

Kansas Spring Turkeys, 2021

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Day One

The morning began as many spring turkey mornings do, with a surprising and disappointing silence. My neighbor and good friend Nate suggested a spot where he had seen quite a few turkeys while deer hunting in the fall, and the hike to get to it made us confident that pressure from other hunters wouldn't be an issue. Several hills later and with boots weighted with mud, we set up without a moment to spare before sunrise. We concluded that a move was necessary less than an hour later. Sometimes you can just feel when it isn't going to happen. We hiked back to the truck.

"Dude, right there!"

Nate pointed out the passenger window to a beautiful bird strutting less than a mile from our original spot. Even as a novice turkey hunter, having hunted only one season before, he knew better than to slow down enough to make the tom uneasy. We parked out of sight and began making a large circle to the far side of the bird, attempting to get between him and where he was headed. We snuck into place for some calling, just in time to experience one of the innumerable hunt-spoilers that can take place on public land. Someone driving by saw the bird, slammed on his brakes, and tried to walk straight to it. That approach didn't work for either hunting parties. Our morning was still young, so on to the next spot.

A few more miles down the road, we saw a tom with some hens pecking their way westward across a large open field. A quick map check confirmed that the birds were not on huntable property, but Nate pointed out that they were generally headed in the direction of Fort Riley land. We worked our way ahead of

them and onto public hunting grounds, this time into a patchy stand of conifers. I set a jake over a breeding hen decoy facing down the only narrow alley which might be visible from the open field, and we set up laying in the prone under what I believe to have been cedars. We noted the eight-to-ten-foot fence separating us from the birds, and I thought of how they're sometimes unwilling to cross even a two-foot ditch. I produced a few yelps off the slate and the tom hammered. He didn't sound like he was straight away from us at the first gobble, but he was definitely close enough to make it work. I dragged another yelp from the slate and he cut me off with another gobble.

"He's coming," I told Nate.

The tom entered that eerie silence with which all turkey hunters are familiar. I clucked softly and sparingly, trying to remember that a turkey hears like a dog smells -- in technicolor. Wings beat within 100 yards, and we looked at each other in disbelief.

"He just flew over the fence," Nate whispered.

"I think he's gonna do it," I replied.

We waited, still in the prone beneath the cedar boughs. We made slow and careful adjustments to our positions to remain comfortable but ready, knowing that when he appeared, he would appear close. And he did. Almost out of thin air, he stepped into view at 14 steps. Another step and he was standing among the decoys.

"Kill him."

My softly spoken message went unanswered by shot or whisper back. I turned to Nate and tried again.

"Kill. Him."

I turned back to the bird as Nate began to raise his gun. The tom turned away from the decoy, perhaps to flee or perhaps just to posture against the jake. I didn't wait to find out. I squeezed the trigger and the prairie land monarch fell.

"Good shot," Nate offered.

He clicked his gun back to safe and lowered it from his cheek. We shared the bittersweet experience of signing my tag on a beautiful animal. Fortunately, our turkey season was a team event which wouldn't be over until his tag had been filled as well.

Day Two

We settled into the brush along a firebreak and listened to the world wake up around us. An owl hooted, a bobcat let out a single shrill cry, and most importantly to us -- gobblers hammered off the roost. The deep, powerful kind of gobbles that you feel down your spine shook us from all directions. We listened to the beating wings of fly-down and called to multiple groups of birds.

The sun came up and brought with it, Nate's opportunity. Two jakes, moved in from our left, all caution thrown to the strangely absent Kansas wind. They weren't the mature toms we could hear in the distance, but it felt right. Nate shook his head "no" as they moved in on our jake decoy, initially uninterested in taking anything besides an adult bird. They entered a half-strut and challenged the decoy.

"I think you should," I whispered.

Nate began to raise his gun. I believe he was thinking the same thing I was after seeing them puff up and begin working on the decoy. If they wanted to act like the big boys, they could receive the big boy treatment.

We watched them weave back and forth and around the jake decoy, waiting for one to create enough separation for an ethical one-bird shot. Finally, one stepped away from the other and craned its neck forward. It all happens in slow motion when you're sitting behind the shooter, and I enjoyed it as much or more than my own bird the day before. Nate made a good shot and his bird fell within a minute of sunrise.

