

TURKEY CALL

Life Experiences

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My brother-in-law, Wayland, speaks Turkey. I do not. He started developing the skill he when he was a teenager, and after many years of trial and failure, he successfully bagged his first bird when he was twenty-one. It was a rite of passage. Wild turkeys are intelligent creatures with a poor sense of smell but they compensate with keen eyesight to detect the slightest movement. Hunting them is challenging, but success is very rewarding.

Wayland is an avid sportsman, a family trait. He loves to fish; he loves to hunt, and he loves to talk turkey. He was the first born in a family of hunters whose mentor father had honed the skills and cultivated the passion as a young man himself. He predicted that his son would never bag a turkey. There was no greater incentive.

During one brisk March day Wayland called me and invited me to come down to Tybee Island, Georgia to go on a hunt. My experience with firearms was limited to shooting tin cans in the backyard, but I was delighted to be asked to come along for the ride. Gobbler season was about to start and Wayland had a game plan for the opening hunt based on prior reconnaissance over the last few weeks. When I drove in, he was already preparing dinner. Yum – brined turkey breast, a portent of things to come. He has had a lot of experience cooking wild game delicacies and tonight's entree would be scrumptious.

After our dinner, we assembled the next day's tools of the trade including Camos, 12 gauge, shells, and the grand prize – a small wooden turkey call. It was ancestral, used to call up gobblers by generations of family turkey hunters. "Urrrrk!" Wayland demonstrated a turkey hen's yelp—perfectly irresistible to a spring-fevered tom. The well-seasoned wing bone vibrating in the cedar box yielded a mellow sound.

Through scotch-beaded crystal glasses we poured over photos and trophies of previous conquests: a claw or two, old tom beards, quills, and magnificent arrays of tail feathers. We headed to bed with visions of bagging a prized bird.

Morning. Early morning. A long silent drive from quiet city through gray fields and misty meadows led to the end of the asphalt. A barbed wire adorned gate separated dirt road from old logging trail. We crossed last season's cotton field and parked the truck at a bend in the trail. Leaving the truck behind, we turned and meandered down a muddy logging road that went through a deep marsh. We continued where the road opened to a clearing. We came upon a small trench bordered by a large felled tree in sight of the woods. Safety off. We nestled in our blind and waited for the dawn.

"Gobble. Gobble. Gobble," blubbered a tom.

The hunt begins.

"Gobble. Gobble. Gobble." This tom was eager.

I could hear him but he was still in the woods out of my sight. Wayland could see a faint red glint through the limbs. "Urrrrk!" Wayland manipulated the wooden turkey call, imitating a hen as eager as her intended mate.

"There he is! Do you see him?" he murmured.

"Where?" I whispered.

With procreation on his mind, the bird edged slowly toward the clearing. For the first time I could see the object of our obsession. "Urrrrk," the box squealed. The bird replied. "Gobble, gobble, gobble." "Patience!" Wayland said, "we don't want the tom to think that the hen is coming to him."

Silence.

"Urrrrk." Bird and box barked and clucked a duet as the interval and distance between call and response diminished. The bird stepped out in the clearing. He strutted another cautious step.

"I'm gonna shoot now," Wayland warned in hushed tones. The motion of the gun rising to position startled the gobbler and he took flight.

Crack! Pow!

"Ack! Winged him!"

The bird fell to the ground and hobbled up the logging road. He dared not run off in either side direction. It would be a certain drowning death in the watery marsh.

“Here, take this, and don’t shoot me.” Wayland said as he shoved the shotgun toward me. I could sense the urgency of the moment, and the faith he had in my hunting skills.

The tom darted to the end of the road before road became field, and veered off to the right, disappearing in the heavy brush. My brother-in-law was in close pursuit. I hurried, but lagged behind. I got my instructions. “I’m gonna go get him” he yelled back to me. “If he comes your way, shoot him!” I froze. This was no tin can.

Wayland waded out in the dense weeds in the trail of the turkey, pausing to survey for movement, then, suddenly, he leapt. My brother-in-law actually took flight.

There was huffing and crowing and puffing and squawking. Wayland pinned him. He had wrestled the bird to the ground and wrung its neck. He held up the bird--head flopped and dead weight.

Wayland grinned. With bird in hand he reverse-waded through the thicket. We walked to the parking field where he put the prize in the truck. He paused. He felt in the pockets of his coat. It was gone! The heirloom, the treasured turkey call was nowhere to be felt. I was dismayed.

Wayland was determined.

The brush rustled as he disappeared again in the undergrowth. I could hear him rooting in leaves and limbs. The turkey was not the only one with eagle eyesight that day. He stood and held up the

small wooden box. Wayland grinned—a second triumph. Turkeys are not the only ones who can swagger and strut.

We were all set for another day of hunting, but not yet. After the drive home, there was chopping, plucking and picking, gutting and scrubbing. And for dinner that night, water buffalo! But that's another story.