

Turkey Day Tradition



RELATIVE NEWCOMERS Though they now thrive across much of Montana, wild turkeys are not native. FWP stocked the Merriam's subspecies, identified by light tail feather tips, in eastern and central Montana, and the birds have since spread. The eastern subspecies, shown here, has chestnut brown tail tips and was introduced illegally in the Flathead region. Those birds have expanded their range into other parts of western Montana.

Each fall, my wife and I try to harvest a bird for Thanksgiving dinner. Here's how we hunt turkeys during Montana's late season.

By Jack Ballard

Thanksgiving and turkey go together like the Fourth of July and hotdogs or St. Patrick's Day and corned beef. For hunters wanting to serve wild turkey to their family on Turkey Day, that usually means bagging a gobbler during the traditional spring hunting season, freezing the bird, then thawing it for the holiday.

But there's another option, one my wife Lisa and I have long pursued but that few other hunters notice amid the hubbub of hunting deer, elk, and other big game: hunting wild turkeys during the fall.

Chasing turkeys in October or November has advantages over hunting a gobbler in spring. Tags are more readily available. In addition to the shotguns allowed for spring hunts, you can also use a rifle, allowing for longer shots (though Lisa and I stick with shotguns). Unlike the toms-only spring season, fall hunters can shoot toms, hens, and young-of-the-year poults. What's more, autumn turkeys are usually

fatter and better tasting than their spring counterparts, which are just coming off the lean months of winter.

Then there's the way you hunt turkeys in fall, which for me is the late season's greatest appeal. During spring, the only way to lure a gobbler to within shotgun range (30 yards or less) is to hunker down in one spot and call a bird close by mimicking a hen

favors a more aggressive approach because you stalk the birds rather than wait for them to (maybe) come to you. And because turkeys in eastern Montana live in or near pronghorn, deer, or upland bird habitats, you can combine turkey hunting with hunts for other species.

WHERE TO HUNT

Fall turkey hunting is allowed in western Montana (Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Regions 1 and 2), where the birds are primarily on private land, and in the state's southeastern quadrant (Region 7), where I hunt and which is packed with public land. The fall season in all three regions runs September 1 through January 1.

Look for turkeys where you find white-tailed deer and ring-necked pheasants: along the edges of pastures and harvested crop fields near riparian (streamside) habitats. They also like open forests and

woody draws where mule deer hang out. Like antelope, turkeys rely on exceptional eyesight to spot danger. Unlike antelope, they rarely venture more than a few hundred yards from cover. You might find them feeding in

With the exception of using the kee-kee run (see page 38), autumn turkey hunting



GUYS NIGHT OUT When not fanned out in their classic mating display, tom (male) turkeys, also known as gobblers, are identified by the strand of long fibrous bristles growing from their chest. During the spring season, only toms can be shot. During the fall season, hunters may also harvest hens and young-of-the-year poults.

LEFT TO RIGHT: DONALD W. JONES; JESSE LEE VARNADO

Jack Ballard is a writer in Red Lodge.

hay meadows or crop stubble, but usually not far from trees or shrubs where they can scurry to safety if threatened, or to rest after filling their crop.

Turkeys roost at night in the tallest trees they can find. In national forests, that means ponderosa pines. On the eastern plains, turkeys mostly roost in green ash or cottonwoods growing along rivers or seasonal streams.

The 1- to 10-square-mile range of local flocks doesn't alter much from spring to fall. However, areas within that range where you'll find turkeys change throughout the year, depending on food sources. In fall, wild turkeys dine from an eclectic menu, which varies depending on what's available. For instance, prolific hatches of terrestrial insects may draw the birds into grasslands where the bugs are abundant. On one fall hunt near Ashland, I bagged a fat hen that had stuffed herself so full of grasshoppers they were coming out of her beak.

In addition to insects (usually more abundant early in the fall season before frost hits), turkeys feed on berries, seeds, and the succulent leaves of wild strawberries and other green plants. Most agricultural crops are harvested before or not long after the fall season begins. Turkeys soon turn up to feast on remnant corn, wheat, and barley or the



FALL HARVEST The author with a Jake Merriam's wild turkey shot on public land northwest of Baker a few days after a premature fall season snowfall. "This particular bird was probably the best wild turkey we've ever eaten," he says.

regrowth of hayed alfalfa. Turkeys also eat wild plums, chokecherries, and rose hips in the open coniferous forests of the Custer National Forest near Ekalaka and Ashland. Elsewhere the birds are most common in moist draws and ravines containing deciduous trees and shrubs.

Once for a magazine article assignment, I accompanied a trio of disabled Vietnam veterans on a pronghorn hunt in southeastern Montana. After the hunters harvested

their antelope and headed for home, I asked the outfitter we'd hired where I might find some turkeys on public land not far from his lodge near Broadus. He pulled out a map and pointed to a few locations in the Custer National Forest. His recommendation led me to an area that's produced several turkeys over many seasons, but this advice has proved universally valuable wherever I hunt turkeys in the fall: "Find dips and draws with plum bushes and

other shrubs, and that's where you'll find turkeys," he said.

HUNTING TACTICS

Spring turkey hunting requires listening. You walk around until you hear a gobbling tom, and then sneak to within a few hundred yards before sitting down to call him in.

But turkeys don't gobble in the fall, so late-season hunting is all about looking, not listening. One approach is to drive around and glass field edges and riparian areas. Another is to hunt likely habitat and search for sign. Once while hiking up a national forest ravine flanked in ponderosa pines, I discovered intermittent tangles of deciduous shrubs along the bottom. I also spotted a faded turkey feather and the telltale three-toed track dried in the mud on a cow path. Bingo. A half hour later, I spied a half-dozen birds pecking at the soil 100 yards away and was able to creep close enough to make a killing shot with the copper-coated No. 6 lead shot from my 20-gauge shotgun.

If the terrain and cover allow, try sneak-

ing up on a stationary flock of turkeys preoccupied with feeding. Another—and, for me, more productive—approach is to locate a slowly moving flock and get ahead of the birds for an ambush. This requires both speed and stealth. Eagle-eyed turkeys can detect distant movement and bright colors from hundreds of yards, so you need to get in front of the birds without a single turkey spotting your approach. Once alerted by a wary turkey's *Putt! Putt!* alarm call, a flock can disappear in an instant.

Turkey movement isn't perfectly predictable, but a hunter can usually figure out where the birds are going. As evening approaches, they'll work their way toward a favored roosting site, so head for the closest grove of tall trees. Feeding birds often follow the contour of a slope or move straight uphill or downhill. At daybreak in favorable weather—not too windy or rainy—turkeys almost always make their way to a feeding area after descending from their roosts. Like white-tailed deer this time of year, they wander into open fields and meadows for an

hour or so before returning to cover.

Last season Lisa and I spotted a flock at midmorning on a Block Management Area about 50 miles northeast of Miles City. The land was mostly open cattle range and hay fields that you'd never consider prime turkey habitat. But it did contain one wandering draw clotted with green ash trees and chokecherries that looked perfect for turkey roosting, loafing, and feeding. Sure enough, we spotted a dozen hens, a few dozen poults, and a couple of jakes (one-year-old males) drifting toward the draw from a cut hayfield. Lisa and I hustled up the draw, then inched up the bank to where we estimated the birds were headed.

The flock was closer than expected. At 20 yards, Lisa killed a hen and a juvenile, while I bagged a jake. Earlier that day we'd harvested an antelope buck and a brace of sharp-tailed grouse. Now, with three wild turkeys also in the bag, we not only had more meat for the freezer, but also a special treat to cook in the smoker and serve for Thanksgiving dinner. 🦃

Using the Kee-Kee Run

If other approaches fail when hunting late-season turkeys, try using the kee-kee run, or call. Employ this tactic if you are unable to get near enough to stationary birds for a shot or can't pull off an ambush on a moving flock.

First, get as close to the flock as possible. Then, with your shotgun unloaded, run at the turkeys and hope they scatter in all directions. Find the nearest cover, sit down, load, and, using a mouth call, say *kee-kee-kee* or *hurry-hurry-hurry* to mimic the worried sound of poults trying to find each other.

You'll need to listen to a training video on YouTube a few times beforehand to get it down. That call, along with a few soft yelps, can often entice a poult or hen to come close enough to your hiding spot for you to secure your Thanksgiving dinner. —Tom Dickson, Editor



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LISA BALLARD; JESS MCGLOTHLIN; JESS MCGLOTHLIN; SHUTTERSTOCK

DEER-TURKEY CONNECTION In eastern Montana, many hunters bag a fall season wild turkey in the same forested terrain where they hunt mule deer, or in agricultural areas along streams and rivers where whitetails and pheasants hang out.