

Scouting Can Reduce Turkey Fever, Even After Opening Day

By Mike Demick – Idaho Department of Fish and Game

Last week this column emphasized how important it is for hunters to obtain permission from landowners before entering private land. Generally speaking, with permission comes improved success. Yet another important aspect of getting game to show up on the business end of your gun barrel is knowing the lay of the land you're hunting.

Every experienced turkey hunter knows that being familiar with the ground you're hunting is a big advantage when it comes to harvesting a gobbler. Turkeys are famous for hanging up and refusing to come to the call, even under the best of conditions. Having an obstacle come between you and a gobbler can wreck a hunt.

What's especially irritating is that often these "obstacles" really aren't obstacles at all. Something as trivial as a dry, shallow ravine three feet wide may halt a turkey's approach as effectively as if it was the Grand Canyon. The turkey might cross that ravine every day of his life, but refuse to do it when you're calling to him. Nobody knows why turkeys do this - I doubt if the turkeys themselves know - but they do it. And they do it with maddening regularity.

Last year near St. Maries, a friend and I had a turkey hang up within my direct line of sight, because of a barbed wire fence we didn't know was there. The turkey would walk along the fence for a hundred yards or so, gobbling like a maniac, then turn around and walk the other direction. My friend would call and the turkey would continue his march up and down the fence. It took the long-beard over an hour to finally give up and leave. When I went to check out the fence, I found gaps big enough to drive a tractor through. Funny how the gobbler still refused to cross it.

On the other hand, a turkey will sometimes fly across a canyon to come to your calling. You just don't ever know. However, the point is, you can't count on turkeys doing the predictable. Therefore, a smart turkey hunter does everything to make sure there's a clean, unobstructed travel lane between himself and a gobbler before he sits down to call.

That's where knowing the lay of the land comes in. If you do a lot of hunting in an area, you probably know it fairly well. But if you're planning to hunt in an unfamiliar place, a little pre-hunt legwork can save you a lot of grief when you get out there with your shotgun.

Many turkey hunters miss the boat during their scouting of late March and early April and even during the first of the season. Many of us go out early in the morning once or twice a week to listen for gobbling, and that's fine. It gives us a general idea of where we can find gobblers, especially if we hear a bird gobbling in the same general area two or three days in a row.

But for most hunters, that's the extent of it. They don't get in the woods and look around. So, early in the season, when they hunt the gobbler they've been hearing for the past week, they discover too late that all the while he's been roosting over a wet meadow and flying down on the far side.

The way to prevent this sort of misfortune is to get in the field and look around. Don't do this early in the morning, when the turkeys are gobbling, but rather in the middle part of the day. Just stroll quietly through the entire area you plan to hunt, noting not only the potential obstacles such as fences, ravines and boggy areas. Also note features that might allow a turkey a convenient line of travel from one point to another. A wide, flat ridge, for example, or a logging road through thick timber.

Not only will it give you a leg up on tagging that early season gobbler, but it's also a great way to burn off a little winter cushion.

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