

Self-Serve Slam!

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It took a while, but you finally called in and killed your first wild turkey. Since then, you've become more adept at filling a tag or two each season; you think you have this turkey-hunting thing figured out. Now it's time to up the challenge and perhaps escape your usual haunt in search of greener pastures—maybe ones where Rios, Merriams and Osceolas roam. You want a Grand Slam.

Jeff Budz, a self-proclaimed turkey fanatic from Illinois who now resides in Florida, is the quintessential do-it-yourself Grand Slammer.

Since first taking an interest in turkey hunting in the mid 1980s, at the age of 18, Budz admits he has become addicted.

He hunted Easterns in his native state before going for Rios and Merriams. It wasn't until 1994 that he took his first Osceola, thus collecting his first Grand Slam. It was then that he decided he would dedicate his life to taking as many slams as he could.

Budz, now 40, has collected and registered with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) 41 Grand Slams! That's no misprint: 41 slams in 12 years. Only Dick Kirby, owner of Quaker Boy Game Calls, has registered more. "Dick has more," Budz says. "But I'm knocking on the door and expect to overtake him." What's most amazing about Budz's accomplishment is that he did it on a workingman's budget—relying on friends and public land along the way. "I shot my first ten slams on public ground before I got a chance to hunt on private land," he says. Today, he has a network of friends to call on, but it wasn't always that way.

For the hunter who doesn't have a lot of resources but is eager to collect his first slam, Budz offers the following advice.

1 COMMIT YOURSELF A huge part of Budz's success has come from his refusal to take rejection personally. He says a hunter has to be driven. "If you're not willing to spend some time, a little money and some elbow grease to plan your slam, it's not going to happen," Budz says. You have to research areas online and

then not be afraid to get on the phone and call people and ask questions. If you call somebody and he isn't able or willing to help, find somebody who is. "My glass is always full. I don't even think about negativity, I don't have time to worry about rejection. It's going to happen. Move on," he says.

2 MAKE A PLAN A majority of hunters live in the Eastern's range due to the fact that it's the most widely distributed subspecies. For that reason, most hunters will be looking to set up hunts for Rios (primarily in the lower Midwest), Merriams (throughout the West) and Osceolas (on the peninsula of Florida). Target states that have more than one subspecies to minimize travel time and distance between hunts. Budz likes Florida for its Osceolas and Easterns, Kansas for its Easterns and Rios, and Nebraska for its Rios and Merriams.

3 SCHEDULE YOUR HUNTS Spring turkey season opens first in Florida, beginning in early March, with many Deep South states opening later that month, followed in April by most Eastern, Midwest and Western states, and finally by Northeastern and upper Midwest states in May. If you're in a state that doesn't open until April, you'll probably want to hit Florida first, followed by your home state. Then you can target the other two subspecies you need. You'll have time. If you live in a state with Easterns that doesn't open until May, you'll definitely want to hit Florida first, followed by areas that hold Rios and Merriams. Finish up at home.

4 BUILD A NETWORK Budz has built a network of contacts who offer advice on local bird activity and sometimes even provide access to land and a place to sleep. To develop your own network, he suggests calling friends who live where other turkey subspecies are found, state game agency turkey biologists and NWTf state directors and chapter presidents (nwtf.org). They can offer insight on the local hunting scene and put you in touch with people who can help you out. "I talk to at least one person every day who lives somewhere that I hunt," Budz says.

5 BE CREATIVE Don't expect hunters simply to take you hunting. It will require more than that. Offer something in return. Budz, who now lives in Florida, gives hunters living in areas where he needs to hunt another subspecies the chance to swap hunts. And don't just think turkeys. If you have a great line on deer or elk hunting, offer a hunt for a different species. Online message boards are a great place to meet others and swap hunts. Place ads in newspapers, and instead of exchanging hunts, propose paying a day fee. If you have a skill, such as carpet cleaning or painting, maybe somebody will be interested in accepting your services for the chance to hunt. Look at everything you have to offer and make it available.

6 GO PUBLIC A lot of hunters avoid public land like the plague, figuring the birds are too pressured. Not so, says Budz, who cut his turkey-hunting teeth on public grounds. To avoid crowds, hunt during the middle of the week, when most locals are working. And skip opening week, when the woods are overrun with sportsmen. "Wait until the second week. The gobblers are still there, they're still hopped up and looking for hens," he says. Take a GPS and be willing to go farther off the trails than most hunters. Many public lands also have camping areas where you can stay for little money. Budz often sleeps in his truck to stay near the action.

7 KEEP IT CHEAP Staying near the action isn't the only reason Budz sometimes sleeps in his truck. It's also cheaper than a hotel. He'll even pitch a tent or sleep on a friend's sofa when available. He drives his own truck whenever possible to avoid the cost of flights, though if you plan to travel across country, you might be better off flying. Check travel sites like Kayak.com, and when you find the flight you want, go to that airline's Web site. Tickets are often cheaper there. If you're driving, your biggest cost will be gasoline and hunting licenses, though nonresident turkey licenses are still a great bargain—usually less than \$150. Hunting with a friend can help cut your travel costs in half.

8 GIVE IT YOUR ALL Because you often have a short window of time in which to get your bird, Budz says you have to go all out. "Be prepared to go without sleep," he says. He often drives at night so he can be where he wants to hunt the next day. There also isn't time to worry about bad weather. Rain, wind, snow—Budz says you're going to have to deal with it. "I figure the turkeys are still out there, so I'm going to be out there." He also keeps on the go once he's in the woods, often hiking for miles until he finds a hot bird. "You don't have time to waste on a call-shy turkey or one that is going to keep hanging up," he says. "You need to find the one that is ready to come in."

Path to a Slam

- 1) Driving is the best way to go. You can tote more gear and your biggest expense will be gasoline.
- 2) Hunt weekdays, when the woods are less crowded.
- 3) Target states that have more than one subspecies of turkey, to reduce travel time between hunts.
- 4) A great way to gain access to distant private land is to swap hunts with sportsmen from other states.