Autumn bowhunters have plenty of opportunities to bag a wild turkey—but being prepared helps.

Falling for Turkeys

Story By Joe Bauer
Photos By Adele Hodde

It was early November and a perfect morning to be in a deer stand. The weather and location I'd scouted were great, and I knew this was going to be the day I connected with a white-tailed deer.

I was hoping for a doe. Frankly, I believe they are the best eating and I had yet to get any venison for the freezer this season. I had scouted this location carefully and was confident deer would move through before the day was done. The sky was clear, the moon was high, the temperature was right around freezing, the wind was non-existent and the sun was just peeking over the eastern horizon. All was right in my world.

The peace of the morning began to break up as the woods started to shake off another night's sleep. The songbirds started filling the quiet with their music and their morning routine of getting breakfast had commenced. In the distance, a coyote slipped through the timber looking for his first meal of the day.

Entranced by the start of another day in the timber, I almost missed the rustle of leaves behind me. Once my focus was regained, I sat motionless in my stand waiting to hear which way the deer was going to pass my tree, to my right or my left. Something was strange though. The sound wasn't the tempo of a walking, or even a feeding, deer. It was more erratic, like a squirrel scurrying around, but whatever was making that much racket was big.

Then, even more strange, the sound started to spread out and I could hear it all around me. It sounded like someone had a garden rake and was going to town on the oak leaves on the forest floor.

The successful reintroduction of the eastern wild turkey in Illinois has allowed for both spring and fall hunting seasons.

It finally dawned on me…turkeys. I knew better than to move, but I had to see this spectacle. Slowly turning around in my tree stand, I saw seven turkeys about 50 yards away. I'm not the greatest turkey hunter in Illinois and I don't get to spend too much time with these creatures, but found this exciting for another reason—I had an Illinois archery turkey tag.

It was by pure luck that I had this tag. When I purchased my archery deer tags a few years prior, the nice lady at the store asked if I wanted to get my archery turkey tag, too. I was new to archery hunting at the time and I didn't know

they were available. She said it was only $5.50 and I'd kick myself if some turkeys stumbled by and I didn't have it. Sounded like the truth to me so I purchased a turkey tag with my deer tags.

Over the next few years I had seen a couple of turkeys in the woods, but never this many so close. To be honest, I began to call the turkey tag my "donation tag," spending my money with little hope of success.

The flock was slowly puttering around, making their way closer to me. I was quite enthralled by the moment and watched the birds for about 10 minutes, in an odd posture, cramping my hamstrings. Checking carefully to make sure I could stretch without being seen by the turkeys, I twisted all the way around only to be greeted by three white flags and a symphony of deer blowing. I had managed to allow a doe and twin button bucks to slip in on me unnoticed.

Archery turkey tags are available over the counter for both Illinois residents and non-residents. Turkeys are legal to harvest with archery equipment in 96 of Illinois' 102 counties. The fall archery turkey season coincides with the archery deer season in those counties which are open to spring turkey hunting.

It is legal to hunt turkeys in the spring with archery equipment and while the season is shorter, the toms are on the prowl and this gives more of an advantage to the hunter than is available in the fall.

One major difference between spring and fall turkey seasons, including fall shotgun season, is that during the fall season you can harvest hens without beards, if you so choose.

Archers may buy and fill two archery turkey permits per year.

A wild turkey has tremendous eyesight. Archers must take great care when they draw on the bird.

To make this misstep completely perfect, the deer ran right through the flock of turkeys. Imagine the noise three running, blowing deer and seven flapping, flopping, clucking turkeys made.

The songbirds had no idea what was going on, but with all the commotion they figured they also should get while the gettin' was good. It took about 30 seconds for the woods to settle down. I sheepishly scanned the timber looking for more game, and human eyes, that had witnessed this marvelous display of hunting prowess.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on what happened that day, I realized I had never practiced on a turkey target and I was unsure of shot placement. I had practiced enough to be confident in my ability to hit the spot I aimed at; the question was where was that spot? I suggest practicing both from the ground and in the tree if you intend to pursue turkeys, even in a passive manner. Use a three-dimensional turkey target, especially for practice when shooting from a tree.

Don't move in your stand without doing a slow, 360 degree scan of the woods.

Turkeys and deer share much of the same habitat, and where you have one, you have the other. Don't get too fixated on turkeys when there are deer in the woods, and vice versa. Turkeys group up in the fall and a flock of them moving through the woods literally makes as much noise as a class of third-graders on a nature walk, especially when turkeys are feeding as they travel.

Finally, if you spend any time sitting in the timber archery deer hunting in the vast majority of Illinois, practice your shooting and buy that archery turkey tag.

You just never know.

Joe Bauer is an avid outdoorsman and works for the DNR Division of Education in Springfield.

"Birds of a feather flock together," could read "Deer and turkeys thrive together." It doesn't rhyme, but it's true.