

Journal

PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL MUZZLE LOADING RIFLE ASSOCIATION'S BIG GAME RECORDS PROGRAM

Early Turkey Hunting

by Keith Lasseigne

They looked like giant turtles with the improvised packs on their back. As they pulled in to the checkpoint bright smiles greeted me as they recognized my face. "Airman Lasseigne we just saw a flock of turkeys!" the team leader said to me.

"I'm pretty sure you saw grouse not turkeys; they never had turkeys in this part of the country. Perhaps when you were crawling around on the ground they just looked the size of turkeys?"

"Well those were the biggest grouse we ever have seen then."

We returned from the field exercise a few days later and on my first day off I drove down to the fish and game offices and was speaking to a Washington state game biologist.

"Yep we've been transplanting turkeys in that area for years now."

Wow, I never heard a turkey gobble here in eastern Washington and growing up in Louisiana I knew what they sounded like.

A few weeks later with a map in my hand and the area marked by the biologist I was sitting in a campground with opening day of turkey season starting the next day. I was playing with an old slate call I had my mom send up from Louisiana where I still had some of my hunting gear stored. As I sat in the campground playing with the call, a loud and thunderous gobble sounded off a few hundred yards from my campsite. I was the only one in the campground and certainly the only one hunting turkeys in that area. I quit calling and later that evening was able to roost the old gobbler.

The next morning my partner and I headed out towards the roost area and sure enough the old tom was still there and had no hens. He flew down off his roost and strutted out to 50 yards in front



of us and put on a fanning show for over 10 minutes. He really had caught me out of position and I was lying flat on the ground this entire time. Eventually the big tom got tired of not seeing the hen calling to him and started running down the hill right towards us. I got all excited and fired off the old 12 gauge. I totally missed him. He took to wing and my hunting partner behind me fired his gun and we watched the awkward flying bird tumble to the ground.

So began my turkey hunting passion in Washington state, except that the very next year I missed the season due to my assignment to Alaska where turkey chasing was traded for bear hunting. I didn't return to Washington for over 12 years. What a difference those twelve years made. Now Washington has three thriving

varieties of long beards and all can be found on public land.

The week before spring turkey season opened, I was out doing some pre-hunt scouting on public land. I had busted up a flock the previous deer season and was pretty sure they would be around. I let out a coyote howl in the predawn darkness and the woods erupted with gobbles. It sounded like a tom was upset at every compass point and I just smiled. I walked back to the truck thinking how great opening day would be now. The evening before opening day my wife and I headed back to try and get an idea where an old tom might be roosting. One yelp on the coyote howler and sure enough a thunderous gobble greeted me.

The next morning found me there 45 minutes before light. I moved as qui-

ety as I could and set up Gertrude, my decoy of many years. Poor Gertrude has been shot, survived a coyote attack, and had my sons use her for target practice a time or two. As night turned to light the old tom was letting the world know he was the boss. I could feel the chill in the air and pulled my face mask up to warm my ears and provide a bit of camouflage to my pale face.

Resting across my lap was a 12 ga. Thompson Center New Englander. Just like Johnny Cash said, "I bought it one piece at a time" from internet auction sites a few years ago. It turned out really nice and I love carrying it in the woods because it's super lightweight. One thing for sure; you must shoot your muzzleloading shotgun on paper. Changing powder charges or shot charges creates a different pattern every time. Try experimenting with over powder cards and over shot wads. One friend of mine uses three over powder cards on his trade gun to get a good shot pattern. I quickly learned that the bulk of the pattern out of my TC is hitting about 6" high and that certainly paid big dividends out in the woods. I knew after extensive patterning what my smoke pole would do. I also practiced with and used my "speed loaders" ex-



tensively, while they are convenient they certainly are not all that "speedy."

The tom finally flew off the roost and started coming my way. The excitement grew as his gobbling became louder. I strained my eyes looking for him. He had to be no farther than 100 yards. What seemed like an hour, but was only

10 minutes or so, passed by slowly and still no movement other than a small striped chipmunk trying to figure out why the buck brush sounded like a hen turkey. Then a far off gobble filled the canyon. Was that the same tom? Ten more minutes passed and there was no sign of the bird. I'm not sure what caused him to run off. I suspected coyotes came in which happens frequently in the area I hunt.

I knew the direction he was headed, so I grabbed my decoy and quickly stuffed it in my back pack. I hiked in a huge circle trying to get ahead of the tom. After about 30 minutes of fast walking I found another good open section and placed Gertrude out again. I made a soft purr on the box call and sure enough a tom gobbled about 100 yards

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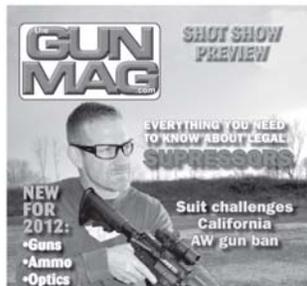


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from the direction I was expecting. I slowly brought up my shotgun and propped it on my knee. A slight movement caught my eye and that old Tom had snuck in quietly. He alerted when I brought back the hammer, but didn't run. In fact he stretched his head and neck to try and figure out where the sound had come from. I placed the gold bead midway on his neck and pulled the trigger. This T/C New Englander has such a nice trigger; light for a shotgun and no creep. White smoke filled the air and when my hearing returned to normal, I could make out the sound of a flopping turkey.

I'm impatient when I'm deer hunting and turkey season seems to make it worse. Running and gunning for turkeys is something I've been using very successfully the past few seasons. It sure beats waiting for hours on end and then nothing appearing. Some folks enjoy sitting in a blind or stand for hours on end, but it's not for me. With my light 12 ga. and good hiking boots, I try to bring the hunt to the birds. It's not unusual for me to cover 5 to 6 miles a day chasing turkeys.

As far as I know turkeys were never native to Washington State. Just like other introduced species some folks love them and some hate them. Winter time here is cold, but not brutally cold. It makes tough living for turkeys, but it's not impossible. They tend to flock up in huge groups during the winter. What a boon for turkey hunters scouting for springtime hunts, but anyone feeding cattle knows what they do to a grain pile in short order. In the spring the flocks tend to break up in smaller groups and spread out looking for the limited amount of food during the transition from winter's icy grip to the new life that spring promises. These birds have become experts at making the most out of Mother Nature's bounty or lack of it. While they may feed in huge tracks of fields or move through the sage brush country, at night they still look for those safe pine trees. Coyotes and cougars prey heavily on the turkey population around here. The result of all this is that their range is a bit larger than back east. Moving around during the day will enable you to hunt more birds and increase your chance of connecting. Using a coyote howler is very effective in shocking the birds into giving up their location. I make it a habit of carrying binoculars with me too. Many times I've spotted the pre-historic walk of a flock feeding in the

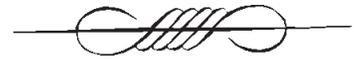
middle of sage brush miles from any trees. When that happens I move out of sight because I'm convinced they can easily see me walking miles away. I'll circle around and attempt to get in front of their movement, but like any hunting it doesn't always work out like you plan. We also have numerous deep drainages or pits from the great Missoula flood thousands of years ago. Birds could be 100 yards away from you in one of these pits and never hear your yelps or howls. Moving and calling every ten minutes will put you on more birds in this type of country guaranteed.

The turkey population is doing very well here and you can take up to five birds a year. You can take two on the east side and one on the west side during spring season and then two more during fall. It takes a lot of hunting to fill your tags and I usually fill them every year or so. So while five a year are allowed, logistics' makes it difficult for most working folks.

To get the most out of your season, remember shoot that muzzleloader on paper and experiment with loading. It'll pay big dividends come spring time. Then do your pre-season scouting in late winter and early spring. Once the

season is on and you're slathered up in tick repellent don't be afraid to put some miles on those boots of yours. You'll expose your calls to more birds and who knows what you will call in. Best of luck hunting!

Keith Lasseigne is an avid hunter and outdoorsman born on the bayous of Louisiana. After a childhood of hunting small game, he joined the Air Force and traveled to many locations trying to hunt, trap, and fish whatever was popular in that location. After 21 years as an Air Force Survival instructor, Keith settled down with his wife of 25 years in eastern Washington. He continues to hunt, fish, and mountain bike every chance he gets. You can contact him at: Zane121@msn.com 



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