A detailed illustration of a forest scene. In the foreground, a large turkey with a red and white head and a patterned tail stands amidst lush green foliage. In the background, a hunter in camouflage gear is crouched, aiming a rifle. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees and dense undergrowth.

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GAME NEWS

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Joe Mattock

Mid-Morning Longbeard

Nick Erway
MAY 00

By Nick Erway

I NEVER HAD time to hunt spring gobblers much. There was always too much to do, such as planting grass and pulling weeds. I never could justify it, and although I tried spring turkey hunting, I never got serious about it. As I sat there in the cool, spring woods, thinking of all the things I should be doing, I decided that this year was going to be different.

Recently retired from a 29-year career that involved a lot of traveling, I now have time to hunt. I got the yard in shape and everything done. This was going to be the year I'd get my gobbler. An acquaintance who had been hearing turkeys gave me permission to hunt near her home and park in her driveway. I didn't get out until Monday of the second week, but I knew I had lots of time.

On that day I was up early, ate breakfast, gathered up all my stuff and was off to my new spot, three miles from my home in Perry County. It was a beautiful cool day. I headed up the trail through mountain laurel and some mixed hemlocks and hardwoods, then picked out what seemed like a good place to start calling.

The hardest thing for me is to refrain from calling too often. Timing myself with my watch, every 15 minutes I gave another series of calls, softly at first and then a little louder. Using every one of my calls and getting no results, I started to think about things

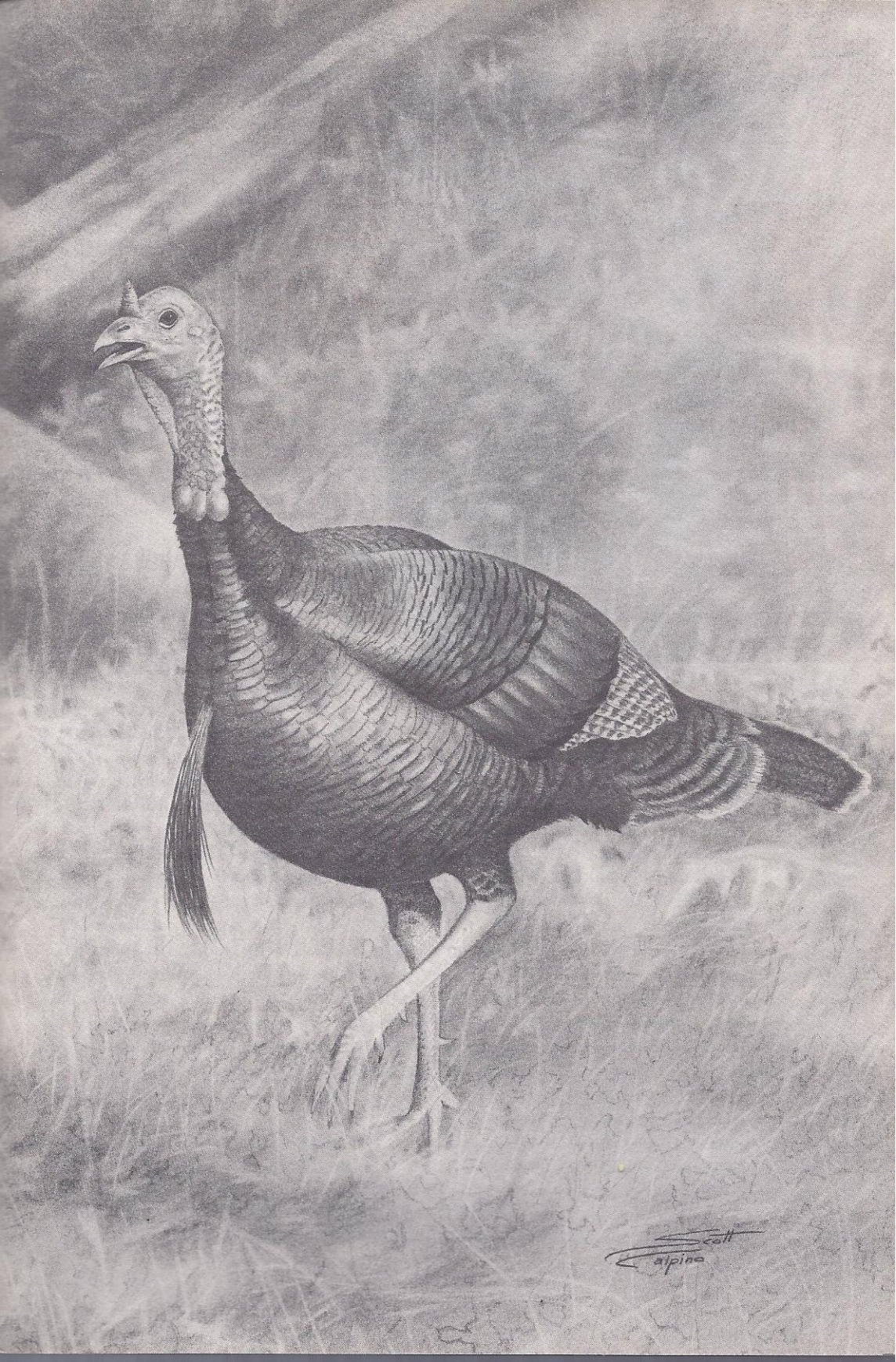
I should have been doing at home. Going for nearly five hours without hearing a gobbler, I was just about to quit when I heard a turkey gobbler far off. For the next hour, I called every 15 minutes and heard the gobbler only two more times, but he sounded farther away each time.

Time was running out, so I decided the next day I would get a little closer to where I heard him. I quietly moved down off the hill and was about to get in my car when I noticed that my friend, Amy, was home. I started up the steps to her home when I heard another gobbler. This time it was close. My watch showed that it was 10 minutes to noon. Amy came out and the turkey gobbled again, barely off the edge of her yard.

"I'll show you that turkey," she said.

I stowed my gun in the car, then we took a small trail out of her backyard and down through a small woodlot that opened into a freshly plowed field. There he was, about 300 yards away, right in the middle of the field. He saw us and took off running for the other side. He really looked big.

On Tuesday I got up early again, grabbed a bite to eat and some coffee, then headed out. I went right to the edge of the big field. I quietly walked in and found a log to sit on. The log lies in front of its trunk and is a perfect seat with a backrest. I started calling softly every 15 minutes. I didn't hear a thing for three hours, but I sat there anyway. It was a nice morning, and I knew that the gobbler was around. If I sat long enough, I was sure I'd hear him.



Scott
alpina



At 10 o'clock, out of the corner of my eye I caught something heading my way. I didn't dare blink — even though I had a facemask on. A hen moved behind me and began clucking, then immediately the tom gobbled from across the field. I never heard him or the hen again, so I figured they got together and ambled off.

Wednesday morning found me again on the log, and again I went for three hours without hearing a turkey. At 10 o'clock, though, right on schedule, the tom gobbled. He stepped out into the far side of the plowed field, about 125 yards away. He walked my way then flopped down and started dusting himself. I tried a couple purrs and yelps, but he paid no attention. The bird got up and shook, sending a cloud of dust across the field on the slight breeze. He turned and walked

the other way, disappearing into the woods.

On Friday I set up on the other side of the field, in a grove of pine trees. I heard a tractor in the distance, and before long a farmer began planting corn in the field 100 feet across from me. I knew the bird wouldn't go into the field with all the racket going on, so I relocated to the log where I had been sitting during the first few days of the season. I no longer heard the tractor, and darned if the tom didn't start gobbling from near the spot I had just left. Then I heard what I thought was another hunter calling to the tom on his side of the field, but soon realized it was a real hen.

On Saturday I figured there was no reason to get into the woods before 9 o'clock, because on previous hunts he hadn't gobbled until around 10, so I slept in. At 10 o'clock I spotted the tom across the field. I made a couple calls, but he ran into the woods. Not long after that two hens

worked their way up along the edge of the field towards me, picking up some newly planted corn along the way. All of a sudden the big gobbler jumped into the field. He was being chased by a big, black housecat. They did a couple circles around each other and stopped and stared at each other before the cat apparently decided this turkey was too big for him and casually sauntered across the field and disappeared. The tom disappeared back into the woods. The two hens continued my way and kept feeding right past me and into the big woods beyond. When they were within 20 feet of me, I could see that one had a 2-inch beard. It was a legal bird, but I wanted the big gobbler.

The following Monday was a nice, clear day. I decided to find a spot in a smaller field above the big field I had been setting up near. I felt that the big gobbler must have been crossing this field to get to the

other. I found a big pine tree that gave me a good view of the upper corner of the field, but after about an hour and a half I decided to look for another spot.

I ended up on my familiar log where I had set up during the previous week and soon noticed the two hens coming my way. I waited and watched as they came right past me, then I heard a loud gobble. The tom was in the smaller field I had just left. I clucked, just like the hens had done during the previous week, and the gobbler came running, straight at me. *Boom!* I missed, and the bird hightailed it back the way he had come.

I couldn't believe I had missed. I never saw him until he came over the top of the slope, and he was no more than 40 feet away, coming at a dead run. He closed the distance so fast he couldn't have been more than 15 feet away when I shot. I figured my shot pattern was so small at that distance that missing wasn't hard to do.

I went out the next two days and spotted the gobbler both times, but he was quiet and wouldn't respond to any calling. On the following Saturday I was in the woods by 7 o'clock. I thought other hunters might be about, and I wanted to be situated in case someone interrupted the big gobbler's routine. Around 8:30 I saw movement behind me in the field then heard some yelp-

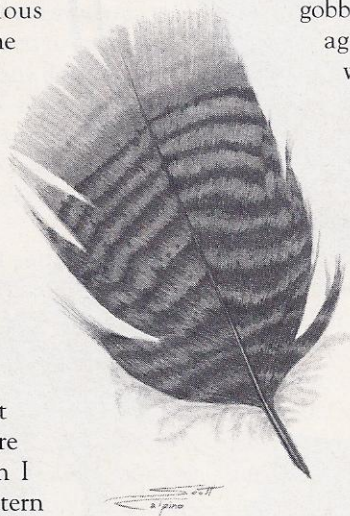
ing. What I thought was a turkey turned out to be a hunter dressed completely in camouflage walking toward me. The hunter never noticed my orange hat and walked right on past then sat down in the trail between the two fields. He stayed for about 20 minutes then got up and left. I moved quietly up to the smaller field and sat until 11 o'clock, then was returning to my original spot when I spotted the gobbler dusting in the big field again, not 50 feet from where I had been earlier.

He saw me and spooked.

On the following Wednesday I set up in a small hedgerow near the big field, and at 10 o'clock the big tom stepped into view. He was 50 feet away and heading right for me. I put the bead of the Ithaca 37 just above his beard, where the neck met his body, and pulled the trigger. The bird crumpled at the

shot, and just like that, I had him. My persistence paid off. I quit shaking from the excitement, filled out my tag, then examined my first gobbler. He was a real beauty. He had a 10-inch beard and weighed 18 pounds.

What a privilege it is to spend time in the spring woods turkey hunting. I guess I was wrong; there really aren't better things to do in the spring. □



COVER PAINTING BY JOE MATTOCK

THE CHANCE of seeing and hearing a big boss gobbler — like the one depicted on this month's cover — just off the roost and amidst a carpet of mayapple on a cool spring morning is all the incentive needed for a diehard turkey hunter to get up in the wee hours of the morning day after day and get into the woods. The colors, sounds and smells of a forest anew this month makes the spring gobbler season a special time to be out and about. Remember to keep everything in perspective, though, and be extremely conscious of safety when out hunting.