

Spring Ritual

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN




There is no mistaking that spring is on its way. Iowa's hardwood forests have already begun echoing with the distinctive, staccato gobble of the eastern wild turkey. Blood stirring and primitive, it is a sound like no other. For human hunters, the deep resonant rattling is a woodland call to arms. It is an annual summons that cannot be denied.

As is the case with any world class concert, choice seats do not come easy. Obtaining your ticket will mean losing some sleep and may even include a night on the

ground. But once the show begins, these petty sacrifices will seem small indeed.

In reality, spring gobbling was not designed for entertainment. For mature toms, it is serious business and the most effective means of attracting potential femalemates. Clear mornings incite peak gobbling activity. The most aggressive toms begin advertising their presence as the very first hints of light begin to color the eastern sky. As dawn approaches, the gobbling intensifies as the symphony is joined by birds from surrounding



LONELY HEARTS CLUB—Etched against the backdrop of a spectacular April sunrise, a group of five gobblers simultaneously sounds off in hopes of attracting nearby hens.

ridgetops. Gobbling often peaks by sunrise and may cease altogether as hens fly down to assemble around vigorously strutting males. Strutting is most likely to occur in forest openings or along field edges where displaying males feel most visible.


During the early segment of the spring ritual March through mid-April, the woodland concert is heavily punctuated by the cutts, cackles and incessant raspy yelpings of inquisitive hens. By the end of April, most hens will have become more subdued as they engage in

nest site selection or commence laying eggs.

Once a majority of those hens have begun to incubate, hunters still in the woods will frequently encounter a distinct and final spike in the annual gobbling cycle. By now the forest will have achieved full canopy. For hunters, the lush greenery provides a much needed catalyst for gobbler encounters that give new meaning to the phrase “up close and personal.”

If conditions are just right, gobbling toms can now be approached to within 40 or 50 yards—sometimes





SHOVING MATCH— A pair of jakes, or yearling males, square off as they try to impress a group of foraging hens. The effort was foiled minutes later, however, by the arrival of a trio of mature toms who promptly trounced the upstarts before sending them scurrying back to the woods.

even closer. Bear in mind that many of these mature, 20-plus pound birds have become reluctant card-carrying members of the Gobbler's Lonely Hearts Club. On edge and scrapping for a fight, a dominate tom's immediate and explosive reaction to a series of soft yelps can be downright unnerving.

Although the dense tapestry of ferns, tree bark and gooseberry may prevent the hunter from obtaining an

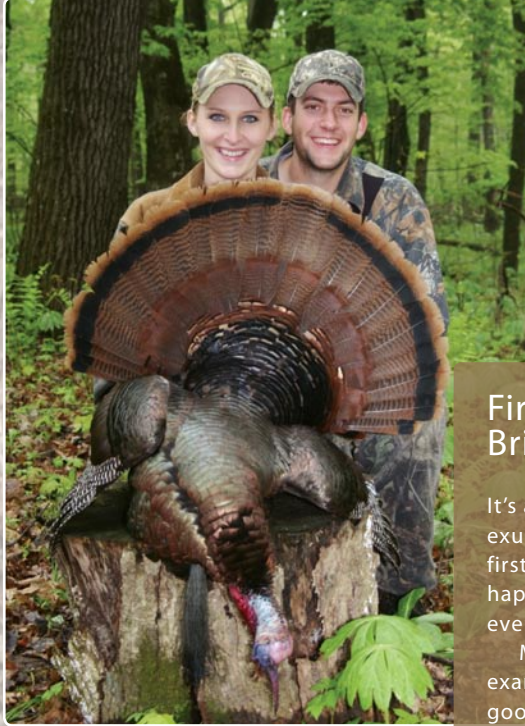
immediate visual confirmation, each new and resounding gobble loudly declares that the Iowa Timber Ghost is in fact headed your way.

It is only after enduring lengthy minutes of nerve-racking anticipation, that he finally and suddenly appears. Although you've seen it all before, your breath is suddenly taken away as the wily longbeard boldly struts on a direct course to your concealed position. Your pulse quickens and you began to tremble. Then, at a mere distance of 25 paces, it happens. With tail fanned and bedecked in all his iridescent splendor, the old tom pauses to emit a defiant in-your-face, triple gobble.

The sound is deafening, and the entire woodland seems to quake at his fury. And although you didn't need this heady reminder, the ancient rattle proclaims for once and all why spring turkey hunting is simply the world's finest and most exciting outdoor pastime. 🦃

SPRING RITUAL—A mature gobbler displays before an apparently disinterested hen along the edge of a northeastern Iowa timber.





First Time Turkey Hunt Brings First Time Success

It's always a unique privilege to be on hand when an exuberant first-time hunter returns to camp with their first ever goose, deer or wild turkey. If that hunter happens to be a family member, the moment escalates even higher.

My daughter-in-law, Renee Washburn, is a good example of what I'm talking about. She enjoyed the good fortune of bagging her first gobbler during her first spring turkey hunt. The 3-year-old, 24-pound longbeard was taken in the hardwood timbers near Marquette in northeast Iowa's Clayton County. She was accompanied on the outing by her husband (my son), DNR Conservation Officer Matt Washburn.

"It was an absolute perfect morning, and the gobbling was really loud," she recalls.

"It was still pitch black when we entered the woods, but as soon as it started to get light the birds began to sound off. A big tom flew down right away, but he started walking in the wrong direction. Pretty soon a second turkey began gobbling, and those two birds really started going at each other. It was incredible."

Deciding to take a risk, the hunters cautiously moved closer to the dueling toms. The tactic paid off. Following a series of soft yelps on the call, Renee spotted one of the gobblers coming up the ridge in full strut. Carefully shouldering her 20 gauge shotgun, she took aim and bagged the bird from 25 yards.

"I was really shaking, having trouble breathing, and all that good stuff," she laughed. "That hunt was definitely one of the most exciting things I've done in a long time, and it all happened in such a beautiful part of the state."

Washburn's memories aren't likely to fade anytime soon. She had her bird mounted, and the gobbler now struts above her living room entrance.

