Memorable wild turkey hunts don't necessarily include a turkey. When a bobcat jumps on your head—now there's a hunt to remember.

Illinois' Wildest Turkey Hunts

(Photo by John Hafner NWTF.)

Story By Joe McFarland

The funny thing about the best turkey hunting stories is that the great ones—those astonishing, strange-but-true stories listeners can't help but retell to somebody else—don't necessarily involve a successful hunt. For most hunters, a successful turkey hunt is a perfectly fine thing. But the truly memorable hunts—where something incredibly unexpected or bizarre happens—now there's a great story waiting to be told.

Among the oddities: Hunters occasionally call in the wrong animal. It seems turkeys aren't the only wildlife to respond to a turkey call, and numerous cases have been reported by hunters where unexpected wildlife show up to join the hunt.

Take the case of a DNR wildlife biologist who was working his turkey call while crouched beside a tree a few years ago in Massac County. Hundreds of yards away, a spring gobbler seemed interested and responded loudly as camouflaged hunter Dan Woolard waited and watched. Suddenly, without so much as a snapped twig or rustled leaf as a warning, Woolard felt a weight on his head—something alive.

"I thought a raccoon fell out of the tree," Woolard recalled later. Instantly he felt a sharp pain on his neck as the animal jumped off his head and bolted away. The startled biologist lifted his head mask and turned around to see a confused bobcat trotting away into the forest. For several days, Woolard was able to point to his scratched neck and tell all nonbelievers the story of being pounced upon by one of the most elusive of all Illinois predators.

Illinois' spring hunting season for the eastern wild turkey is set for April 6-May 7 (South) and April 13-May 14 (North).

Amazingly, Woolard's story isn't unique. Turkey hunters often sound so convincingly real as they cluck and gobble on their calls, even the most wary predators get fooled. Sometimes, those four-legged hunters decide they want a cut of the action and show up for some opportunistic freeloading.

Veteran wild turkey hunter Kenny Pind had his strategic hunting position picked out one morning in 1990 near North Ripple Hollow in the Shawnee National Forest. Pind had hiked uphill before dawn and settled in to the per-

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Wild turkey hunters bagged more than 15,790 gobblers during the spring season last year. A few hunters called in everything from coyotes to bobcats—and even stray peacocks.

fect place to call a gobbler at sunrise—and everything was working according to plan.

"The turkey was working its way uphill, gobbling and strutting away," Pind said. "Just about the time it was maybe 50 yards out, right when I was getting ready to shoot, a coyote jumps from out of nowhere, grabs the turkey and runs off with it."

It all happened so fast, Pind never had a chance to fire to claim the turkey he felt he deserved.

"Off he went with my bird, and that was the end of that," Pind said. "I'll say this: That coyote was a lot more satisfied than I was."

Unexpected attacks from wildlife also include one of the most baffling cases of mistaken identity ever caught on videotape. Conservation Police Officer Dave Hyatt was hunting with a friend who'd decided to give a shot at videotaping their hunt one April in Gallatin County.

"It was the first hunt I was able to videotape," Jim Scherer recalled recently. Outside of their blind the duo had placed a couple of turkey decoys—one hen and one jake (an immature male). Turkey hunters often use the combination of decoys to attract a bigger and more dominant gobbler to the scene.

The results were impressive—and bizarre.

As Hyatt made calls to a distant gobbler that seemed to be getting closer, Scherer quietly ran the video camera. Suddenly, an unexpected arrival from behind the blind came into view: an unseen adult gobbler.

"It was different turkey than the one we were calling," Scherer said. "We were totally caught off guard because he hadn't made a sound until he showed up."

But this new gobbler meant business. So convinced was the live turkey that the decoys were real, the gobbler proceeded to fan its tail feathers and strut for the plastic hen. Of course there was no response, which seemed to infuriate the live turkey.

Meanwhile, Hyatt was positioning himself to bag the new arrival.

Unable to woo the plastic hen, the live gobbler made a bold move to eliminate the competition: It suddenly attacked the plastic jake—and pulled it away with its beak.

"I've seen gobblers flog the decoy before, but I've never had them grab a decoy and drag it off," Hyatt said. As the video rolled, the gobbler ripped the decoy from the supporting stake with its beak, dragging it away from the hen.

By then, Hyatt was ready to shoot and bagged the angry gobbler with one shot. Yet he also paid a price by damaging his incredibly effective decoy.

"When he shot, they were so close together there were feathers shot through the decoy," Scherer said.

"We never did see the turkey I had been calling," Hyatt added. "But I guess that one would have made for a far less interesting hunt."

Decoys are meant to attract aggressive gobblers within range. In one bizarre case, a gobbler attacked the decoy and dragged it away.

Got a wild or unbelievable Illinois wild turkey hunting story to tell? We'd love to hear it. Especially if you've got a photo. Drop us a line at dnr.editor@illinois.gov. If we've got room, we'll run your tale in an upcoming issue of *Outdoor* Illinois.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

(Video images courtesy of Jim Scherer.)