

26 Days for a Gobbler

By Stephen Smith

IN THE WINTER of 2011, I was fortunate to relocate to a house within walking distance of a Game Lands. I was very familiar with this Game Lands and had even killed several turkeys on it in the past couple of seasons. Now living right next to one of my favorite hunting spots, I was especially excited for the spring gobbler season to arrive, knowing I'd be able to hunt for at least an hour or two of each morning, if I had to. I never expected that it would take almost that long before I filled my tag.

My season unofficially began in late March with early morning scouting trips. I was encouraged by the amount of gobbling activity I heard, and by the time the season opened I had located close to two dozen birds and was even beginning to consider the possibility of a quick end to the season.

The first day lived up to my expectations, as I worked several birds and was able to put my father-in-law on a bird that he killed less than an hour into the season.

The gobbling activity stayed strong for the first few days of the season, but by the middle of the week the woods turned quiet. The remainder of the first week and the entire second week consisted of a few brief encounters with birds, sandwiched in between long periods of silence.

To make matters worse, around the middle of the second week Mother Nature turned against us turkey hunters, as central Pennsylvania experienced almost 10 straight days of rain. Not wanting to use up my vacation time during such inclement weather, I would often hunt for an hour or so before the consistent downpour forced me out of the woods and to the office.

As a result, I was not in the highest of spirits as the season progressed. What had started out promising looked to be coming to an uneventful conclusion, and while the forecast did not predict any rain, it did include some days of extremely hot, humid weather. Nevertheless, I reminded myself of one of my favorite sayings when spring gobbler hunting gets difficult — better stick with it because once the season ends it's a long time until October. I pressed on.

Late in the third week, I located two gobblers on a remote section of the Game Lands. I had attempted to work these birds earlier and was thrilled to discover that they were still in the area. Through several days of trial and error I eventually determined that one of the gobblers preferred to roost high on the mountain with a hen close to him in the tree. Because he already had a hen close by, he rarely made any sound in the morning and had no interest in responding to my calls.

In fact, during one particularly embarrassing experience, I snuck into the woods well before dawn and spent an hour sparsely calling without a response. Frustrated, I stood up to leave and two birds flushed from the tree directly above me. It had been that kind of a season.

The second gobbler roosted three-quarters of the way down the steep, rocky mountain and was much more talkative on the roost, sometimes responding to my calls with double and triple gobbles.

No matter how enthusiastic he sounded in the tree, though, when his feet touched the ground he, too, would quietly disappear, a feat made possible by the full foliage and abundant pockets of thick mountain laurel. While neither of the birds could be termed anywhere close to a sure thing, being low on options I decided to spend what was left of the season going after the second gobbler.

I tried a few early morning set-ups on the second bird, and while neither was successful, I felt that I was gaining a good understanding of his routine. With each attempt, I remained

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wary of getting too close and spooking him. If I could not get in to a good position, I would back off so as not to further educate what I was sure was a veteran of several seasons.

On the final Saturday of the season he started gobbling at his usual time, just after 5 o'clock. I attempted to approach him from a new set up location and eased into position about 75 yards directly below him. My hopes were dashed when I answered one of his gobbles with a soft yelp, and a hen aggressively started cutting below and to my right. I had suspected a hen had kept him from coming to me in the past week and now had audio confirmation. Having heard two separate calls from two different locations, he stopped gobbling and the waiting game commenced.

A few minutes later I heard the unmistakable sound of beating wings as he flew to a small bench directly above my location. I remained motionless, knowing that he was likely searching for me or the hen. After a half-hour slowly ticked by without a sound, I made a few soft yelps but he had long since disappeared into the dense underbrush.

Just a few years previous that would have been my last chance at a gobbler. But because the season has recently been extended through to the end of May, I was fortunate to have an additional day to try again for the elusive gobbler.

Memorial Day, the 26th day of the season, arrived with near stifling heat and humidity. Under the cover of darkness, I walked directly past where I thought the tom would be roosting, then turned and climbed onto the bench that he flew to on Saturday. Under normal conditions I would never have walked so close to the roosting area of a gobbler, but with only two days to hunt I was running out of time and took a gamble.

Five o'clock came and went without a gobble. Five-thirty came and went without a gobble. I felt certain I had spooked him in the tree, so I decided to call to see if he was still in the area. He immediately gobbled but sounded farther to my left than I was expecting. I decided to stick with my original plan and remain on the bench. I sat down, put on my face mask, and placed my call in my lap. When I looked up there he was — 50 yards away and walking directly toward me. I had thought he was farther away when he gobbled, but in reality he must have been on the ground, which muffled the sound of his approach. Because his arrival took me by surprise, I had my gun on my lap and was not in position to take a shot. Fortunately, when he approached to about 30 yards from my location he turned his head away momentarily, before jumping up onto a log and stretching out his neck to look down the hillside. This gave me the chance to bring up my gun, find him in the sights and squeeze the trigger.

This ended the most challenging season I have ever experienced. With a beard slightly more than 10 inches, 1¼-inch spurs and 19.8 pounds, he is the largest bird I've harvested, but what made him particularly satisfying was the amount of effort it took to locate, pattern and eventually harvest him. After 26 straight days of hunting I finally filled out my tag. The reward was well worth the effort.