

Turkey
April, 2019 New Mexico

Psalm 72:19 “Blessed be His glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with His glory! Amen and Amen!”

Last spring Robin decided to try turkey hunting with her bow. The previous fall we passed her crossbow to a friend whose young daughter planned to start hunting and, just like Robin when she began, didn't like firing a shotgun even with ear muffs.

I prepared some head lopper arrows for Robin and she practiced in the back yard at relatively close range. After her first shot I declared “dead turkey!” Each subsequent shot seemed destined for success so we geared up for youth-only weekend, which takes place the weekend before general turkey season.



Dead turkey!

Unfortunately our plan to spend time in the northern part of the state were dampened, no pun intended, by a winter storm! Shaded areas already held snow that still hadn't melted from our wet winter season. The storm began Friday evening and continued all morning Saturday. The precipitation let up slightly by midday so I convinced Robin to bundle up to see if we could stumble across some fresh turkey tracks.

We hiked around for a couple of hours, mainly filled with Robin throwing snowballs at me every time she didn't think I was paying attention. We didn't see any turkey tracks, although we crossed fresh deer and elk tracks a few times.



This is not turkey hunting weather!



Most definitely not turkey hunting weather!

We were bundled in quality outdoor gear and with the exception of our utter failure to locate any birds, we had a great time that afternoon. The snow continued to fall until we called it quits and headed for a warm fireplace and hot meal that evening.

The next morning dawned bright and clear, but cold, so we let it warm up before venturing outside. The new snow made everything glorious: fresh and clean - sunglasses were mandatory in the blindingly bright landscape.



Ours were the only tracks in the fresh snow



Robin still likes to pose for photos near interesting trees and other landmarks – I hope she never outgrows this youthful exuberance

Much like the day before, all we got was exercise and fresh air, but I consider that more of a blessing than something to complain about.

As we hiked Robin took occasional practice shots with her bow at pinecones, snowball turkeys, fallen leaves and other spur of the moment targets. Practicing in real-world conditions with hunting gear is not only fun but beneficial in refining ones shooting skills.



Smile for the camera!

That afternoon we tried a different area and discovered fresh tracks in the snow from a flock of birds! We followed them until it seemed we were getting close and set up our decoys. I gave a few calls and we were rewarded with a lusty gobble downhill of our position. We sat quietly and waited but never heard another peep.

Eventually we packed up and continued following the tracks hoping to at least identify where the turkeys would roost for the evening but ultimately lost their trail in a meadow where the warm sun had melted the snow.

Youth weekend ended without an actual turkey sighting, but it was wonderful never-the-less.



Elk herd enjoying the spring weather



Flowers were popping everywhere!



This little dinosaur resembled a vivid miniature dragon



Huge set of mountain lion tracks in dried mud!

When spring general season opened and I could hunt Robin was tied up with activities, so I headed out solo. I went to an area where I'd found success in the past, intending to scope things out and make a game plan for getting Robin back out.

I hiked quite some distance without finding any turkey sign, but decided to take a rest, set up the decoys and call a little. I placed my ultra-realistic decoys roughly 15 yards in front of me and tucked into some brush after arranging a few logs and branches to create a natural hide.



Tom and Jenny look pretty enticing!

I yelped a few hen calls and waited. After a little while I heard leaves scratching behind me and carefully turned to discover a rufous sided towhee jumping around in the detritus beneath the brush. The antics of this pretty bird kept me entertained. He would scratch with both feet at the same time, spraying dirt and leaves behind, and then peck at whatever he was exposing.



Rufous Sided Towhee – one of the few photos I was able to capture as he held still

I periodically called like a turkey hen, watched the towhee and read a page or two from my book. I've found that a small paperback makes it easier to stay put, and often include one in my backpack when I anticipate sitting and waiting in ambush. After about 30 minutes of calling turkeys gobbled!

I remained silent and readied my bow, but over the next few minutes the gobbling receded and became faint. I knew the birds heard me because they had responded immediately, but for whatever reason they hadn't been interested. Rather than frantically go back to calling I simply relaxed and returned to my book. I've learned over the years that no amount of calling will bring in toms if they aren't interested. In fact over calling often leads to additional frustration because they'll typically gobble over and over from just out of sight waiting for the "hen" to come over to them. But by remaining silent and playing hard to get often a tom will become curious enough to begin snooping around and when they spot the decoys they get mad enough to charge in close.

Perhaps another 15-20 minutes passed without any further activity and I was just about to resume calling when a gobble belted out nearby!

I hastily started my video camera, which had been set up on its tripod in advance, and readied my bow. Almost immediately I heard loud purring, clucking and wing feathers brushing, and a trio of toms sprinted to the decoys with dust flying behind!

The most aggressive hit my male decoy like a freight train and began to fight it: batting with his wings, pecking with his beak and lashing out with his fighting spurs on his ankles. The other two birds danced and threw in an occasional jab for good measure.



This trio of toms were fighting mad and came in hot!



The dominant bird jumped on my decoy and stomped him, while another fanned his tail to show off

I carefully drew my bow and settled in on the lead bird's neck, using a broadhead designed specifically for head/neck shots on turkeys. The action was so furious I had to wait a few seconds for my intended target to pause before losing my shaft. The big tom dropped like a stone and the other 2 birds scattered.



My arrow lopped his head

I nocked a second arrow and nearly had an opportunity at a second bird (2 bearded birds are legal in NM's spring season) but as they approached within range to beat the tar out of their now fallen bully of a leader, he flopped "like a chicken with his head cut off" and spooked them away. I may have been able to cluck with my mouth to get them to freeze long enough for a shot, but I didn't want to force a marginal shot and in the back of my mind I hoped to get Robin out to the area and give her a chance. I held tight until the remaining duo trotted away before slinking from my hide to examine my prize.



Great spurs indicate a mature tom



One toe had been broken at some point – his tracks must have been quite distinctive.



Tagged and loaded



Ready to hike to the truck



This warrior was missing a few tail feathers from his fan, but still an impressive trophy

As soon as Robin could break free we tried “my” spot. She had homework, but diligently plugged away while I called from our natural blind. The spring weather was glorious and we had an enjoyable outing, but alas, nary a peep was heard during our sit.

As we gathered up our gear in preparation for our hike to the truck we did hear one far away gobble, but this year a turkey for Robin just wasn’t meant to be. I’ll still cherish our time together with no regrets.



Homework is calling...even when the turkeys aren't