

Outdoors

Turkey guns, pro and con

Much controversy exists about which type of gun is proper for spring gobbler hunting.

The argument, you must understand, is not about hunting methods, of which several are current. The only one that truly qualifies as hunting, however, is calling gobblers within shotgun range.

This method and this one alone demands the exercise of many and varied hunting skills. All the other methods are simply sniping and the only skill required is marksmanship. They are perfectly legal and legitimate, but they amount to food-gathering, not sport.

The controversy arises about what you shoot your bird with when you have enticed him into range (which is about 35 yards, maximum, no matter what your choice of artillery.)

The hard-core purist turkey hunter is convinced that it's a mortal sin to slay a gobbler with anything except a tightly-choked magnum shotgun. The sight of a rifle of any description, especially one with a scope sight, in a hunter's hands is proof-positive that the knave intends to

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John Wootters

knock over an unsuspecting bird at 150 yards. To the purist, that sort of thing ranks right up there with dynamiting the roost.

Having lost the use of my right (master) eye a decade or so ago, I made the transition to shooting a rifle from my left shoulder reasonably well, but have never mastered left-handed shotgunning. The dynamics of shooting a scattergun are totally different, and the sad truth is that I'm maybe a little too old a dog to relearn that trick.

So I sometimes hunt turkeys with a rifle. One of my favorites is a little single-shot chambered for the .357 Magnum pistol cartridge. Sights are a tang-mounted peep and front blade. It has accounted for several gobblers with a single bullet

each, none of them beyond shotgun range.

Another favorite is a beautiful little deluxe lever-action with the same sighting equipment, chambered to the .32-30 WCF round.

Still another is an original Winchester Model 1892 carbine in .25-20 WCF. This one is a genuine collectors' item and I shouldn't be dragging it around in the brush, but it's a favorite companion of many years' standing and I can't bear to consign it to the darkness of a gun safe forevermore.

None of these weapons is suitable for whacking turkeys beyond normal shotgun range, so why should the purists get indignant about the fact that they fire only one bullet at a time? They also require considerably more skill to make clean kills on gobblers than any shotgun at the same distances.

The same is true of my handguns, with which I've shot most of my called-up gobblers during the last few seasons. I've used an open-sighted .357 Magnum revolver firing cast-bullet handloads or even .38 Specials for several gobblers (including my lifetime best, a

23-pound dinosaur of a Rio Grande gobbler). I've also scored with a pet .44 Special, a .41 Special (wildcat), and a .45 Colt, all open-sighted single-action revolvers.

A couple of single-shot handguns, Thompson/Center Contenders, have also collected turkey dinners for me. Two favorites are a .256 Winchester Magnum, and a wildcat .300 Whisper, the latter loaded with cast bullets to approximate the .32-20 or .30 M1 Carbine.

All of these birds were called up to within normal shotgun ranges. In fact, I have never killed a spring gobbler with either a rifle or pistol that would not have been much easier to take with a typical magnum shotgun set up for turkey hunting.

I have often urged the purists to try turkey-hunting with an open-sighted single-action pistol for a change. They just might find that it puts a little sport into the game!

To a real purist that's blasphemy and I ought to be ashamed of myself – but I just can't resist it!



Photo by John Wootters

Wootters poses with a fine gobbler called up and collected at 21 paces with the single-shot pistol in his hand, chambered to a wildcat cartridge similar to the .32-20 WCF. Having lost the use of his shooting eye and unable to use a shotgun from his left shoulder, he finds turkey-hunting with a handgun challenging and satisfying.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's "Hunting" magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on

deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."