

The Turkey Hunter

by
Jim Sayles

My father, Hal Sayles, had one dream, one life ambition in hunting. He had never been a deer hunter, but he wanted to kill a turkey gobbler. It didn't have to be a spring gobbler coaxed in with a turkey call. It didn't have to be killed with a shotgun. Any legal season and any legal means would satisfy him.

The Sayles Ranch in the 60's and 70's had the largest turkey population in Taylor County. It was not unusual to see 400 or 500 turkeys come down off the roost along one particular quarter mile bend of Elm Creek, and I loved sitting up on the sandstone bluff in the bend of the creek to watch them "put" and cackle as they flew down from the elms and pecan trees.

My hunting buddies and I didn't hunt them there at the roost. We waited for them to work their way back up into the oak brush draws on the south side of Elm Creek, and we ambushed them with our shotguns, bringing them down out of the air. It was almost like shooting down one of the B-52's from Dyess Air Force Base as the big gobblers plummeted heavily to the ground.

Sometimes we shot them with our deer rifles, as targets of opportunity when we were deer hunting, shooting off their heads as I did once on the limestone cliffs at the west end of the South Pasture. As soon as I shot, the headless gobbler set his wings to glide all the way down to the bottom as if he was still alive.

It was so easy for us to harvest turkeys that we weren't particularly interested in traditional turkey hunting. They were just a bonus while we were deer hunting, or something to hunt in the spring.

But my dad's blood ran hot at the thought of taking down a turkey.

In the beginning I didn't pay much attention. He would tell me that he had three flying shots at a turkey with his 16 gauge shotgun or that he had missed a turkey with his Savage .243 lever action. He was a notoriously bad shot with either, and I expected him to miss a few before he finally took one.

I never saw him hit anything with the .243. My mother did send me a photo of him with a doe while I was off in Australia chasing wild bulls, but if he actually shot the doe he never verified that fact. And I suspected that one of the young Wheeler boys, Greg or Mike, actually killed the doe so he could have his photo taken with it.

His shotgun skills were the worst I've ever seen, and my mother, Nancy, frequently embarrassed him on dove hunts as she brought down a dove with her Remington Model 31 20 guage after he had missed the darting, dodging dove three times in a row.

To make matters worse, I pulled a prank on him opening day of dove season one year, removing the shot from an entire box of shells and replacing the shot with wax so the sound and recoil would be the same as before. Then I watched with tears of laughter streaming down my cheeks as he fired three rounds at a dove on a limb without even making the dove nervous. He quickly reloaded and moved closer to the dove, firing three more rounds without effect. The final three shots were fired at a range of 20 yards, and the dove finally flew off unharmed.

"What did you do?" he asked as he came back to the truck to find me doubled over with laughter. "Did you do something to my sights?"

That fall, feeling guilty for the prank with his shotshells, I set up a feeder 30 yards away from a platform blind in a large elm tree. We called this blind “the tree house”, and it was perfectly camouflaged with gun emplacement netting.

Several flocks of both gobblers and hens fed at the feeder each morning after coming down from the roost and again each evening before going up to roost.

On opening day of deer season I put him up in the tree house with his 16 gauge pump shotgun and a box of high brass number 6 shot with instructions that he should aim at the heads and not the bodies.

Thirty minutes after daylight I heard three shots in rapid succession. Fifteen minutes later I heard another three shots in rapid succession, and a minute later I heard the final three shots. Nine shots in all.

I thought, “Oh, no, he has taken his revenge, and there are turkeys flopping around all over the creek bottom.”

I quickly returned to my truck and drove down into the creek bottom to help him sort out the slaughter as I thought about who I could call to take some of the extra birds.

When I got there he was wandering around with his shotgun looking at the ground.

“How many did you kill, dad?” I called out.

“I think I drew feathers on one,” he replied seriously.

The first flock had been gathered so tightly around the feeder that his shot was simply a “flock shot”. His second and third shots were at running turkeys. Fifteen minutes later another flock gathered at the feeder, and he took six shots, all without effect.

Now I was beginning to feel sorry for the old man. Anyone else would have been able to close their eyes and take a single “sound shot” with better results.

Sometime later I knew where seven older gobblers with 9 and 10 inch beards were coming off the roost, and I took him to an ambush spot where he could get a close shot with his .243.

Instead of flying down to the creek bottom from the roost, these particular gobblers liked to fly up to the lower ledge of a sandstone bluff and then cautiously peek over the ledge before disappearing into the juniper and oak breaks.

My dad was on one knee with a good rest when the first old gobbler peeked over the ledge about 20 yards away.

“There he is, dad.”

“Where?” he said as he waved the scope back and forth looking for the gobbler.

“There, right where you’re looking.”

He took his eye away from the scope, spotted the gobbler, and then looked through the scope again. The Savage .243 waved back and forth as he tried to get the crosshairs on the gobbler, and then he pulled the trigger with no effect.

The safety was on.

He lowered the rifle, found the safety, and took it off “safe” before raising it to his shoulder again.

The puttering gobbler was getting nervous as my dad waved the rifle around again trying to find his mark in the four power scope.

The heavy old gobbler couldn’t take any more, and he exploded into the air like a giant bob white as he flew straight away to the higher cliff two hundred yards away.

“Get ready, dad,” I said as I shouldered my 7mm to watch the bird fly. “You’ll have a shot when he lights on top of the other cliff.”

My crosshairs were centered on the bird all the way, and just before he reached the other cliff, I couldn’t help myself, I squeezed the trigger.

An explosion of feathers with a pink cloud and body parts splattering against the cliff told the story, and as my dad stood up and unloaded his rifle he said, “You S.O.B., I’m never going hunting with you again as long as I live.”

I felt really bad about that, and I was determined to make up for it the following year.

Gobblers stay with each other from the time they are jakes until the last of their group is gone, and by the time they are fully mature there are often only a few left in the gang. I patterned one group of five old gobblers coming down a particular spot on the fenceline at 3:30pm every day, and I made a cedar bush hide 25 yards away from the fenceline where my dad could pick one off with his 16 gauge.

After I showed him the hide he took his own car, an Oldsmobile 88, up in the pasture to hunt the spot, and at about 5pm I heard a single muffled shotgun blast.

My heart beat rapidly as I was certain the single shot indicated a kill. My old man had finally taken his gobbler.

It was his habit to come by the ranch house after a hunt, mix himself a cocktail, and visit for awhile before driving on in to Abilene. But that night he did not show up, and thirty minutes after dark I drove up into the pasture to see if he might have car trouble.

His car was gone, and he had apparently driven out of another gate, something he had never done before.

When I called my parent’s house he answered the phone.

“Dad, did you kill a gobbler?”

“No, I didn’t even see a gobbler.”

“I heard a shotgun shot right up there by where you were sitting. Are you sure you didn’t shoot?”

“No. It wasn’t me.”

“Did you hear the shot?”

“No. No shots.”

“Why didn’t you come by the house?”

“I didn’t have time. I needed to get on back into town.”

I suspected that he had missed a perfect setup again and was embarrassed to admit it, but the next morning when I drove up to the driveway on the alley side of their house I saw a trail of transmission fluid, like a blood trail, leading into his side of the garage.

“Mom,” I asked as I entered the kitchen, “what happened to dad’s car?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“He said when the turkeys didn’t show up at the expected time he went back to the car to get his .243 in case he spotted a deer. And when he got out of the car he accidentally discharged the rifle, and it put a bullet through his transmission.”

That year I had a special present for him under the Christmas tree. I found a plastic Oldsmobile 88 model and painted it the same as his car. Then I mounted the Oldsmobile model to a trophy plaque with a nine inch turkey beard glued to the transmission of the car.

For some reason he never saw the humor in that, and I feel really bad about that now that he's gone.

While I was in Australia my dad's best friend, Jack Wheeler, passed away, and my dad, the sweetest and most generous man I've ever known, took the Wheeler boys, Greg and Mike, under his wing.

They hunted and fished the Sayles Ranch with him, and Greg took over as the chief turkey hunting guide for the old man. But my dad eventually died without ever achieving his goal of taking a wild turkey.

Afterwards Greg took my dad's 16 gauge, and, remembering the fatherly kindness my dad had shown him and his brother, he killed a gobbler with one shot using the shotgun that should be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the most misses on a turkey.

With the shotgun in one hand and the gobbler in the other he looked skyward and smiled, offering a silent prayer of thanks in memorium of the worst turkey hunter and greatest father figure either he or I had ever known.



Elm Creek in fall



The Turkey Roost