

How to Shoot a turkey (Really)



STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRIAN LOVETT

This seemingly easy act can become trouble if you're not prepared. Here's how to make sure you're ready and in position for every shot opportunity.

Shooting a turkey sounds ridiculously simple. After all, most birds walk in, often stretch their heads high and typically hold still for a bit.

However, being in solid position at the moment of truth involves much more than just patterning your gun before the season, making sure a turkey is within range and anticipating a good opportunity. Hunts don't always follow an easy script, and if something goes amiss, you must be ready to adjust. Make sure you're prepared for that perfect shot opportunity this season.

BODY POSITION

Many hunters — even experienced veterans — fail because they don't position their bodies correctly for quality shots. Naturally, they face directly toward a shooting lane or where they expect a turkey to appear. Then, they are almost 90 degrees

out of position.

Think of how your body moves when you shoulder a shotgun. Assuming you shoot right-handed, you have 90 degrees or more of movement from your center to your left but much less to your right. So, if a turkey pops up to your right or walks that way as you attempt to fire, you must fight against your body and make drastic shifts to shoot it. And that causes trouble.

Instead, make sure you have 180 degrees or more of movement in relation to where you expect to shoot. If you're sitting against a tree in a traditional turkey hunting setup, face to the right of where you hope the turkey will appear. Ninety degrees right is probably too much, so aim for 60 to 80 degrees. Point your left shoulder and left knee at the bird or decoys. That way, you can cover more than 90 degrees left and right of where you expect the shot to occur, which

leaves you prepared for gobblers that appear unexpectedly at your side or walk that way before you can shoot.

When hunting from a blind, during which you'll sit in a chair, apply the same principle. Position the chair so it's angled right instead of directly facing the windows from which you'll shoot. Make sure you can easily swivel in your seat to cover your left and right flanks, and open windows to let you shoot to those spots.

Oh, and for lefties? Simply reverse that advice, and position your body to the left of where you expect to shoot.

ADJUSTING

The lead to this article said turkeys often hold still briefly at the moment of truth, which is true. Otherwise, however, they're almost always moving, and you must adjust. Actually, you'll have to move



The act of shooting a turkey incorporates many factors, but you should begin by making sure your gun throws a consistent, lethal pattern where you point it. And for that, there's no substitute for pre-season range time.



Get in proper position to shoot an approaching bird. If you're right-handed, point your left shoulder and left knee at the bird. That way, you can cover more than 90 degrees left and right of where you expect the shot to occur.



This hunter is in perfect position to swing left or right on a bird that appears on either side. Further, he has a solid rest, and his head is tight to the stock.



your gun somewhat on every turkey at which you shoot.

This process is much easier when hunting from a blind and using decoys. Typically, you can focus your gun barrel at the decoys and watch the gobbler approach, having only to adjust your gun slightly before taking a quality shot. Further, the blind will hide most other gun movements.

When against a tree in the woods, however, the process is more difficult. Often, you must track a bird's approach via sound — that is, gobbling and drumming — and might not see the turkey until it's within or almost in range. Flow with the turkey. Constantly shift your gun so it's pointed at the last place the tom gobbled or, if you can see the turkey, at the bird. Even when a turkey appears close and continues to move — say, walking left toward your decoys — move your gun with the bird. Gobblers won't catch this slow, steady movement. They will bust you when you move your gun swiftly or suddenly, though, so it's important to keep your sights and barrel at the same pace as the approaching bird.

Sometimes, when turkeys move unseen between gobblers, your gun will be out of position. Don't sweat. Simply make sure the turkey isn't visible and adjust your aim. Further, if it becomes obvious the bird is approaching to the left or right, ease your gun and, if necessary, body that way to ensure you're ready.

Now and then, a quick or quiet gobbler

will appear when you're not ready or your gun is out of position. Again, don't panic. You usually have time to slowly raise or adjust your gun — think super-slow motion — and get on target before the bird spooks and leaves. In field situations, decoys will help distract a gobbler's attention from you. In the woods, you can wait until a bird's head passes behind leaves, brush or tree trunks to make quick adjustments.

SEALING THE DEAL

Assuming you're on target and ready, you must decide when to shoot. This is important, as it's much easier to kill a bird that's standing still and stretching its head and neck high than it is to target the head of a moving or strutting turkey. A full vertical head-and-neck shot allows room for error, and a low or high pattern will still place sufficient pellets in the brain or spine to kill the bird. Conversely, you can easily shoot over the head of a gobbler by aiming at its head or body-shoot a strutting bird.

You can typically break a bird out of strut or make it halt briefly via two methods: First, cluck or make another turkey vocalization. (I've heard folks cutt, kee-kee or even yelp.) Often, this will make a gobbler slick back his feathers and look for the noisy hen. Or, simply move your gun barrel a few degrees. Most turkeys will catch the movement and lift their heads to scan for danger. In some situations, an incoming turkey will stop and

lift its head on its own. This occurs frequently when a bird clears an obstruction and searches for the hen it knows it should hear. Or, perhaps the gobbler sees something amiss or is merely being cautious.

When a gobbler offers a good shot, don't rush, but don't hesitate, either. The turkey probably won't stay still for long. Make certain you're steady, check your aim — slightly above the wattles is usually ideal — and then squeeze the trigger. Don't slap the trigger or jerk at the shot. Firing ultra-tight patterns at small targets is much more like shooting a rifle than firing a shotgun at ducks, and an awkward trigger pull can easily send the cloud of shot over a gobbler's head or past his ear. Breathe regularly. Exhale as you prepare to shoot. Slowly put pressure on the trigger. Keep your eye on the gobbler during and after the shot. You'll likely see the turkey crumple even as your barrel jumps from the recoil.

CONCLUSION

After several seasons in the turkey woods, many of these shooting tips will become second nature. Still, it never hurts to review them and remind yourself about proper form. Turkey hunting holds enough crazy variables to keep it interesting and sometimes frustrating. Your shooting doesn't have to be one of them. 🐓