

Autumn Turkeys

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Fall Hunting for New Hampshire's Greatest Gamebird

BY STEVE HICKOFF

Have you seen a wild turkey lately? Chances are, the answer is yes. Our present-day opportunities for watching and hunting New Hampshire turkeys have steadily increased, thanks to more than thirty years of wildlife management.

Since 1975 — when the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department released just 25 wild turkeys — statewide populations have grown to well over 30,000 birds. Prior to that restoration effort, Granite State wild turkeys had all but disappeared for more than a century; habitat loss and unregulated hunting had extirpated this great gamebird by 1854.

Today, flock numbers continue to grow statewide, north and south, beyond their original historical range. In northernmost Coos County, even springtime trout anglers are likely to hear a gobble or two, and in the Seacoast region, autumn brood flock sightings are commonplace. New Hampshire's wild turkey is alive and well.

HUNTING FALL BIRDS

New Hampshire offers a generous archery-only autumn turkey season in most of the state, which runs concurrent with bow-only deer opportunities (September 15 - December 15, 2007). For some, this allows an archer to target two game species, often from a tree stand. Since daytime-roaming turkeys often use game trails from their roosting sites to feeding areas, as mostly nocturnal whitetails do from nighttime fields to bedding locations, the arrangement is ideal.

Not a bow hunter? A limited five-day, weekday fall shotgun season is also available in the southwestern region, Connecticut River Valley and other nearby Wildlife Management Units (October 15-19, 2007).

As strategies go, there are two primary fall turkey hunting approaches: you can passively wait for patterned wild turkeys to show up in range, either on the ground, in a blind, or in a tree stand; or find a flock and attempt to scatter them on foot.

In the latter scenario, separated birds want to regroup, especially autumn family flocks. Calling scattered gobble gangs (and broodless hen groups) is sometimes tougher, but not impossible. I've had hunting and calling success with all fall flock variations, and they've beaten me many times as well.

SCOUTING FALL FLOCKS

As with New Hampshire's spring turkey season, it's important to find autumn birds to hunt. To do so, you need to spend time afield, rely on landowner reports, or both. When scouting and hunting, move slowly at all times. Look ahead, on the chance you'll see distant flocks (though many times wary birds see you first), and also at the ground to note where they've recently traveled. Finding sign in the form of tracks, droppings, scratchings, molted feathers, plus dusting and roosting areas, is important to solving the scouting puzzle.

Tracks, the most common wild turkey sign, are left in muddy areas where flocks roam, where they move from the roosts to feeding zones, along game trails and even creek beds. The middle toes of adult gobblers (often 3 inches or more) are typically longer than a hen's (less than 3 inches). Mixed track sizes in one location indicate a family flock.

Droppings are either j-shaped (for male turkeys), or bulbous (for females), though there are exceptions to this standard rule. Unlike spring's "bearded bird" requirement, in fall turkey hunting, both male and female turkeys are legal for taking. When you find both fresh tracks and droppings, it assures you that wild turkeys are around.

Scratchings indicate where turkeys have raked leaves to expose insects, tubers and hard mast such as acorns and beechnuts.

Molted feathers show where turkeys have been the past late summer and into fall. Indiscriminately scattered feathers under likely roosting trees, paired with an excess of droppings beneath branches, reveal a likely roost.

Dusting areas, where wild turkeys crouch belly down and shake themselves in the dirt, are frequently used during the warmer months. These often hold other sign forms.

Roosting areas provide a sense of security where turkeys sleep at night. Broad-branched trees such as white pines, oaks and maples often hold flocks. Often enough, these roosts include water near or below them.

In all cases, pay attention to both fragmentary and consistent turkey sign in a particular area you're scouting and hunting.

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If you know what to look for, turkey sign is easy to find. Fresh tracks and molted feathers are traces of turkey activity.





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Turkeys are not fussy eaters. In season, berries and beechnuts are diet staples.

FOODS AND FEEDING ZONES

Our New Hampshire turkeys, like others around the country, rely on high-protein grasshoppers, crickets and other insects for nutrition. Through summer, as brood hens raise poults, and as gobbler gangs — plus broodless hens — travel with their own sex, flocks often hit open field or edge cover locations daily.

As colder months arrive, fall turkey flocks transition to spending more time in the woods and along edge cover, feeding on both lingering soft and hard mast such as berries, beechnuts and acorns.

I first hunted turkeys in the early 1970s as a Pennsylvania teenager, and have lived in north-

ern New England since the mid 1980s. Over the years I've routinely investigated this bird's crop — or "craw," the turkey's thin-walled, sac-like food storage area — to determine what they've been feeding on. The results might amaze some. Here's a short list of some contents I've found there: grasshoppers, crickets, stinkbugs, worms, frogs, salamanders, alfalfa leaves, beechnuts, other hard mast, small pebbles, pine nuts, miscellaneous tubers and berries.

Sometimes it seems there's nothing a wild turkey won't eat!

CALLING FALL TURKEYS

Wild turkeys call to contact flock members, to vocalize a sense of well-being, and to express alarm at a predator's presence. Roughly thirty call distinctions exist, while fewer than half of these are applicable as hunting calls. Some hunters tag birds regularly with only clucking and yelping. Others use as many calling vocalizations as possible.

Calling turkeys is an interactive game where the hunter speaks the language of wild birds to coax that quarry into range. When calling fall turkeys, imitate their vocalizations by age and sex to evoke a response from the kind of individual bird or flock you want to hunt.

In family groups, young birds-of-the-year respond to "kee-kees" and "kee-kee-runs." Brood hens use assembly calls — a long series of yelps — to assembled separated flock members. Adult gobblers and broodless hens, the other two types of fall flocks, communicate with raspy yelps (gobblers), and higher-pitched yelps (hens), as well as clucking.

Hands-free single- or double-reed diaphragm mouth calls are best for making kee-kees and kee-kee-runs. Box calls and slates offer realistic yelps and clucks, but require the hand movement close-range turkeys can detect. By using both mouth and friction calls, the hunter can call autumn birds.

Gobbling activity is considerably less than during the spring breeding period, though I've heard it on autumn roosts and during hunts, espe-

SAFETY SAYS

In autumn, taking a wild turkey of either sex is legal. As a result, the various vocalizations you make as a fall hunter — including clucks, yelps, purrs, and so on — might be noted by other sportsmen in the autumn woods who are accustomed to targeting springtime's gobbling birds. Take precautions and always assume that the calling you hear might first be a person until visual evidence proves otherwise.

As shooting goes, it's not only important to aim accurately at the turkey, but also to note what's beyond that target. Arrows can skip and fly well beyond the intended quarry, and shooting lanes need to offer a broad view. Where will your arrow or pellets go once the shot is made?

Though scattering fall turkey flocks in order to call them back to your position as they reassemble is part of the long tradition of autumn turkey hunting, you need to make a deliberate distinction between this tactic and stalking, which is strongly discouraged.

For more information on New Hampshire turkey hunting — both spring and fall — visit www.HuntNH.com. — SH



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PERMITS AND TAGS

Hunters can take only a single turkey of either sex during the fall, either with bow and arrow during the archery season, or with a shotgun during the five-day shotgun season. The bird must be tagged with the “fall” tag that comes with the regular turkey license. Shooting hours for the fall season begin one-half hour before sunrise and end one-half hour after sunset.

The fall shotgun turkey season currently requires both an \$11 fall shotgun permit and a \$6 turkey license, as well as a current New Hampshire hunting license—all available at www.HuntNH.com or from any Fish and Game license agent.



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“Think like a turkey” and practice your calls. A realistic kee-kee-run will bring the birds to your hunting spot.

cially as male-only flocks regroup after fly-down. Jakes (juvenile males) often add a gobble-in-progress on the end of their kee-kee-runs.


Call softly or aggressively, situation depending. Hunt family flocks and adult hen and gobbler groups to get schooled in calling variations. Wild turkeys call to communicate in the wild; at times, almost any turkey sound the human hunter makes brings a chance of luring a curious bird in for a look. Or not. That’s the calling game. You need to interpret what you’re hearing from live birds to successfully imitate them.

When calling turkeys from an open setup, remain stationary, ideally while sitting in full camouflage with a broad tree trunk at your back. For safety, tie a length of hunter-orange surveyor’s tape around the tree. Pop-up blinds can put you in a position to wait comfortably for birds to show up in feeding zones. Some archers do so from a treestand while also targeting deer.

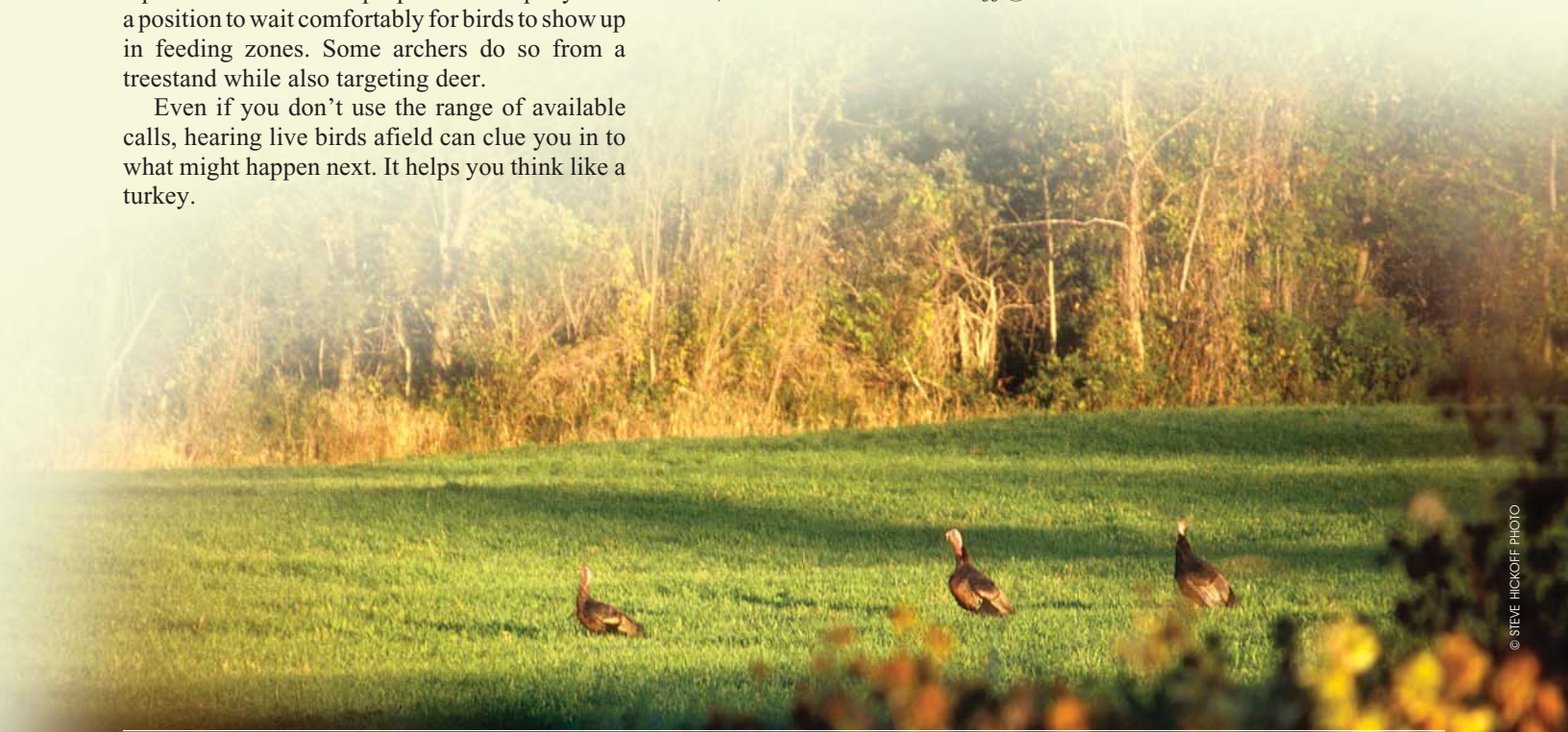
Even if you don’t use the range of available calls, hearing live birds afield can clue you in to what might happen next. It helps you think like a turkey.

GET OUT AND ENJOY

New Hampshire’s lengthy archery-only season allows for a steady and low-key hunt, and the five-day shotgun opportunity affords yet another chance to put a wild turkey on the holiday table. In both cases, simply being out there watching, scouting, and calling this great Granite State gamebird is pleasurable.

That we have such increasing options is a testament to N.H. Fish and Game’s ongoing wild-life management approach. Enjoy it, and preserve it for the years to come. 

A longtime N.H. Wildlife Journal contributor, Steve Hickoff is the author of The Fall and Winter Turkey Hunter’s Handbook (Stackpole Books, 2007). Contact Steve at hickoff@comcast.net.




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