

THOMAS HARVEY

# Measures of Success

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*Even the most experienced turkey hunters encounter a challenging season, but they don't let it define them*

WRITTEN BY WALTER "DEET" JAMES

**I**n a realm of technological advancements that cater to our every whim, hunting is the great equalizer. Turkey hunting is a weed-out course. Having hunted turkeys for 38 years, I feel I have reached an experience apex of sorts, though by no means am I an expert. Turkeys are the teachers; we are the students.

I have enjoyed tagging out in multiple states over many years and must admit that I once developed a proverbial chip on my shoulder. The chip was first knocked off during a week-long trip to Alabama in the mid-1990s when I returned home empty handed with tail fully tucked between my humbled legs.

That humility returned last spring when I once again learned that I am not in control. Despite being prepared physically and mentally, I left pristine turkey hunting land without a turkey. It was as humbling as the first time, but it also helped me appreciate that there is more to hunting than pulling the trigger.

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## PREPARATION OVERLOAD

My turkey hunting preparation begins with training, both physical and psychological, and lasts from January through August. It is initiated via a vast collection of turkey hunting videos and enhanced by physical training, including weightlifting, bike riding, walking and avoiding elevators that do nothing good for the heart.

Spring gobbler season is an obsession of mind and body. It includes countless wee-hour wakeups, many vehicle and boot miles, and physical and mental exhaustion. It is driven by an obsession and deep admiration for the noblest of game birds.

I am a creature of habit, so my spring turkey season typically starts in Virginia at large tracts of national forest and other public lands. At age 60, I still feel like 20 but know things will change eventually, so I embrace and nurture the gift while it lasts.

Unfortunately, the 2020 spring season began under the cloud of COVID-19. States were restricting non-essential travel and, as I encountered, some public land access areas were either closed or under construction. That said, I was more than grateful to recreate socially distanced, regardless of a few minor setbacks, and was even more





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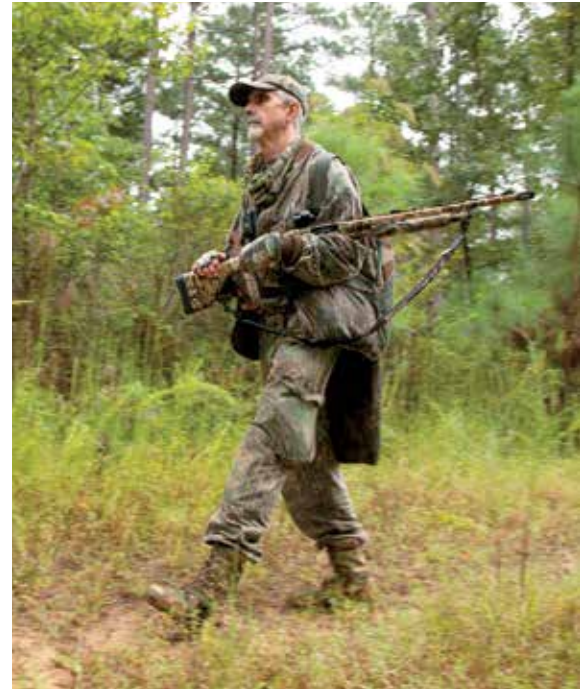
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Above, Clockwise from left: A global positioning system (GPS) is a welcome tool for hunters covering a lot of ground, especially in an unfamiliar area. A wingbone yelper, made from a turkey's wing bone, can be used to imitate the calls of a hen. Field edges can yield sign like tracks, scat or dusting areas. Opposite: A mature gobbler in full strut is something every turkey hunter hopes to see.

grateful after listening to COVID-19 tragedies on NPR at day's end.

As predicted, the weather turned cold for the opener and continued through my stay. If it was not windy or snowy, it was raining. As always, I lodged in my truck, also called the Red Roof Chevy Inn, and absolutely LOVED IT. Temperatures in the upper-teens and low-20s in a pickup bed are less than stellar, but are a great reason to dress quickly in the morning.

I sprung fully dressed from the truck bed into the remote, dark abyss of the national forest on opening morning and was greeted by a light dusting of snow. I headed to a traditional listening spot and despite the windy, wintry morning, I heard a gobbler at daybreak and was dumfounded! Extreme cold fronts and a dropping barometer typically shut down gobbling, especially when combined with snow. I went through an array of pre-fly-down tactics,

but the gobbler seemed disinterested and soon vanished. No doubt, his intention was the nearest real hen and circling him was moot since he stopped gobbling altogether. Game over.

#### THE SOUND OF SILENCE

After my initial defeat, I deployed my favored cutt-and-run method of hunting. With every call, I was greeted by silence. In fact, the entire valley was silent. I had seen many hunters in the area on the drive in, yet not a single shotgun report was heard.

Then a break! A sliver of public land extended down a steep ridge to the river and private land below. I doubt many hunters utilize it due to the challenging climb out. After a few hundred yards, I came to a point where I could go no farther, essentially a wedge of public vs. private land. I set up behind a blowdown on an old logging

road and began with some soft calls that were promptly answered by a gobble! As it turned out, I would encounter the "twins," two gobblers and likely siblings that refused to budge, remaining safely on the private land below. I hunted the twins for three consecutive days and was never close enough for a shot. With numb fingers every morning, I could only watch the twins and four hens participate in the pageant that is spring despite less-than-ideal weather.

I would encounter only one other gobbler in the first few days of hunting. I labeled him "The Ghost." The Ghost responded after daylight on top of an open ridge and I could not pinpoint his location. In fact, when The Ghost did respond, his gobble seemed multi-directional. Before I knew it, The Ghost vanished in open woods. Was it a gobbler from the past seeking revenge? Was it a premonition? Perhaps both, as I never heard or saw another gobbler that week.

I decided to shift gears to another favorite tract some 40 miles away. Access to this location had been previously closed for construction and I attempted to lodge up nearby my intended hunting location. Under the shroud of COVID-19, however, area residents were reluctant to offer lodging to out-of-staters. Regardless, I now had access to a favorite spot and likely one of the first to get it since the season began.

As the story goes, the only thing constant in life is change. The habitat had been altered considerably and my once

semi-open ridges were now largely briar thickets and early succession. I pleasingly discovered grouse were again abundant, but turkeys tend to be reluctant to be persuaded through thickets no matter how sweet the turkey talk. One gobbler was heard across a broad chasm that would make Evel Knievel

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nervous, but I was not intimidated due to my physical conditioning!

Following a 2:30 a.m. wake-up call and about 6 round-trip miles in national forest, the chasm gobbler was labeled Ghost No. 2. The second, and last, gobbler I encountered had a company of hens. Although I figured I had their travel corridor figured out, all abruptly circled behind me, putted and left me holding my gun while dropping both jaw and pride.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

I had hunted two solid weeks in some of the most breathtaking woodlands imaginable. I left empty handed but physically





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The author likes to cover a lot of ground when turkey hunting, a tactic dubbed “run and gun.” He sometimes employs decoys to help lure a gobbler into gun range.

and mentally refreshed. I would ultimately end the 2020 season in my home state of Pennsylvania harvesting one well-earned and appreciated gobbler.

When I reflect on the season, I must admit the inherent lack of gobbling stings but the adventure and pristine isolation of

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the national forests linger. The hiss of the falling snow apparent in my headlamp was mesmerizing, and the twins were a sight to behold. Both entities were like sunrises and sunsets; neither can be fully possessed but can be enjoyed and stored in the mind’s eye for reference during challenging seasons.

The harvest of wild game is by itself anticlimactic. If it were for that only, hunting success would be nothing more than an uninspired trip to the grocery store. True success in hunting is the culmination of the sights and sounds that leave us entertained, refreshed, enlightened and

part of something that sustains body and soul. I have come to measure and embrace success outdoors.

“If I wanted just to enjoy the forest, I’d go to a park,” my brother, who no longer hunts, once wisely said. As dedicated turkey hunters, our intention is to harvest, so lean times motivate. Having an adventurous nature, I find myself contemplating the following:

- Opening day syndrome: I have always scheduled leave time during opening season, and despite the Alabama locals indicating that I came much too early, I have never changed strategies. In fact, seasonality can play a role in both gobbler susceptibility and favored weather.
- Weather: It is beyond the control of the turkey hunter, but we can control geography. I favor the highlands of northern states, but they tend to experience spring “winters” often, so Piedmont regions or southern climes may be better suited early on.
- Heyday calling: Calling too much and too loud was common during initial turkey reintroductions decades ago, but it can be detrimental because birds



RICK SMALL

have adapted to predation, including human hunters. Hence, soft turkey talk is likely more suitable nowadays.

- Do what ya did and get what ya got: There are places that hold precious memories for all of us, including hunters, but the Earth is constantly changing. If we hunt one place long enough, we will experience those changes both in flora and fauna. One of my favored turkey haunts is now more suited to deer and grouse. The key is to recognize and adapt.

Finally, the most important item in the turkey hunter’s arsenal is pure, unwavering persistence. No one ever promised that turkey hunting would be easy. Every experienced turkey hunter has experienced highs and lows that serve as motivation despite the conditions or challenges. As I write this, I am already anticipating spring 2021 and how I have come to embrace the experience with a willingness to adapt. Simply put, that’s turkey hunting! ♦

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## My Packing List

I have been asked about my “typical” gear for spring turkey hunting, so I have provided a brief inventory. Keep in mind that I am a bit fanatical when it comes to turkey hunting. Your mileage may vary.

Concerning shooting irons, I alternate between gauges and actions, including 10, 12, 20, .410’s in pumps, semi-autos and double barrel. I usually take three or four shotguns on a remote camping hunt and alternate each under the mantra, “change of gun, change of luck.”

As for ammo, lead remains a standard. I am well-stocked and am testing non-toxics, including TSS (Tungsten Super Shot) and its predecessor, HEVI-Shot, which does increase killing ranges. That said, I still attempt to call turkeys in as close as possible and prefer putting the hammer down at 30 yards or less.

My turkey hunting clothing is typically layered depending on temperature with standard run-and-gun attire including layered medium-weight cottons and synthetics. Unlike deer hunting, where I’m bundled up and stationary, I am always on the move for turkeys, so sweating is the norm. I add weight to my turkey vest with an array of calls.

Footwear is always sturdy, high-top, ankle-supported, uninsulated waterproof boots. I prefer camo in both uppers and soles, when available. I have many pairs with varying degrees of insulation for early season mountain hunts through late-season heat and humidity. I typically carry three or four pairs of boots on these camping trips.

As with guns, it is great to alternate boots because feet do sweat and can increase potential soreness. In addition, and as I am aging, I use insoles with good arch support. They’re a run-and-gun must, particularly since I have had overuse injuries in the past. I only resort to snake boots (a precaution) as temperatures rise or if I’m hunting in lowlands late in the season.

I always pack a box call, a pot call (whether slate, glass, aluminum, ceramic or otherwise), a gobble call and at least three to five preferred multi-reed diaphragms with a good rasp on endnotes. At times, I have two diaphragm calls in my mouth (one against each cheek) when working a gobbler and will switch them out like a CD changer attempting to fuel his desire.

I always carry decoys in states where legal. I use the folding foam type but rarely deploy them and, on average, only during about 25 percent of setups. In fact, if I strike a gobbler close (a response after calling), he is usually too close for setting up decoys. If I am spotted when doing so, the hunt is over.

There are no shortcuts in turkey hunting. Although a gobbler or two may come easy at times, hunters who consistently harvest birds do so because of years of experience that include blunders and birds that got away. When it comes to turkey hunting, we will always be woefully unprepared and underequipped, but that’s what keeps us coming back for more!