



Sometimes the trophies from our hunt aren't found on the mantel. They live in our memories of the hunt.

The 2-year tom

SPRING TURKEY HUNTING TURNS INTO A QUEST FOR ONE MAN'S WHITE WHALE.

Ron Weber

The gobble startled me as it shattered the predawn silence. A few soft hen yelps from my slate call had incited the response, which in turn, excited me. It was the first morning of my spring turkey season and it seemed as though it might be a short one. I knew I had a tom close — easily within 60 yards.

As I impatiently waited for light, I couldn't help myself but to throw out a few more soft calls, each answered by a booming gobble. I know many "experts" would say that one should avoid calling too much to a tom on the roost. But for me, gobbling is the kick that makes spring turkey hunting so special.

First light came and went, but the tom remained roosted somewhere just out of sight down the field edge, most likely in a large white pine which served as a favorite roost tree.

Finally, the flapping of wings signaled his descent into the field to begin another day of strutting, gobbling and searching for hens. He glided about 150 yards into the field and began walking — pecking the ground as he did. I tried a series of soft yelps and purrs, which prompted another gobble and a brief display of his fan, but he seemed intent on walking up a small rise in the field.

Once he reached his destination he puffed himself into full display and with a very distinctive thick beard strutted back and forth in full glory along the rise, every so often letting loose a gobble.

I was still confident that it was just a matter of time before he would notice my decoy positioned in the field 20 yards from the woods line where I was concealed under the branches of a large white spruce. My confidence was shaken, however, when I heard yelps from over the rise and across the field.

Eventually, the tom started moving in the direction of the yelps. I tried to persuade him with a variety of calls, but he disappeared over the rise. It can be hard to compete with real hens and after no sign of him for a half hour — save a few gobbles from the other side of the field — I figured that was the end.

I never imagined, though, that was only the beginning.

Over the rest of my week-long first season, I had several more long-range encounters with the thick bearded tom whose gobble I had come to distinguish from other toms in the area.

Though he was often quick to respond to my calls, he never showed any real interest in coming in to my decoys. I took this indifference as a slap to my hunting skills and he soon became my single target, my “white whale.”

As my first season ended, I passed up several toms waiting for that one tom that eluded me. Still, I had tags for two more week-long seasons and felt confident that sooner or later he would be mine.

That feeling of certainty was starting to fade by the middle of my last season. Though I had heard him almost daily, I had not even caught a glimpse of

him over that time. He seemed to have taken to the woods and as far as I could tell was rarely in a field. I, likewise, had changed my tactics and was trying to position myself in areas of the woods where I heard him gobbling. He seemed

to have a pattern of moving along a trail that ran through one section of woods towards a small field that was tucked into the woods.

It was there that I found myself early in the afternoon of my last day of spring turkey season. There had not been any gobbles since early in the morning and I was dozing in the warmth of the mid-May sun.

Suddenly, I was brought out of my impending slumber by a gobble. For a few moments I was thinking maybe I had just dreamt it. But then another gobble rose above the sound of the wind rustling the freshly hatched leaves. It wasn't just any gobble, it was That gobble. A series of seductive yelps brought a response that told me he was in the direction of the small field but not in it.

As the sun sank on the horizon my season drew to a close with my tom still somewhere out there.

When you are a child a year seems like a lifetime. For the rest of us, a year has a way of passing like a summer day. Soon, I found myself looking forward to another turkey season. This year, though, I only had one tag so my season would be limited to a single week.

A few days before my season was set to begin I went out early one morning to see what type of gobbling activity I could hear in the woods and fields around my house. There was assorted gobbling in just about every direction as the dark faded into light. Just as the sun was creasing the tops of the trees I heard it. That gobble.

I had long since moved on from the quest to get my tom last season. He had won and I assumed it was likely that a fall hunter, a predator or an unusually harsh winter had taken him. But there he was. His gobble had awakened my memory and there was no doubt it was him.

Unlike the season before, he seemed much quieter. I never saw him and only heard him twice over the first five days of my season. Maybe the winter had been hard on him or maybe he was no longer the dominant bird I saw on that small rise the year before. It didn't matter why, I just knew that I missed his gobble.

Early in the afternoon of the second to last day of my season it began to rain — light at first, but steadily increasing in intensity. I went to my rainy day spot, protected under the spreading branches of the big white spruce where I had first seen my tom. It had been one of those

days — little gobbling in the morning and none since. I had not seen a turkey all day and was losing my drive to keep going. A hot shower and warm meal sounded very good about then. I convinced myself to stay until 5.

A little after 4 p.m., as I stared blankly into the field, out of the corner of my eye I caught the unmistakable jerky movement of a turkey walking along the edge of the field to my right. With a shift of my eyes a hen came into view about 30 yards away. She seemed to be walking right towards my decoy. My eyes followed her and I again caught movement to my right. There he was. There was no mistaking the paintbrush thick beard which hung almost to the ground.

I had positioned the barrel of my shotgun on my knees and secured the butt of the gun on my shoulder. The hen passed into an opening in the spruce branches directly in front of me no more than 15 yards away. The tom was following directly in her wake. The screen of spruce branches made them oblivious to my presence. Now, it was just a matter of a couple of feet.

“Boom!” At the sound both turkeys’ heads raised. “Boom!” I yelled and my voice reverberated a second time across the field sending the turkeys clucking excitedly, half running, half flying their way to the top of the rise in the field. Then they disappeared.

Back under the spruce, I contemplated what had just happened. Up until the moment I first yelled “Boom!” I really thought I would get my tom. The safety was off, my finger was on the trigger. I just couldn't squeeze it. And I knew why.

I had total respect for that bird. If he was going to die, he deserved to go out in full glory, strutting and gobbling like the first time I saw him. He didn't deserve to be ambushed like he was set up to be. Besides, the woods and fields in my world were more interesting knowing he was still out there.

The next morning I took a jake, maybe one of my tom's offspring, ensuring that we would have turkey for the table.

Though his paintbrush beard and tail fan cannot be found in the room where I keep other mounts of birds, fish and deer, my 2-year tom can be found with so many other trophies in the corners of my memory. Those are the trophies I find myself revisiting the most. 

Ron Weber writes from Weyerhaeuser.



DNR FILE

Talking with the turkeys is a most exciting part of turkey hunting.