

# In Pursuit of Florida's Crown Jewel

By Tim Herald

Photographs courtesy of Author

Of the four subspecies of wild turkey that make up the traditional Grand Slam, the Osceola, or Florida wild turkey, is generally considered the greatest trophy. Obviously the availability of places to hunt this bird are in short supply since it only resides in part of the state, and to make things tougher, these long-legged gobblers are notorious for their lack of gobbling. South Florida has the earliest spring turkey season in the United States, so Osceola hunters can get a jump-start on their spring, but hunting these wily birds in the subtropical landscape they call home is by no means a “piece of cake.”



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Though we generally think of Florida as a vacationer's paradise, once off the beaten path, the state has some very wild lands. The weather isn't always suited for lounging around the pool when turkey season opens in early March with cold fronts, storms, and stiff breezes being quite common. There are many obstacles that early season turkey hunters in Florida may have to overcome, including sparse gobbling, unpredictable weather patterns, and of course high winds, so bagging a trophy Osceola gobbler isn't as casual a pursuit as taking a stroll down the beach.

When the south zone season (south of Highway 70) opens the first Saturday of March, wild turkeys are generally in the second transition or breeding phase of spring. During this transition phase, turkeys have broken up into smaller groups from large flocks. Usually the birds will be in groups of 5 to 15 hens with 1 to 3 gobblers tagging along. These flocks may or may not have a few jakes following close behind.

Many hunters in south Florida complain that the gobbling is shutting down by the time the season opens, and that the turkeys are “finished.” This line of thought has some validity, but even more falsehood. Gobbling usually is tapering off a bit from the first gobbling peak that is often experienced during mid to late February when turkeys are in the first transition phase of spring. During the first phase, gobbling peaks as birds attempt to establish a hierarchy and break up into smaller flocks. During the second transition phase, one boss tom or a small group of gobblers usually travel with a small flock of hens that become receptive to breeding at this time.

Gobblers will gobble a little on the roost, but generally, after they fly down, they become much less vocal. Since the hens are receptive, they only need to strut to attract hens on the ground. They are usually in close proximity to the hens so the drumming sound made while strutting and the visual display itself are the most effective ways to coax in potential mates.

The hens are ready to breed during phase two and are often quite aggressive in keeping the attention of nearby gobblers. Both on the roost and after flydown, hunters will notice that hens are very vocal. Hens go to the gobblers during this phase to breed, and then at some point during the day they will sneak off to their nest sites to lay an egg. Later they will rejoin the flock and go about their daily business. The toms are in the presence of at least some of the hens virtually all day long. Occasionally, during mid to late morning, when most hens slip off to their nests, a gobbler may find himself alone or with other males.

So as you can see, the reason gobbling activity decreases at this time of spring is not because the breeding season is coming to an end, but because breeding is at its peak. The toms don't gobble as much because they have already established the pecking order, and they strut more to attract the willing hens during this time instead of gobbling. As the season progresses and hens begin sitting on their nests for longer periods leaving toms to themselves, gobbling will increase again to a second peak. The gobblers that have been in the presence of hens almost constantly for weeks find themselves alone, and begin gobbling more frequently to try to attract any available females.

In both 2001 and 2002 on opening day of Florida's south zone, temperatures were well below normal, and the mercury fell to around 40 degrees. The added wind made for some pretty serious wind chills that affected Osceola hunters and the gobblers they pursued. Clear cool mornings often produce good gobbling, but temperatures over 20 degrees below average will often turn the turkeys "off." March is a fickle time in Florida, and a day that starts out at 37 degrees just before dawn may top out in the mid 80s by late afternoon, or the thermometer may never climb to 60. Hunters should be prepared for varying conditions in March. Spring storms and frequent rain showers are a possibility, and again temperatures can fall within a wide range on any given day.

More than temperature or rain, wind is one of a turkey hunter's worst enemies no matter where you hunt, and March is often quite windy. Wind noise cuts down the effective hearing range of both hunters and turkeys, and it also keeps gobblers on edge. The loud noise caused by wind blowing through cabbage palms and various other vegetation that is always fully leaved in Florida will cover the sounds of approach-



ing predators. Wild turkeys seek places sheltered from the wind or wide open spaces where they can use their keen vision to detect danger when their sense of hearing is impaired by wind and its effects.

During the first week of March last spring, I was fortunate in the fact that I was able to be an instructor at an Osceola hunting school. On opening morning, temperatures were in the low 40s and there was a brisk wind. I had a couple of nice gobblers scouted out that were traveling with between 12 and 15 hens, and I got the participant I was guiding within 150 yards of where the flock had been roosting. As the first soft rays of sunlight broke the eastern horizon, the flock of hens began to talk, and I chatted back with them. Soon, all 15 ladies were on the ground, and I began a vocal duel with the boss hen. She cutt,

and I cutt and yelped on my slate and mouth calls. I always tried to be a little louder and more aggressive than she was. Eventually the flock walked up within 15 yards of my decoys and stayed around for over 10 minutes. For some reason the gobblers hadn't roosted in their normal spot that night and were not around. Had they been, they would have followed the hens right up to the gun barrel.

At the same time Anthony Brown, one of the other instructors, and Mike Gillespie, set up in a small clearing in a large oak and palm hammock that was sheltered from the wind. They got comfortable and Anthony began calling on a Knight and Hale Sla-Tek friction call and a mouth diaphragm. After a few sequences with no answer, he switched to his loud and high-pitched Kentucky Longbox. He got a quick

response from about 200 yards out, so he got very aggressive with his calling. After only two series of loud yelps, the big gobbler and three hens were closing the distance at 100 yards. Brown switched back to his Sla-Tek call and kept up the aggressive routine. Once he could see the gobbler strutting, he did not call as long as the bird was moving toward him, but when the tom veered off his path, Brown offered a few more yelps and cutts and got the majestic bird moving his way again. After less than 10 minutes, Mike stroked the beautiful iridescent feathers of his first Osceola gobbler that lay only 21 steps from his setup tree.

Brown said, "The loud aggressive calling on the longbox is what got the gobbler cranked up, and once he was coming, I stayed on him with a call to keep him moving in our direction. Uncharacteristically, the hens followed the gobbler right in. The longbox cut through the wind so the bird could get a fix on our position, and once he got in our sheltered opening I could effectively use the Sla-Tek call on him."

Loud calls such as box calls or aluminum and Sla-Tek friction calls are very effective during windy conditions. The high pitch of a longbox call also just seems to make toms gobble when nothing else will



**BELOW:** Results of a successful hunt using a strutting jake decoy to challenge dominance along with two hen decoys near a cypress swamp. **INSET:** The author (left) and Anthony Brown with two early season Osceolas.



work. When hens are receptive and vocal and wind is a factor, aggressive calling is the way to go. This type of calling will sound natural at the time, and it is imperative to cut the noise caused by a strong breeze.

After the second day of hunting the same birds and watching the big tom I was targeting being led away from my calling by the group of hens, I decided to really get aggressive on the third morning. I had watched two gobblers fly up to roost about 90 yards away from the hens the evening before, but there was no way to get between them. The closest we could get was on the point of a small hammock straight across the narrow pasture from the toms, and that put us 150 yards away. It was a very windy morning, so I knew I would have to crank up the calling if I was to lure one of the longbeards into effective range of Jeff Harm's Benelli.

Under the cover of darkness we slipped in behind a large cabbage palm, and I began calling on a Knight & Hale's Silver Queen aluminum friction call. Soon after, I added a box call and Hale's Advanced V mouth diaphragm. I wanted to get the gobblers to fly down in my direction and hopefully lure them close enough for a shot before the real hens could fly down and lead them away. It was so windy I never heard a single gobble, but before good light, I could see the snowy white head of the largest gobbler in strut across the pasture.

I called nonstop on all three calls, using the Silver Queen most frequently, and the big tom moved steadily toward our setup. He broke into strut once, and I cutt loudly at him on the aluminum call. I saw him gobble back but it was so windy I couldn't hear him at 100 yards. He quickly resumed his march toward our hide. While I was still calling almost continually with my arsenal of calls, the Osceola monarch broke into a sprint and ran straight toward us. I cackled on my mouth call to stop him at 30 paces, and Jeff made a good shot. Upon the report of the gun, the hens across the pasture launched from their roosts.

With very aggressive calling, I was able to get the big tom to fly down and come to us before the hens even hit the ground. I knew I had to get his attention first and keep it, or the flock of hens would drag him away and end the hunt as they had the previous day.

### Setup Strategies

During the early part of season when competition with hens is at its peak, there are two setup strategies that work well. First,

a hunter should get as close as possible to the gobbler he is hunting, and secondly, along with aggressive calling, he should use a decoy set that will challenge dominance. Combining these two strategies can produce fantastic results in the right situation.

As with the hunt above, it is always better to try to get a tom to come to you before he gets with hens, and the closer you can set up to his roost, the better chance you have of luring him in before the hens spoil the hunt. Longtime Osceola guide Ken Mayes advised, "Getting close is a great setup tactic, but it can be risky because there is always a distinct possibility of bumping the bird. If you know where a gobbler and a group of hens are roosted, the ideal situation is to work in between them to setup." Many times you will get a gobbler to come to you first, come by you on the way to the hens, or the gobbler and hens might meet within shotgun range of your position. All of these scenarios will put you in the right place for a shot. "Seeing the exact location where the birds fly up to roost the night before will help tremendously when employing this tactic," said Mayes.

Even if a hunter doesn't get between hens and a gobbler, but gets in tight on the tom, he or she stands a good chance of getting a shot. If the hunter can sneak within 75 to 80 yards of a longbeard, the bird only has to walk 35 to 40 yards to get close enough to check out the calling or decoys and offer a good shot. He could even be with hens and walk a short 40 yards away from them and still feel like he is strutting for them. He hasn't really left his lady friends, but he has moved in to gun range. When employed on loud windy days, this tactic is a great choice because if you are in close, the gobbler can still clearly hear your calling despite the background noise.

When pursuing a boss gobbler that is traveling with a group of hens in the early part of the season, Mike Tussey, a veteran guide, says a very effective tactic is to put out two or more hen decoys and a strutting jake decoy. Tussey said, "The big tom has already asserted his dominance, and he won't put up with insubordination, especially from a jake. Many times a gobbler will leave his group of hens to come over and show a strutting intruder just who is boss of his area. The action can be fast and furious."

On a hunt near Fort Drum a few years back, on the blustery second day of the season, I was able to put all of the tactics I have mentioned to work in one hunt. I knew where a tom and his hens had



A successful hunter in cypress swamp near Fort Drum.

been roosting on the edge of a cypress swamp. I slipped in early and positioned myself about 75 yards away from the bird on the edge of the swamp. After crawling into an opening, I put out two hen decoys and a strutting jake.

When the first crow welcomed the new day, the turkey gobbled. I answered with a tree yelp, and he responded immediately. A chorus from a group of hens on the other side of him grew in volume, and I called aggressively on my Silver Queen and Advanced V diaphragm. Soon after I saw five hens sail out of their trees, and the big longbeard joined them. I kept up the calling, and when the boss tom pirouetted in full strut to a position where he could see my imposters, I mimicked a defiant fighting purr. That was all it took.

The Osceola sultan double gobbled and trotted away from his female companions straight toward my strutting jake decoy. He stopped only a few feet from the fake challenger and blew up into strut. I cutt loudly at him to bring his head up and unleashed a lethal load of 5-shot.

Florida's Osceola, the crown jewel of the wild turkey Grand Slam, is the supreme feathered challenge within the United States. Just because the bird resides in the Sunshine State doesn't mean that hunting it will always be on warm, clear days. Pursuing this regal game bird in early March can be a great challenge both due to weather fluctuations and the breeding phase that the birds are in during this time. Calling aggressively, setting up close, and the proper use of mixed decoys can turn the tide in your favor and help you harvest a trophy Osceola gobbler. ■