

Hunting Tips from the Turkey Freaks

Article by [Scott Bestul](#). Uploaded on March 24, 2014



Jeff Budz scans past palmettos for a Florida gobbler. Below, Budz demonstrates the tactics of all our experts.

Photos by Chris Crisman

Lots of folks love turkey hunting. But these four guys are totally nuts about it, as in gone-for-three-months, drive-all-night, no-sleep, belly-crawl-through-a-swamp, forget-married-life crazy about spring gobblers. And you can learn a lot from them.

The Southern Slam Man

-Jeff Budz, Land Manager and Private Guide, Florida



Statistically, Jeff Budz is the world's biggest turkey freak. At 47 he is closing in on his 400th turkey and has registered more Grand Slams with the NWTF than any hunter in history. The 61 slams tallied by the late and legendary Dick Kirby were once thought to be as untouchable as Roger Maris's 61 home runs. But once Budz got his first in 1994, he registered quadruple slams (16 turkeys each calendar year) from 1999 through the present. He now has 91 and isn't slowing down.

Budz's latest quest is to kill gobblers in all 49 states that host a season. "I've got 45 down and should finish this spring," he says. Last year, he tagged a tom in each of the 16 states he hunted, in one stretch taking 10 birds in 10 states in 10 consecutive days.

"Young guys come up to me and say, 'I want to do what you're doing!' I tell them, O.K., first thing you do is take that wedding ring off, smash it with a hammer, and throw it out the window." Budz started this season hunting Osceolas in March. In April, he'll drive to the Napa Valley and hunt his way home. "I'll average 3.32 hours of sleep a night for the entire stretch, and I'll love every second of it."

What He Does That Others Don't

"Stay in shape. I was a cross-country runner, so I know all about conditioning. But now I do it for turkey hunting. When a bird gobbles halfway up a mountain, I'm running at him before that gobble dies. I never let physical effort stop me, and I'm able to hunt hard for weeks."

His Secret Tactic

“Field turkeys are tough. They’ll pitch into a meadow and refuse to budge. So I belly-crawl into the landing zone an hour before sunup and stake an Avian-X hen decoy. I might yelp once or twice, but then I’m quiet. Just seeing a hen right where a tom likes to strut is often all it takes. But sometimes he’ll hang up out of range and then start walking off. That’s when I grab a full-strut gobbler silhouette from Montana Decoy, stick it in front of me, and start crawling toward the tom. As soon as he sees that thing, he’ll turn and come, almost guaranteed.”

His Secret Weapon

“Technology. I hunt a lot of public ground, and a GPS helps me navigate unfamiliar territory, mark birds and sign, and get back out. I also use a rangefinder on every hunt. With today’s turkey loads, 40 yards is the new 20. But you’d better know it’s 40 and not 60.”

If He Could Only Run One Call

“Actually I only use two, and they’re in my mouth at the same time: a Primos True Double for yelps and aggressive cutts, and a single-reed Primos that’s awesome for clucks, purrs, and kee kees. I’m a very aggressive caller. I drive my hunting partners absolutely nuts.”

How He Kills the Toughest Toms

“Total-immersion hunting. I’ll get in the woods before the season and just live there for several days, listening to gobblers and marking strut zones, feeding areas, and roosts on GPS. By opening day, I’m ready to tag the boss bird.”

Three Rules to Hunt By:

1. Keep a journal. “I write a detailed account of every hunt—the weather, breeding phase, how many birds I saw and worked. There’s no greater learning tool.”
2. Check your watch. “If you see a bird doing the same thing in the same area at about the same time every day, it’s your own fault if you don’t kill him.”
3. Get comfortable. “It takes patience to kill most toms. When you set up, pick a cozy spot and get things cleared and situated so you can wait out a tough gobbler.”

The West’s Best

-Doug Herman, Co-owner of Cottonwood Hunting Lodge, Nebraska



Doug Herman killed his first turkey, a Nebraska Merriam's, in 1990 at the age of 20 and has been obsessed ever since. "I spent years just listening to their calls and studying body language and behavior, trying to get in their heads," he says. Eventually, he used that knowledge to start killing gobblers with bow and arrow—without a blind—just by setting up properly.

At 44, Herman has spent over half his life as a turkey guide. In an average season, his hunters tag 40 to 50 birds, many with archery equipment (cottonwoodhuntinglodge.com).

Herman insists that western birds, though often numerous, are no pushovers. "Merriam's and Rios adapted to different habitat, and if you don't adjust your tactics to match that, these birds will tromp on you day after day."

What He Does That Others Don't

"Use the wind. When the trees and bushes are waving around, you can slip in tight before calling. Also, if you're slightly out of position, you can often move yourself or your barrel without spooking an incoming bird."

His Secret Tactic

"Western birds always seem to have a place to go; they may gobble their heads off at you, but as often as not they'll just line out and walk away. I let them disappear. Then, using terrain, I parallel their route until I get just ahead of them and suddenly swing over to cut them off. If that setup isn't tight enough, I'll try it once more. If that fails, I make a huge loop to get as far ahead of them as I can and get in position to cut

them off. These turkeys are runners; if you think you're calling a Merriam's back to a place he's already been, you're kidding yourself."

His Secret Weapon

"The tail fan from a gobbler. It's the ultimate lightweight decoy. When a bird plants his feet, I just stick that fan in front of my face, belly-crawl into range, and tip him over."

If He Could Only Run One Call

"Actually, 95 percent of my calling is from one call—a nail call I've used for years to mimic clucks, purrs, yelps, cutts, even kee kees. The striker is a horseshoe nail you work against a chunk of slate. You'd swear you were hearing a real turkey." (Go to fieldandstream.com/nailcall to see it in action.)

How He Kills the Toughest Toms

"If a bird I'm set up on has been gobbling for 20 minutes and I haven't killed him, I reposition. I've tagged some difficult, old turkeys just by knowing when it's time to move."

Three Rules to Hunt By:

1. Mean what you say. "Don't be content to make a bird gobble. Heck, a crow can do that. Judge his mood, body language, the phase of the season, and give him what you think he needs to hear to come in."
2. Get closer. "The thin, clear air of the West really makes gobbles carry. I've had clients hear one a full mile away and hit the deck to set up. Usually, you need to get closer than you think."
3. Don't check in. "One of the worst things you can do when you're moving on a bird is check him with a turkey call, which can lure him in before you're ready. If you have to know where he is, use a shock call."

The Yankee Killer

-David "Big Daddy" Smith, Owner of Double D Guide Service, Massachusetts



David Smith's turkey obsession started innocently enough during the Bay State's first modern seasons in the early 1980s. "But it wasn't long at all before I got to the point where I couldn't not hunt," says the 50-year-old guide. "I would get up in the middle of the night to hunt another state, drive home, shower, and go to work until 10 p.m. Then I'd do it all over again, every day, until the season closed."

Somewhere in there his first wife left him, and Smith threw himself even deeper into the sport. Widely recognized as one of today's top turkey hunters in New England, Smith has tagged gobblers in a wide variety of habitats and locations, including small woodlots in New Jersey and vast industrial forests in Maine. "Guys would follow my truck, looking for my secret spots," he says. "What they didn't know is I didn't have many. I was hunting public ground and farms other guys hunted."

These days Smith puts nearly all of his efforts into helping his clients, who kill 30-plus gobblers each spring. "My wife—I'm happily remarried—teases me about how few birds I kill these days. 'You always get one on the last day,' she says. That's because I never want the season to end."

What He Does That Others Don't

"Scout obsessively. I'm in the woods an hour before sunup every day for an entire month before the turkey season opens, locating roosts, feeding areas, strut zones, and obstacles that will hang a turkey up. The old saying 'It's always easier to call them to where they want to go' is true. But you don't learn those places unless you scout like mad."

His Secret Tactic

“When a roosted gobbler doesn’t fly down into my lap at dawn, I listen closely to pinpoint him as he gobbles and struts off the limb. As soon as he moves off, I slip into his landing zone and offer a few yelps. Most of the time, the bird will run back to that spot. He’s thinking Hey! I was gobbling there before, and a hen was just late getting to me. It really works.”

His Secret Weapon

“Where it’s legal, I carry a wing from a real hen shot in the fall. I scratch it across a branch or trunk. They’ll gobble just to that. No tree yelp needed.”

If He Could Only Run One Call

“I might go crazy. I have 30 calls laid out on my kitchen table before I go out, and I run all of them, listening for the handful that sound perfect to me that day.”

How He Kills the Toughest Toms

“Patience, and setup. The way to kill an old, smart turkey is to get in the right spot and wear out the seat of your pants. I tell people that turkeys don’t hang up; they walk to the exact spot where they know they should see the hen they heard. If you can’t shoot to that spot, you’re out of the game.”

Three Rules to Hunt By:

1. Be quiet. “When I meet a client, I have him put on his vest and jump once. If I don’t hear a noise from the vest, he can wear it. If I do, it stays at the truck.”
2. Cover your tracks. “I avoid walking muddy trails, and I pick up every turkey feather I see. Why tip off someone else that there are turkeys in the area?”
3. Be the bird. “Listen to the turkeys and mimic them. I don’t care how good I think I sound in my truck, I let the birds tell me what they want to hear.”

The Missouri Assassin

-Mike Miller, Buck Commander TV Cameraman, Missouri



There are thousands of Mike Millers—but only one Mike Miller the Turkey Killer. Peers in the turkey hunting industry gave him the tag in a nod to his skill. Although there are more noted callers and better-known experts, when it comes to putting gobblers on the ground, no one is so universally named the best by those in the know. As one industry insider put it, “Mike Miller is simply the most efficient turkey-killing organism God ever created.”

Averaging 70 days in the field each spring, Miller is in on 50 to 60 kills each year. “I’ll do whatever it takes to tag a turkey, legally. I once belly-crawled a half mile across a field to shoot one, just because someone bet me I couldn’t.”

Miller killed his first tom 31 years ago in Missouri, at age 13. “I got hooked by the gobble, by the spit-and-drum, like everyone else. But I also just like to eat them. You never master this game, but when you know where a tom is going to go before he gets there, and you’re waiting when he shows up, well that’s the ultimate for me.” Folks who’ve hunted with Miller say that happens an awful lot.

What He Does That Others Don’t

“Read and heed the Bible. Acts 10:13 tells us, ‘Arise; kill and eat.’ It doesn’t say sit around and wait. I’m an aggressive turkey hunter. I try to anticipate a tom’s movements and quickly get myself right to the spot where he wants to be.”

His Secret Tactic

“Some of my friends call it the Missouri assassin technique. I actually started learning it with the first gobbler I ever killed. I had no patience to wait for him to come to me, so I just slowly stalked toward him, stopping occasionally to listen to him spit and drum, until he finally walked into gun range. Now I do the same thing, but much faster. I was a track star in high school, so no one covers ground faster than I do. I just use terrain and cover to move quickly toward a gobbler until I’m close enough to either shoot him or easily call him in. I have zero tolerance for a bird that won’t commit. If he plants his feet, I’m on my way to him instantly.”

His Secret Weapon

“My eyes. Well, those and some binoculars. Observing turkeys to learn where they roost, feed, strut, travel, and loaf is the start of everything. I scout year-round. In February and March, I focus on concentrations of hens. When the season starts and the gobbling is poor, I head to those hangouts to strike a bird.”

If He Could Only Run One Call

“For mouth calls I carry my signature series Hook’s Custom Executioner I and II. But I’m never without a slate that my grandfather made for me years ago.”

How He Kills the Toughest Toms

“Pinpoint roosting. When I put a tom to bed, I want to know the specific tree he’s in. The next morning I crawl in close while it’s still pitch-black. When he flies down, he’s going to be in gun range or so close it will take a yelp or two to bring him in.”

Three Rules to Hunt By:

1. Don’t overthink. “Don’t ask, what would I do if I were a gobbler? Ask what a gobbler will do, based on your scouting.”
2. Talk him up. “A few situations require soft calling. Otherwise, I pour the coals to a bird. I want to get a stubborn tom so amped that he either comes in despite himself or chokes to death on his own gobble.”
3. Move at the right times. “When you have a physical obstruction, or a stiff breeze is blowing, or when a tom’s fan is facing you, don’t hesitate to slip in closer.”