

Are You Ready for the Spring Turkey Hunt

by Lee Keck

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Though wild turkey populations have suffered some in recent years, the number of local hunters pursuing this bird remain high. The 2020 spring season in the south zone is now only just days away. And, north zone hunters have barely a few weeks remaining before heading to the forests and woodlots of Illinois.

The spring turkey hunt actually began a week ago with the special two-day youth hunting season scheduled for March 28-29 in the state's southern zone and April 4-5 in the north zone. The southern zone includes Crawford, Jasper, Effingham, Fayette, Bond and Madison counties, and all counties to the south.

As in the past, Illinois hunters will have five separate regular season segments in each zone. Season dates in the north zone are April 13-17, April 18-23, April 24-29, April 30-May 6 and May 7-14. Seasons in the south zone are April 6-10, April 11-16, April 17-22, April 23-29 and April 30-May 7. Permits are issued for a particular season and indicate specific counties or hunting areas.

As mentioned, Illinois youths will be the first to tackle these wily birds. The special two-day youth hunt pits youngsters against these wily birds. Previously issued special permits are required for the youth hunts. This season is open to youths who have not reached 16 years of age by the first day of the season.

With plenty of new hunters heading afield, many of these individuals will be experiencing their first taste of turkey hunting. Fortunately, the sport requires only a minimum of equipment and a little basic knowledge to successfully pursue these birds. Those who are among the newcomers to the sport, can expect to quickly discover the excitement and, even more often, the disappointment, of spring turkey hunting.

If you already hunt deer or waterfowl, the cost factor in taking up this exciting spring sport is minimal. In fact, you already possess the two most expensive items -- a firearm and camouflage clothing.

Here in Illinois, turkey can be hunted with a modern shotgun or muzzleloading shotgun as large as a 10 gauge to as small as a 20 gauge with shot sizes no bigger than No. 4 to as small as 7 1/2. Hunting with a .410 or 28 gauge is not permitted. Combination shells that use shot within the legal size range are also allowed, as is a bow and arrow. You can also use a muzzleloading shotgun using the same shot sizes as a shotgun.

Though it is possible to bag a turkey with your regular hunting load, all manufacturers make special turkey loads that are loaded with coated pellets for more stopping power. Veteran turkey hunters prefer shotguns choked as tightly as possible. And, the optimum for this sport is a shot pattern as tight as possible. A shotgun with a full-choke should be the minimum. If the weapon's barrel uses a choke tube system, you may want to invest in a special turkey-choke tube.

For camouflage, most any pattern will do. For best results, however, try to match the pattern with the hunting situation. First time turkey hunters may need to purchase a camouflage face mask, gloves and either tape or sleeves for their gun. Better yet, they may wish to utilize a camouflage blind.

Most shotguns have a sighting system consisting of a front bead. Ribbed-barrel shotguns often have a front bead and one about halfway down the rib. However, some turkey

hunters prefer to upgrade their sighting system to something a bit more elaborate. Though anything more than a simple sighting system may seem like a luxury, deer hunters can attest to the benefits of a scope, red-dot site or holograph site. These sight systems not only allow a full field-of-view of the target, but also force repetitive mounting of the weapon to achieve the proper sight picture.

Turkey hunters may wish to carry a calling device or two, though there are always a few that should never use them. Calls come in all shapes and sizes and are made from everything from a wing bone to space age materials.

There are mouth calls consisting of a reed-like device that is placed in the mouth. These can require some expertise.

First-timers might be better off using one or more of the manufactured calls. There are round slate calls that are sounded with a striker and box calls which just require moving a hinged flap.

Push calls (the easiest) consist of a preset striker connected to rod. The hunter simply pushes the rod to create the hen-like sounds. Another option, is a vibration calls that is shaken. Try them all and get one that works best.

Decoys are another helpful tool. They should be light and easily transportable. They range from photo silhouettes made of various hard material with a photo overlay to hard plastic molded full body decoys. Perhaps the most desirable are the soft plastic full-body decoys.

A turkey hunting vest is also extremely helpful when carrying all your gear. Many have a built-in seat cushion.

As a rule, hunters possessing a shotgun and camouflage can get started hunting turkeys for under a \$150 in equipment. And if you're a newbie needing to purchase a gun and camo, that first turkey dinner can be had for under \$900. Of course, if you wish to buy the very best, the sky is the limit.

Keep in mind that hunting is permitted from a half-hour before sunrise until 1 p.m. While most turkey hunters will admit that good gear is indeed a luxury, most would willingly trade some of this quality for a fair amount of luck. This is one essential thing that every successful turkey hunter needs.

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Attachments area