

## Eastern Wild Turkey

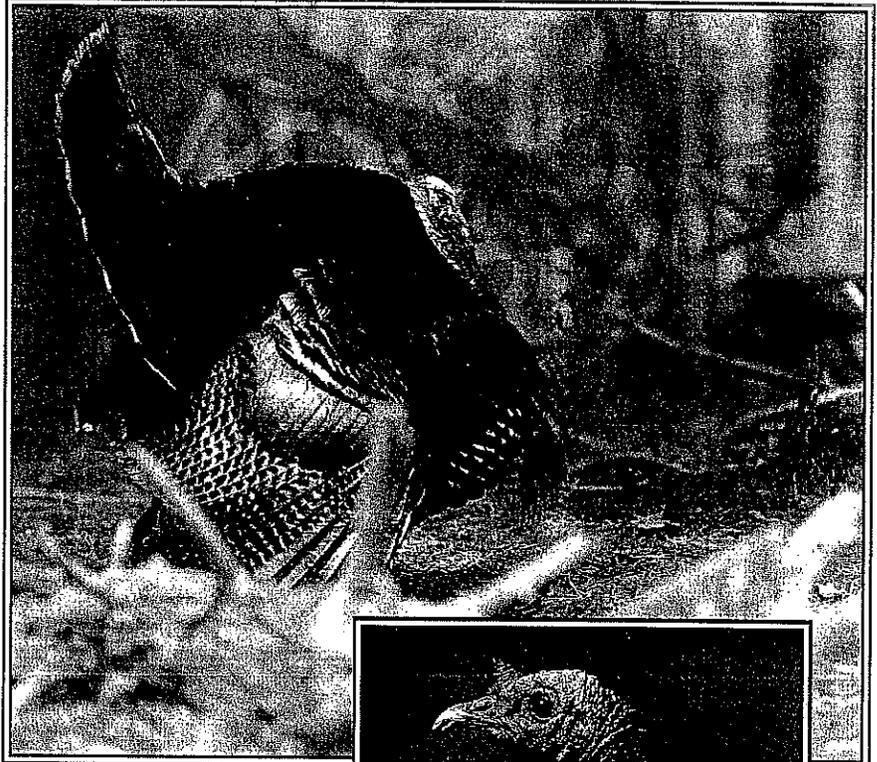
(*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*)

by Mary C. Kennamer

NWTF WILDLIFE BULLETIN NO. 1



NATIONAL WILD  
TURKEY FEDERATION



ABOVE: The eastern wild turkey inhabits the eastern half of the United States.

RIGHT: The gobbler exhibits the characteristic red, white and blue head, the black-tipped breast feathers and copper/bronze iridescence.

The eastern wild turkey is the most widely distributed, abundant, and hunted turkey subspecies of the 5 distinct subspecies found in the United States. It inhabits roughly the eastern half of the country. The eastern wild turkey is found in the hardwood and mixed forests from New England and southern Canada to northern Florida and west to Texas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. It has also been successfully transplanted in California, Oregon, and Washington, states outside its suspected original range.

L.J.P. Vieillot first described and named the eastern subspecies in 1817 using the word *silvestris*, meaning "forest" turkey.

Since the eastern wild turkey ranges the farthest north, individuals can also grow to be among the largest of any of the subspecies. The adult male, called a gobbler or tom, may measure up to 4 feet tall at maturity and weigh more than 20 pounds. Its upper tail coverts, which cover the base of the long tail feathers, are tipped with chestnut brown and tail tips with dark buff or chocolate brown. In contrast, the breast feathers are tipped in black. Other body feathers are characterized by rich, metallic, copper/bronze iridescence.

The primary wing feathers have white and black bars that extend from the outer edge of each all the way to the shaft. Secondary wing feathers have prominent white bars and are edged in white, producing a whitish triangular area on each side of the back when the wings are folded on the back.

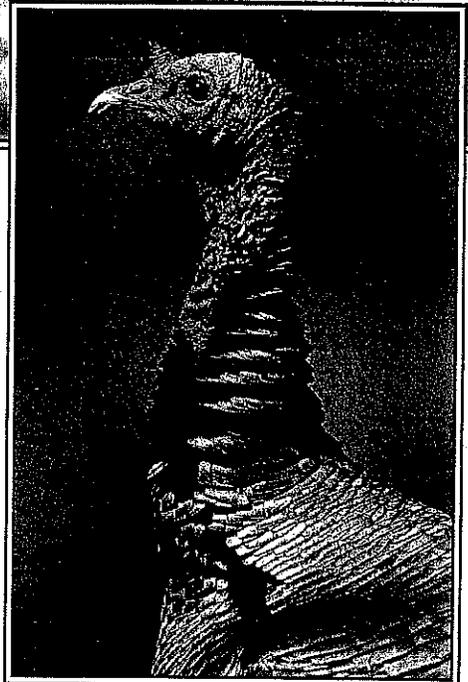
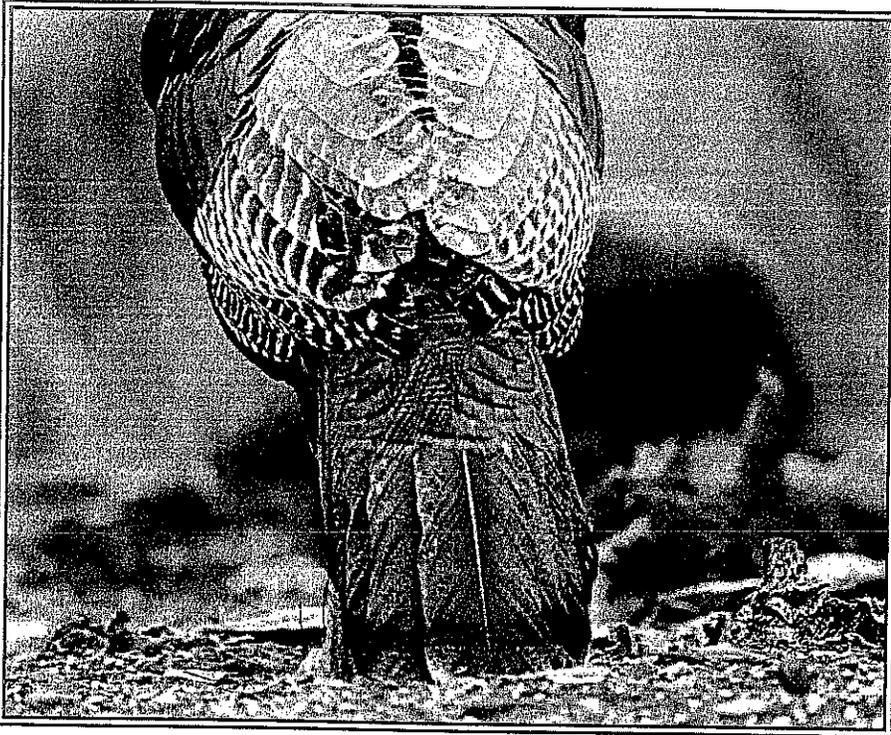


Photo by JOHN HEIDECER

PHOTO BY BILL KINNEY



Eastern gobbler wings folded on the back show a whitish triangular patch.

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Eastern wild turkeys are found in 38 states and one Canadian province. It is the most abundant of the five subspecies found in the U.S. and Canada.

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A mature female, called a hen, may be nearly as tall but is usually lighter, weighing between 8 and 12 pounds. Females are similar in color to the males but more brown, and the metallic reflections are less brilliant. Feathers of the hen's breast, flanks, and sides are tipped with brown rather than the black and white tips of the male. The head of the female is considered feather covered with smaller, dark feathers extending up from the back of the neck. Females lack the caruncles or fleshy protuberances of skin at the base of the front of the neck that are bright red on the male. Beards and spurs are generally considered secondary sex characteristics in males. Beards may be present on about 10 percent of the hens, however, they are thinner and shorter than those of adult males. Spurs on hens are uncommon but, when present, are usually rounded and poorly developed.

The reproductive cycle for the eastern wild turkey usually begins in late February or early March in its southernmost habitats but not until April in northern states such as Vermont and other areas across the northern edge of turkey range. Likewise, the cycle is complete with the hatching of poults by June

or as late as mid-summer further north. Birds that reneest may bring off broods as late as August.

Breeding behavior is triggered primarily by the increasing day length in spring, but unusually warm or cold spells may accelerate or slow breeding activity. This behavior begins while birds may still be in large winter flocks prior to separating as individuals or into small groups.

The basic social organization of these flocks is determined by a pecking order with the most dominate bird at the top and the least on the bottom. Males and females have separate hierarchies, and there can be pecking orders within and between flocks of the same sex; while stable pecking orders within flocks of the same sex seem to be common to all wild turkey subspecies. Turkeys have home ranges, not territories where individuals defend space within a given habitat from other members of the same sex. Instead they fight for dominance recognizing individuals within the pecking order while sharing overlapping home ranges.

Courtship behavior patterns include gobbling and strutting by the males. Gobbling attracts hens to males who court the hens by strutting. If the hen selects the gobbler for mating she crouches, which signals the male to copulate. The first peak of gobbling activity is associated with the beginning of the breeding period when gobblers are searching for hens. The second peak occurs a few weeks later, when most hens begin incubation.

Hens become secretive while searching for a site to nest prior to laying eggs. Laying hens may continue to feed with other hens and mate with gobblers, but this social activity will be away from the nest site.

Nests are shallow depressions formed mostly by scratching, squatting, and laying eggs rather than by purposeful construction. The arrangement of twigs and leaves is minimal in sites chosen for their moderately dense

understory which still allows the hen a view but gives protection from avian predators.

Laying a clutch of 10 - 12 eggs takes about 2 weeks and unincubated eggs are usually covered with leaves. Continuous incubation begins about the time the last egg is laid at which time the hen no longer tries to conceal her eggs when she leaves for short periods to feed.

The hen will incubate for 26 - 28 days sitting quietly and moving about once an hour to turn the eggs. Actual hatching begins with pipping—the poult rotating within the shell, chipping a complete break around the large end of the egg. Hens respond to the pipping sounds by making soft clucks at random, a form of communication which begins to imprint the poults to the hen as she inspects the eggs and turns them. Damp poults clumsily free themselves from the egg but are fully dry and coordinated so they can follow the hen away from the nest within 12 to 24 hours after hatching. This vocal communication between hen and poults still in the eggs is an important part of the hatching process and is critical to survival of the young.

Imprinting is a special form of learning which facilitates the rapid social development of the poults into adults. It's a strong social bond between the hen and her offspring which occurs up to 24 hours after hatching. Imprinting describes the rapid process by which the young poults learn to recognize their species, essential for their survival. It happens only at this time and cannot be reversed.

Day-old poults learn to respond to the hen's putt or alarm call before leaving the nest and respond by freezing or running to hide beneath her. The hen, clucking almost continually, slowly leads her poults away from the

nest until within a few hours her pace is more normal. By now the poults have formed into a brood group that is constantly feeding by pecking at food items, a behavior learned from their mother.

By the second day out of the nest, wild turkey poults are performing most of the characteristic feeding, movement, and grooming behavior patterns. By the end of the first week they are regularly dusting with the hen. By their second week they are able to fly short distances and at the third week they are able to roost in low trees with the hen. The ability to roost in trees is an important event in the brood's development as it removes them from the danger of ground predators. Roosting occurs at the beginning of another phase of rapid development, the acquisition of juvenile plumage and a change in diet from predominantly insects to a higher percentage of plant matter. This phase of behavioral

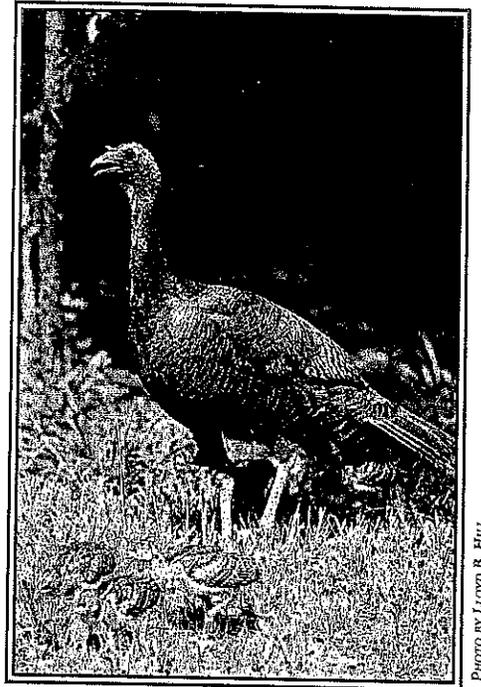


PHOTO BY LLOYD B. HILL

*An eastern hen, darker and duller than the gobbler, with 3 poults about 2 weeks old.*

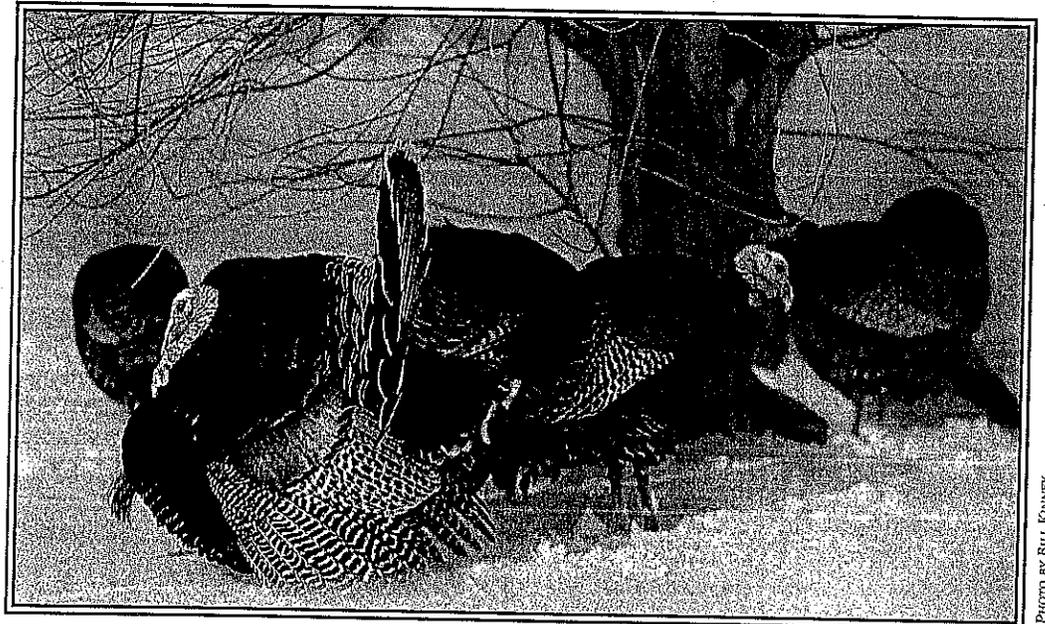
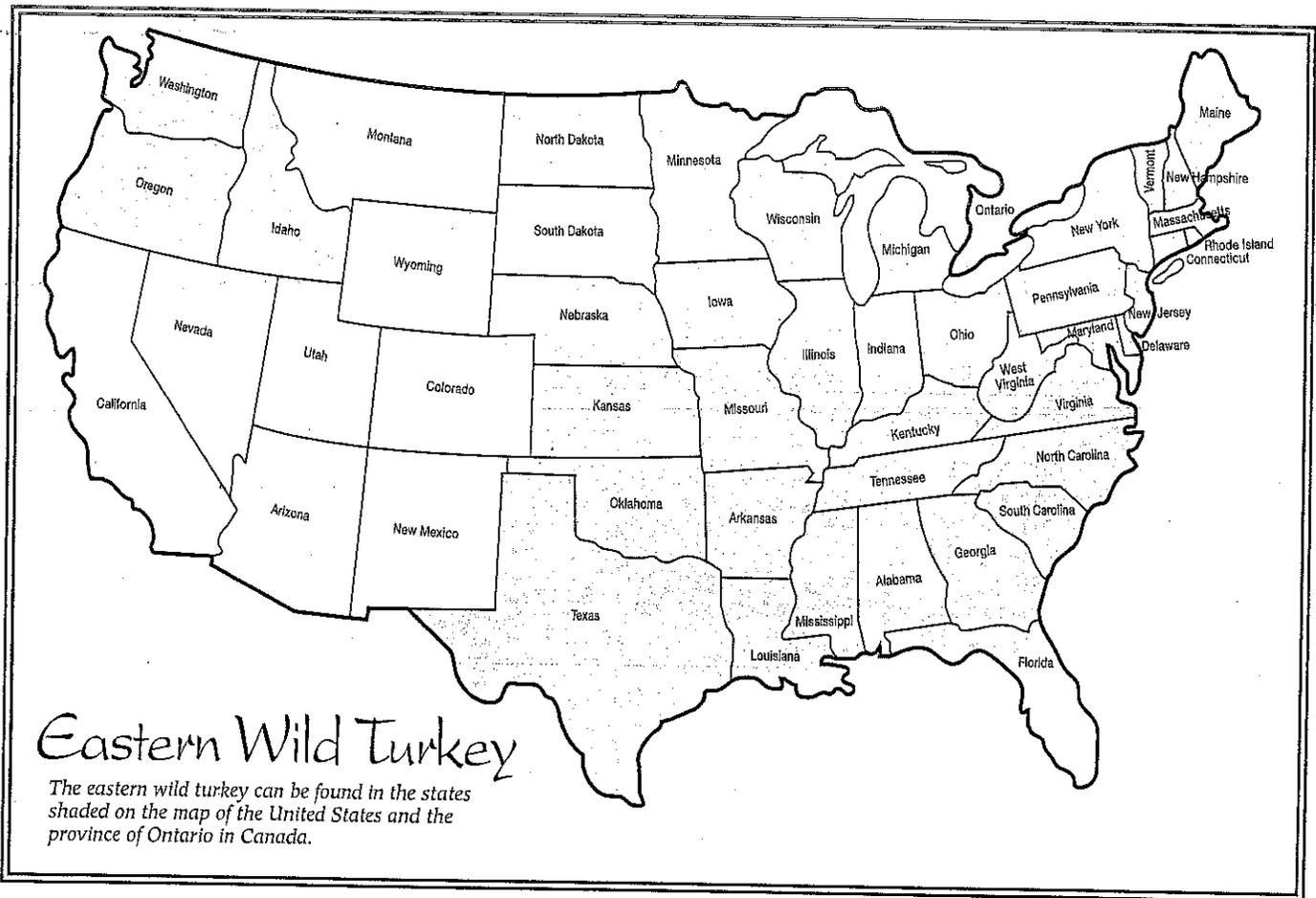


PHOTO BY BILL KINNEY

and physical development is accompanied by a sharp decline in poult mortality. Poults that survive the first six weeks have a much better chance of surviving to adulthood.

At age 14 weeks, male and female poults are distinguishable by body size and plumage. They have formed separate pecking orders although still dominated by

*Courtship behavior patterns include gobbling and strutting by males which, because of the wide distribution of the eastern subspecies, can occur when there is still snow cover.*



the hen until all males have finally left the brood group to form their own social units.

By fall, the pecking order of the sibling groups has been established and the young flocks are ready to enter the social organization of the surrounding population. The body growth of juveniles ends by the beginning of winter when the flocks,

separated by age and sex class, settle into winter range.

For additional information on this subject refer to **The Wild Turkey Biology and Management**, edited by Jim Dickson. The book is available for \$59.95 from the National Wild Turkey Federation, call 1-800-THE-NWTF.



**FEDERAL**  
*Ammunition*



Financial support for this publication was provided in part by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Federal Cartridge and Wildlife Forever and published by the National Wild Turkey Federation.

## Turkey Hunting Basics

Any hunter who has ever heard the thunderous gobble of a nearby male turkey knows why turkey hunting is one of the most exciting pursuits that a sportsman can undertake. However, to the newcomer, the special seasons, along with the specialized gear and tactics, can also be intimidating. Everything you need to know to get started in this thrilling sport will be covered in this two-part series. Part I will cover the rules and tactics, and Part II will discuss the gear and safety.

### The Rules

Turkeys are hunted in 49 States and three Canadian Provinces. All of these jurisdictions have at least a spring hunt, and many also have a fall turkey season. The spring season is much more popular with hunters, due in part to the fact that most of these locales have few other hunting opportunities in the spring, whitetail deer, small game, and waterfowl seasons are just a few of the other options that compete for the attention of hunters in the fall. As a result, much of the fall turkey harvest is merely incidental to pursuing other species while also carrying a turkey tag.

During the spring hunt, only mature male turkeys, known as toms, or juvenile males, known as jakes, may be harvested. Most jurisdictions allow the harvest of both males and females during their fall hunts.

Telling males and females apart is not difficult. Male turkeys, often called gobblers, are a darker brown color - even bordering on black - than the females. Gobblers' heads are a combination of red and blue, while their feathers have a metallic sheen. Females, known as hens, are generally a drab brown from head to toe.

Gobblers are also larger than hens. While most hens won't weigh more than 12 or 14 pounds, big gobblers can grow to twice that size.

The most telling difference between males and females; however, is the bristly tuft of modified feather that resembles hair that males grow on their chests, known as a beard. Only bearded birds are legal during the spring season. While a jake's beard is usually very short

and stubby, a mature tom's beard can be as long as 12 inches or more. Although the length of the beard is irrelevant from a legal perspective, the length of a tom's beard, along with the sheer size of the bird, is the measure of a bird's trophy status.

Some of the spring seasons restrict daily hunting hours to dawn to noon, or dawn to mid-afternoon. This is to minimize disturbance to nesting hens, which nest on the ground. During the fall hunts, however, hunting is generally allowed from dawn to dusk. The other big difference in the rules governing the different hunting seasons is in the type of firearms that can be used. Generally only shotguns or bows are allowed during the spring, while rifles or handguns are also allowed during the fall in some places.

As always, make sure to consult state or provincial hunting regulations for seasons, limits and other local rules.

### **The Tactics**

Spring is the breeding season for the wild turkey, and it's a good thing too; if not for the fact that male turkeys are somewhat preoccupied at this time of year, hunters would have a very hard time bagging these wily birds.

In the spring, tom turkeys will gather and breed with as many hens as they can. In their quest to add additional hens to their harems, gobblers will respond by gobbling to a hunter imitating the call of a hen. By continuing to call to an interested gobbler, the hunter hopes to lure the amorous bird into range.

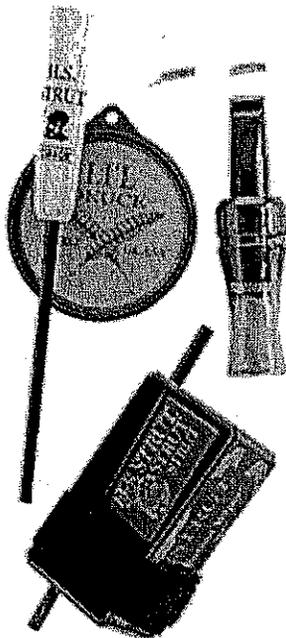
The classic strategy for bagging a gobbler in the spring is to actually locate a bird the night before. Turkeys roost in trees overnight, and by scouting a likely area during the late afternoon or early evening before a hunt, a hunter can locate a gobbler either visually or by



*While a jake's beard is usually very short and stubby, a mature tom's beard can be as long as 12 inches or more.*

getting him to respond to a number of different calls. Either way, the bird is likely to roost for the night in a nearby tree and, unless disturbed from his roost during the night, will still be there the next morning.

Well before first light the next morning, the hunter will quietly sneak to within a couple hundred yards of the roosted gobbler and find a nice wide tree to sit up against. By calling to the gobbler right away, even before he flies down from his roost just before dawn, a hunter is often able to lure the gobbler in before he becomes occupied with real hens or feeding.



*The most common calls to imitate during the spring are those of the hen turkey, with the yelp being the key call.*

Because the gobbler has love on his mind, the most common calls to imitate during the spring are those of the hen turkey, with the yelp being the key call. These calls will usually get a gobbler to respond by gobbling back, and hopefully get him into shooting range. But this doesn't always work because the courtship of real hens and gobblers works the opposite way, with the tom calling the hens to him. If a wary gobbler decides to play hard-to-get and refuses to be lured in by your best hen calls, imitating a gobbler rather than a hen can sometimes take advantage of the jealous streak in the tom. By make gobbling sounds, the hunter hopes to make the gobbler think that another gobbler is trying to move in on the hen.

Fall hunting can be a bit different. As previously mentioned, hunters who are mainly hunting deer, bears, or other game take many of the turkeys harvested each fall. However, for those who wish to target turkeys in the fall, it is important to realize that it is completely different from hunting turkeys in the spring. As the birds are not breeding at this time of year, the hunter must use different tactics to lure a bird into shooting range. Rather than using a big tom's jealousy against him, hunters instead depend on the gregarious nature of turkeys.

Autumn birds are either grouped into large flocks of adult males or a mixture of immature males and females. The most common approach to turkey hunting in the fall is to locate a flock of turkeys and then try to break the flock apart. This is done by sneaking up as close to the flock as possible and then rushing at the birds (with gun unloaded) until they run or fly away, hopefully each in a different direction. A dog can also be used instead to accomplish the same thing (if legal in your state). Once this is done, the hunter finds a good place to hide right in the middle of where the birds were, and starts to call. The idea is that the birds want to get back together into a flock and will soon start to call to locate each other and regroup.

The calls to make in the fall are also different from the spring calls. The hunter is merely trying to imitate the sound of a hen turkey that is trying to locate other birds from its flock. The most common calls to imitate in the fall are the adult hen assembly "yelp," the juvenile hen "kee-kee," or in the case of mature toms, coarse gobbler "yelps."

## **The Gear**

**Calls:** As you can tell, being able to imitate the sounds that real turkeys make is the key to success, whether in spring or fall. Fortunately, there are a number of different calls available to replicate just about any sound a live turkey can make.

Diaphragm calls use small, horseshoe-shaped pieces of flat aluminum with one or more pieces of thin latex stretched across them to create a reed. These calls are probably the most popular type of call used by turkey hunters. This is because these mouth calls produce excellent imitations of a range of different turkey sounds, and don't require the hunter to make any noticeable hand movements while also allowing him to have both hands free to mount a gun or draw a bow. Although these calls are also the most difficult to learn to use and require the most practice, all turkey hunters should strive to master the diaphragm call.

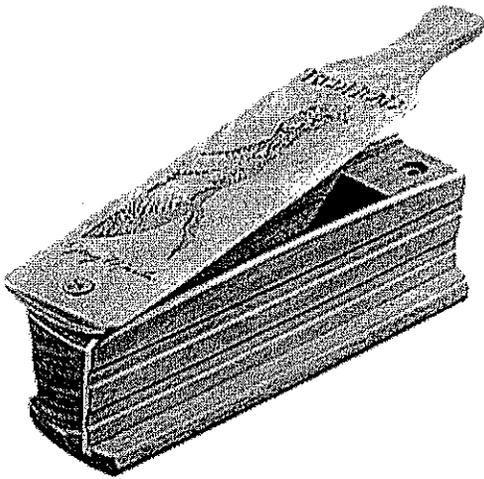
Friction calls are another popular type of call. These actually consist of two separate pieces, namely a round, flat box, called a sounding

board, with a slate, glass, or aluminum surface, and a peg, or striker, with a pencil-like shaft of wood or some man-made material. By "scratching" the tip of the pen-shaped striker across the surface of the box, a number of different turkey calls can be imitated with excellent realism. The disadvantage of friction calls is that most require two hands to operate, and some also won't work when wet due to the materials used for the surface of the box and/or the head of the striker.

The other popular type of turkey call is the box call. A box call is simply a rectangular-shaped wooden box with a lid. By dragging the lightly-chalked bottom of the lid across the edges of the box, extremely realistic turkey sounds can be produced. These calls are very easy to use and can be heard from a long distance, but, as with slate calls, they require two hands and most types cannot be used in the rain.

Regardless of what type of call you purchase, if you don't know an experienced turkey hunter who can teach you how to use it, a good instructional audio cassette or videotape is another essential piece of equipment. Play the tape over and over until you can reproduce most of the key sounds, and then practice, and practice some more. But don't just start practicing the night before opening day. Turkeys have excellent hearing, and can tell a good call from a poor one, which is why many hunters practice their calling year round.

Although there are other types of mouth and friction calls available, most hunters use one of the above calls. In fact, many hunters use a number of different calls, of different varieties, in order to imitate the sound of different birds. As you can imagine, it can be difficult to carry such an assortment of different calls into the field. That is why most turkey hunters wear a turkey vest.



*The other popular type of turkey call is the box call. A box call is simply a rectangular-shaped wooden box with a lid.*

The key feature of a good turkey vest is the number of different pockets that it contains for storing all manner of different turkey calls. A turkey vest can also have a built-in back and/or seat cushion, as well as a game pouch for carrying your turkey.

**Camouflage:** Unlike many of the game species that hunters pursue, turkeys can see color, and have excellent visual acuity as well. That means that unnecessary movement should always be avoided, and full head-to-toe camouflage is required to cover up all necessary movement. Face and hands should also be camouflaged. This is especially true

for bowhunters, since more movement is required to lift, draw and aim a bow than with a shotgun.

But not all camouflage is the same. Army surplus jungle camouflage is better than nothing, but there are dozens of superior camo patterns available to today's turkey hunters. Regardless of where you hunt, there is a camo pattern to match, and a camo pattern that matches the terrain and cover you will be hunting in will do a better job of breaking up your outline and concealing your movements.

Camo colors can be matched as well. During the early spring, when new vegetation and leaves have not yet sprouted, a pattern with more browns and greys is more effective than one that is predominantly green. This is also true for fall turkey hunting. However, a pattern containing more greens will blend in much better as the spring progresses.

**Guns and Bows:** Guns or bows must accord to local regulations, which usually mandate shotguns of between 10 and 20 gauge, loaded with shot sizes of between #4 and #6, and bows of similar pound pull as those required for hunting deer. Some jurisdictions also allow the use of rifles and handguns during their fall seasons.

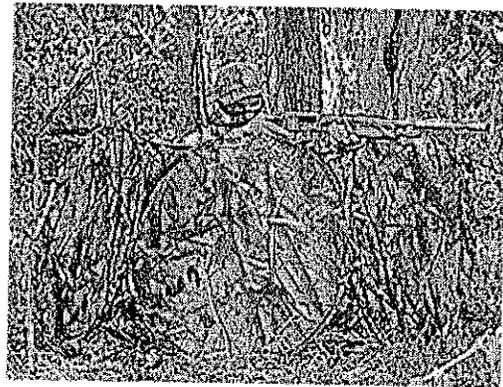
Calibers starting with the .22 centerfires on up to the various deer-class cartridges are appropriate.

When hunting with a shotgun, always aim for the turkey's head and neck. Never shoot at the thick and boney body of a turkey, as it will usually result in just a wounded bird. Because a turkey's head and neck is a small target - about the size of your wrist and fist - tight turkey chokes are the way to go. As a result, many hunters opt for iron sights and even scopes on tight-shooting turkey guns. However; make sure that you pattern your shotgun in advance to see how it shoots, and try different ammunition if you are not happy with the results.

When you do get a big gobbler in your shotgun's sights, try to avoid taking the shot while the bird is all puffed up and strutting. During such posture, the gobbler will actually pull his vulnerable head and neck down and into his chest, partially shielding the target area. Instead, wait for him to straighten up and stick his head up, offering a much better target.

Bowhunters should use razor-sharp broadheads suitable for deer, and aim for the turkey's vital internal organs.

**Accessories:** Portable or natural blinds are also popular with some hunters. The beauty of a blind is that it conceals all movement, especially when the bird is in close and you're getting ready to shoot. Blinds are very popular with bowhunters, as raising, drawing and aiming a bow requires much more movement than a shotgun does. Doing all of that without being spotted can be very difficult, especially when you are in view of more than one bird.



*The beauty of a blind is that it conceals all movement, especially when the bird is in close and you're getting ready to shoot.*

Besides a small stool and/or seat cushion to sit on, the final piece of equipment that most turkey hunters rely on is a decoy or two. An imitation hen or jake serves to

not only add a visual confirmation of what the gobbler is hearing, but also helps to focus the turkey's attention away from the hunter during the final key moments before the shot.

Decoys should be used with caution, however, especially while hunting on public land. Although calling a turkey into shooting range is what it's all about, and not to mention the fact that they are just too wary to be stalked with any real degree of success, some hunters may spot your decoy, mistake it for a live bird, and decide to try to sneak up on it. Should you see another hunter stalking your decoy, quickly speak up in a firm voice. This brings us to a word on turkey hunting safety.

## **Safety**

When setting up in a calling location, find a nice tree to sit against, making sure that the tree is at least as wide as your shoulders, and make sure that you have good visibility to spot approaching hunters, as well as approaching turkeys.

Never wear visible items of clothing in white, red or blue, as these colors can be mistaken for parts of a turkey. Similarly, when you bag your bird and are carrying it out of the field, make sure that the bird is either completely concealed or that you and the bird are marked with a sufficient amount of hunter orange to alert other hunters.

Don't let what may seem like a lot of complicated gear, rules and tactics keep you from trying this exciting sport. A little bit of basic knowledge will help you sort through the confusion, and you'll soon discover what great sport turkey hunting is.

# **CAMOUFLAGE**

## **Dress for Success**

- 1** Never wear pieces of clothing that contain the colors of red, white, or blue because they can be mistaken for colors found on wild turkeys.
- 2** Be sure that accessories you carry that are red, white, or blue (e.g. diaphragm calls, box call chalk, candy wrappers, apples, cigarette packs, etc.) are not visible to other hunters.
- 3** Camouflage your gun. If not, at least cover up white diamonds or other red or white markings.
- 4** Always keep your hands and head camouflaged when calling.
- 5** Wear dark-colored socks and pants that are long enough to keep your bare skin from being exposed.
- 6** Do not “over-camouflage” by sitting in vegetation so thick that it obscures your vision.
- 7** If you can legally use a man-made blind of camouflage netting, maintain a clear field of view.



Special thanks to the Pennsylvania chapters, NWTF and Winchester  
for financial support of the Turkey Hunting Safety Task Force.

# PROPER USE OF DECOYS

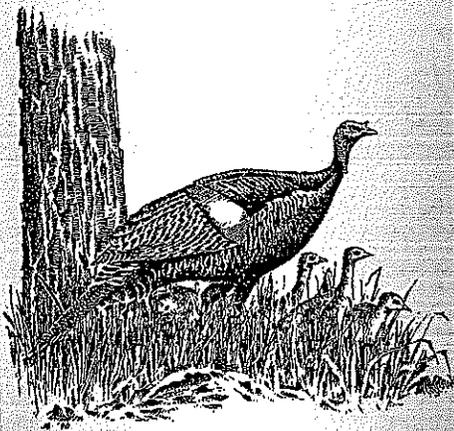
**Unless the use of decoys is prohibited by law, the following guidelines apply:**

- 1** A decoy should never be visible while being transported. Never carry an uncovered (identifiable) decoy any distance.
- 2** Whenever possible, set-up by a “stand” tree that is greater in diameter than the width of your shoulders.
- 3** From your seated position, identify the clearest line of vision to your front. Establish a “sight line” that allows you 100 yards visibility. *Then* set your decoy(s) approximately 20 yards from your position on the line.
- 4** Should you see another hunter (especially if he/she is close to your “line of sight”) call out to them in a *loud*, clear voice. Their presence has already compromised your location and a “soft” call may only confuse them, rather than alerting them to your presence.
- 5** If you are calling over decoys and then elect to move to a new location, check carefully to ensure that no one is stalking your decoys. Check *before* leaving your “stand” tree. Should you see someone in the area, rule 4 applies.

Your safety is *your* responsibility - hunt defensively!



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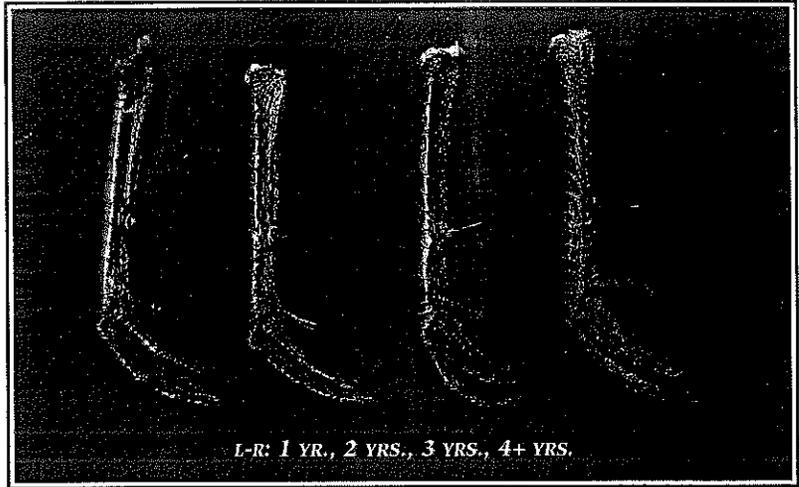
# Aging Spring Turkeys

By Ron Brenneman  
Photos by Gene Smith

NWTF WILDLIFE BULLETIN No. 19



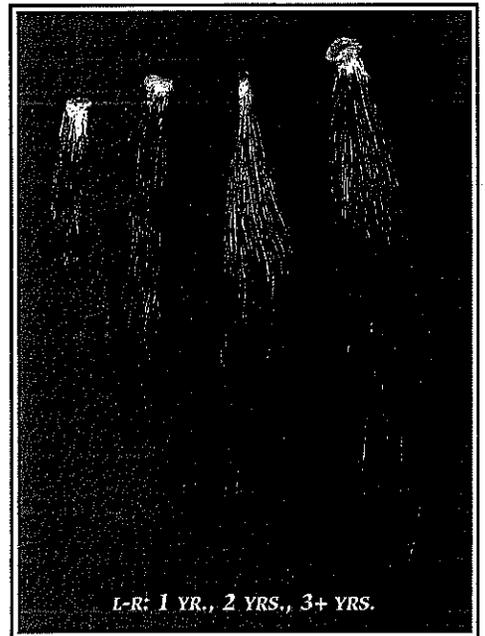
NATIONAL WILD  
TURKEY FEDERATION



L-R: 1 YR., 2 YRS., 3 YRS., 4+ YRS.

## SPURS

- 1 year .....1/2" or less
- 2 years .....1/2" to 7/8"
- 3 years .....7/8" to 1"
- 4+ years .....1"+

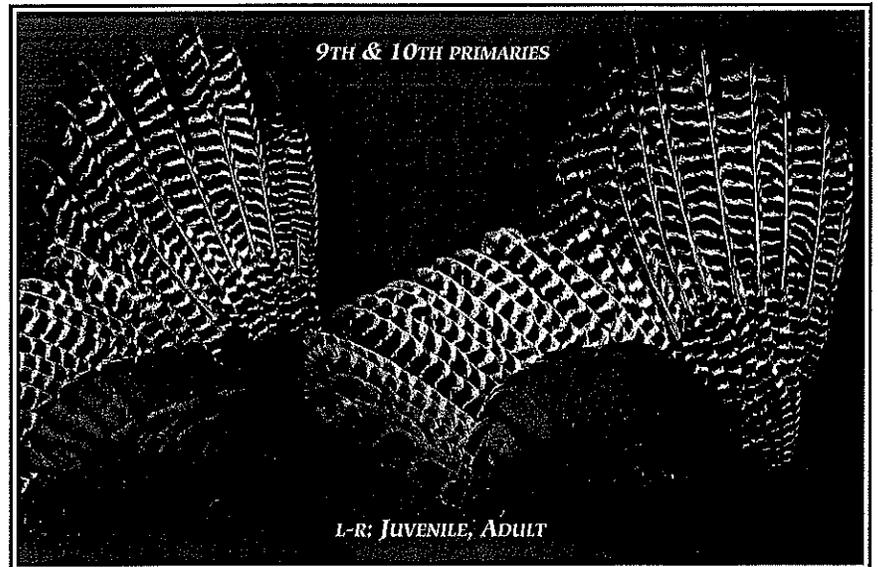


L-R: 1 YR., 2 YRS., 3+ YRS.

## BEARDS

- 1 year .....3-5"
- 2 years .....6-9"
- 3+ years .....10"+

## WINGS



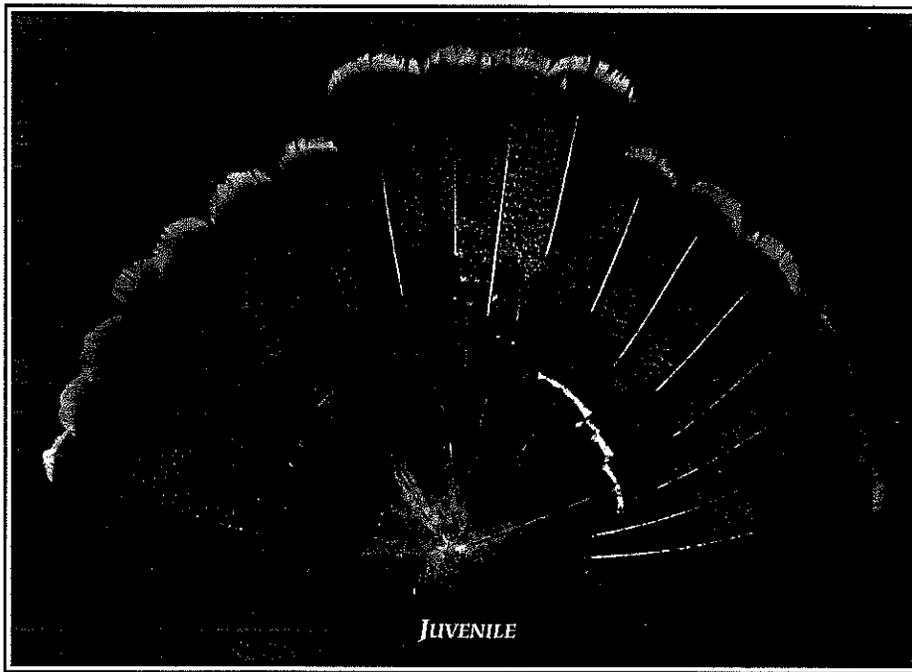
9TH & 10TH PRIMARIES

L-R: JUVENILE, ADULT

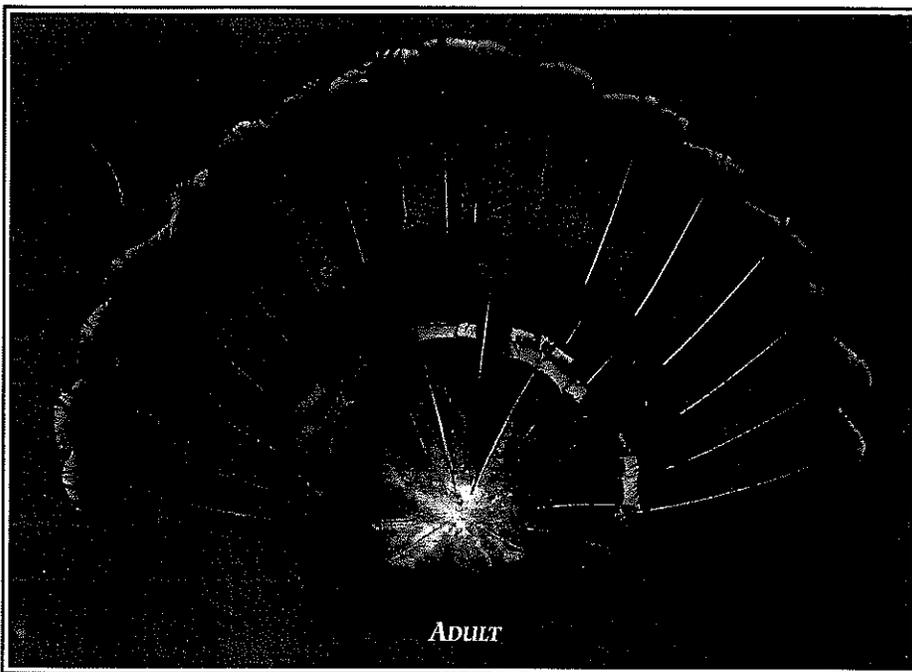
Juvenile - 9th & 10th primaries pointed and dark tipped, no barring near tip

Adult - 9th & 10th primaries more rounded with white barring extending to the end

TAIL



Juvenile – irregular contour of tail feathers



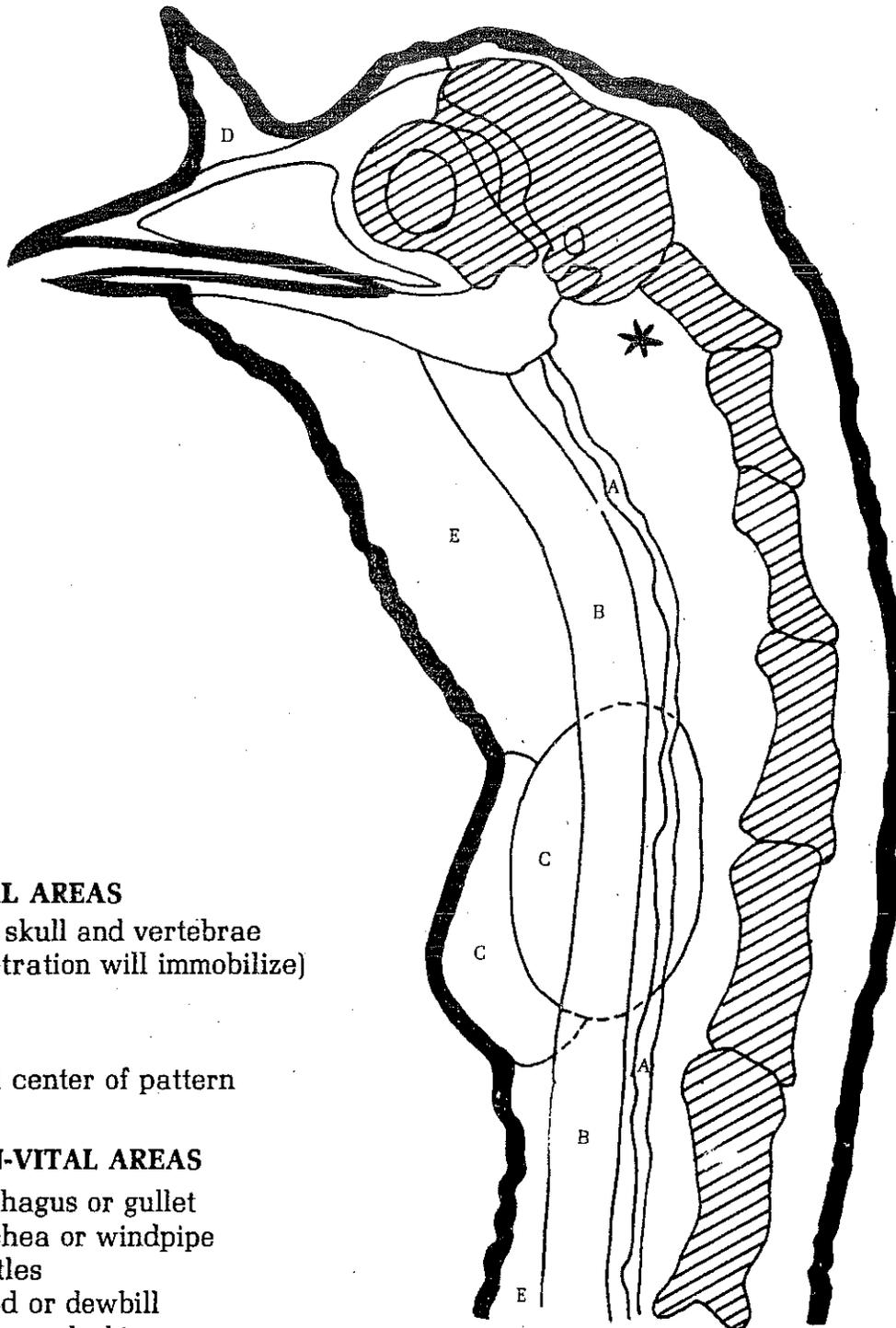
Adult – regular contour of tail feathers



Financial support for this publication was provided in part by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Federal Cartridge and Wildlife Forever and published by the National Wild Turkey Federation.

# 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.  
Used by permission of Wildlife Section,  
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources