gobbler yelps and gobbler clucks. Billy Buice makes gobbler boxes for me that he tunes to his old gobbler box."

The most critical factor in bagging yourself a fall longbeard, he said, is "lots of patience and confidence that you're doing the right routine. Nothing's a given. But when you go somewhere like Central Texas where there's lots of turkeys, you have a lot better chance."

MAKING THE SHOT

"More fall turkeys are harvested by deer hunters than turkey hunters," Roche said, "And, most deer hunters kill turkeys with a rifle because that's what they've got with them. So a lot of times when they shoot a turkey, they end up blowing it up so it's not mountable nor edible."

If you find yourself in the position to bag a tom but have only a rifle, Roche suggested a point-of-shoulder to point-of-shoulder shot. "This broadside shot is both quick and humane," he observed, "and won't destroy the meat."

The best bet may be to use a shotgun, aiming for the head. This keeps the hollow bones of the bird from splintering and getting into the meat, and keeps the beard and spurs intact. It also keeps more meat on those longbeard bones — so there's more to put onto that Thanksgiving table. □

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