

Outdoors

The story of Delilah

Mind you, I am not claiming to have invented the turkey decoy, but I did carve a life-sized hen turkey from a block of Styrofoam before I ever saw a manufactured turkey decoy. And Delilah, as I named her, did lure a wild gobbler to my gun on her first outing, on the Nueces River a little downstream from Montel.

Many Texas hunters today do not realize that the first-ever spring gobbler season in this state was in 1970. Texas had no spring-turkey hunting tradition, and Texans, by and large, had no idea of how to go about calling up a lovesick tom.

The only turkey hunting experience most of us had at that time was potting an occasional gobbler with a deer rifle during the fall whitetail season. We quickly learned the tragic futility of hitting a turkey's body with a high-velocity expanding bullet, but few of us could hit a turkey's head or neck with a rifle. So we started with zero background in turkey tactics when the new spring season was announced.

About all we could do was buy a turkey call and read the instructions, or maybe purchase a record or audio tape that provided some clue to what kind of noises a turkey call was supposed to make — but told us nothing about

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how to hunt springtime turkeys.

If you're a serious turkey hunter today, you can imagine some of the antics that took place throughout the Hill Country in the name of hunting turkeys. I have to believe that some of the gobblers that died that season must have laughed themselves to death.

The only salvation for the hunters was that the turkeys themselves had never experienced a spring hunting season, either. They were unbelievably tolerant of what had to be some of the worst turkey calling ever heard. A buddy with whom I shared a deer lease in Val Verde County bought a box call with instruction sheet (having never, like most of us, heard a proper yelp, purr, or cut in his life) and went hunting. Over that first weekend he called up a gobbler for himself and one each for his wife and teenaged son. All



Photo by John Wootters

Here Wootters' homemade hen turkey decoy, Delilah, poses proudly with her one and only victim.

three birds were collected, and he came home wondering what all the fuss over this spring turkey hunting was about. I must add that during the years since, the Texas gobblers have learned a thing or two about calls, and so has my friend.

So did we all, in fact. If assassinating a gobbler were really as easy as he thought it was after his first hunt, most of us wouldn't bother. The majority of us came home from that 1970 season empty-handed and humiliated by a bird known not to have sense enough to come in out of the rain (ask any turkey farmer).

But we learned, slowly, painfully, but thoroughly,

about turkey habits, calls, camouflage, guns, and — yes, decoys. Meantime, Texas turkey flocks have flourished and spread, so there are more birds available to hunters, in more counties, than ever before. And we became turkey addicts, many of us, awaiting the spring gobbler season as eagerly as ever we anticipated opening day of deer season.

What became of Delilah? Her Styrofoam body gradually got broken, dented and chipped, and her paint job suffered accordingly, until she looked less like a turkey hen than some grotesque, short-necked snow goose and was replaced with a commercial model. She and I

never collaborated on another gobbler.

But Delilah had her moment of triumph ... and so did I!

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."