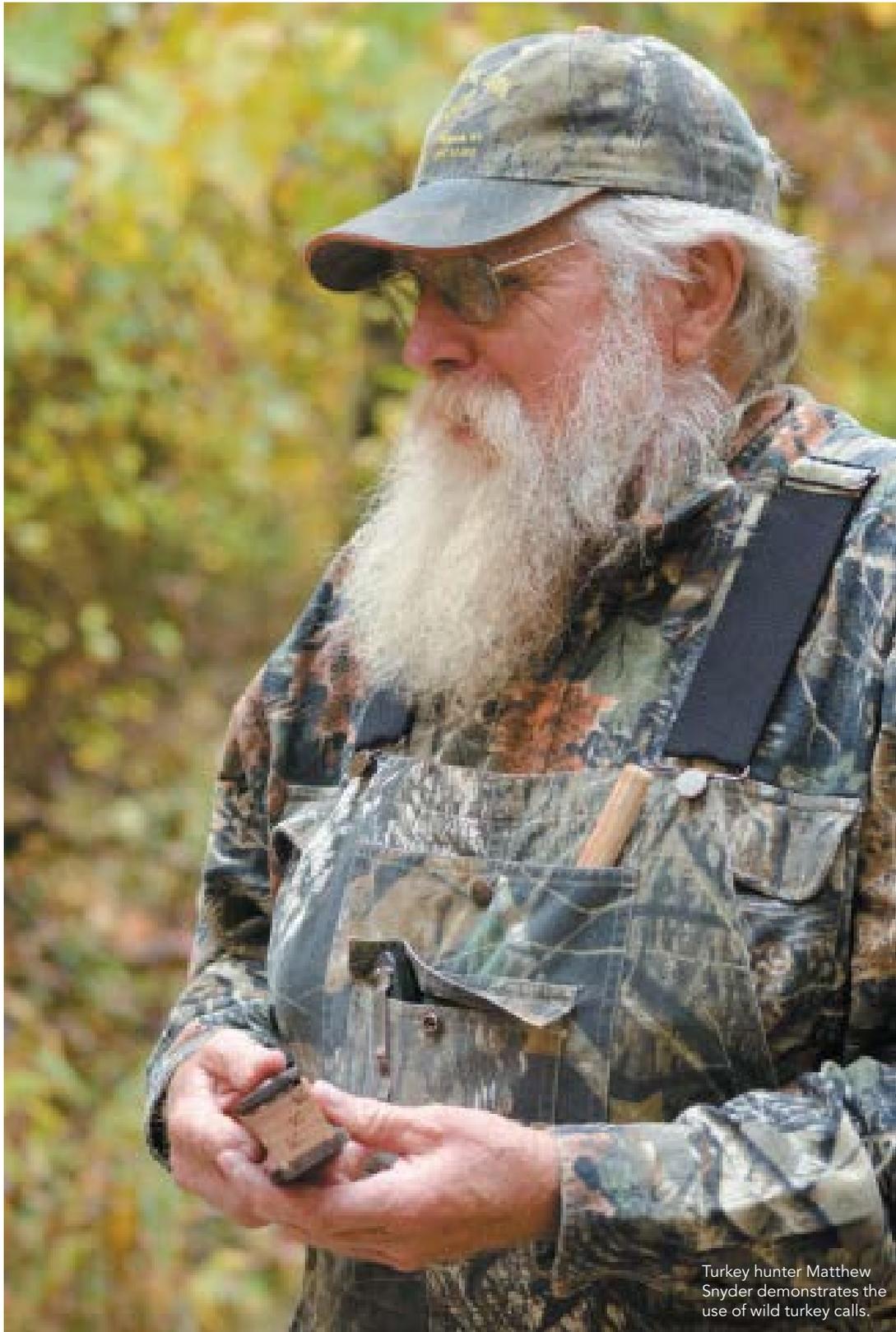


TO RULE THE ROOST

Turkey hunters across the state feel a strong passion
and love for the outdoor tradition.

WRITTEN BY **MICHAEL CARVELLI**
PHOTOGRAPHED BY **NIKKI BOWMAN**



Turkey hunter Matthew Snyder demonstrates the use of wild turkey calls.



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ade Boyles wakes up at 3:30 a.m. on a brisk fall morning. He finds himself more amazed that he was able to get to sleep than that he woke

up on time to get out to the woods. He's eager and full of anticipation as he jumps out of bed and gets ready to head to a patch of woods just outside Harrison County. It's the same patch of land where, in 1981, his father introduced him to his first love: turkey hunting.

More than 30 years later, he's still there, witnessing the majesty of nature as he travels along the same pathways he did as a boy. From watching the trees to listening to birds signal the start of a new day, it all takes him back to a time when things were simpler. He walks through the trees and underbrush carefully, almost tiptoeing so as not to create a stir, stepping into the light of the rising sun. "There's just something about hearing the woods wake up, getting to have conversations with the animals," he says. "There's so much more to this than the pulling of the trigger."

West Virginia has a long tradition of turkey hunting. Parents take their children to the woods hoping to pass the sport down through generations. Friends take each other in hopes another might catch the bug they caught years before.

Most turkey hunters have experience hunting other types of animals. Boyles hunts deer, too, and he's tried

squirrel, grouse, rabbits, and just about everything else. But each time he's come away underwhelmed, mostly due to the wait-and-see nature of these other hunts. Part of the reason turkey hunting is so unique and has picked up what Boyles calls a "cult-like following" among hunters in West Virginia is that it's so interactive.

Rather than walking through the woods or sitting in a tree stand waiting for the animal, hunters actively seek the bird while figuring out ways to trick it into revealing itself. "It's like a big game of hide and seek," says Keith Krantz, an upland game and wild turkey biologist with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (DNR). The game starts with getting into the woods in the early morning hours while the birds are still roosting in the trees. As they slumber, hunters can slowly creep closer to the roost sites without giving themselves away.

At this point, patience comes into play. In recent years, the turkey population in West Virginia has decreased, making it more difficult to come away with a successful hunt. There were 21,380 turkeys killed in West Virginia in 2001—a peak year for the Mountain State—but since then the number has dropped. Since 2009 the average number of turkeys killed each year has fallen to 10,758, according to DNR figures. In part these issues can be traced to a lack of nesting and brooding habitat. The challenge of finding turkeys now has turned away some more casual hunters. "The odds have become a little more stacked against you," Krantz says. "But those really avid hunters are going to go regardless. They thrive on that challenge."

As the sun begins its crest over the woods, these hunters will call to turkeys using unique man-made calls. Just as fishermen carry several different lures in

West Virginia has a long tradition of turkey hunting.

LARRY CASE



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turkey hunter

Clyde Campbell is a West Virginia artisan who makes turkey calls.



their tackle boxes, turkey hunters carry different types of turkey calls in their vests. Most hunters have several, and all the best are handcrafted. Boyles is currently the West Virginia turkey-calling champion, a title he won during the Webster County Wood-Chopping Festival in Webster Springs over Memorial Day Weekend 2015. During the competition a panel of judges sits behind a curtain and keeps score as each contestant makes a variety of calls for the chance to move on to Grand Nationals in Nashville in February. “It’s like our Super Bowl,” Boyles says.

One of the most widely preferred calls is the diaphragm, a hands-free call that fits in the mouth and makes some of the most authentic sounds when used correctly, while also allowing the hunter to stay prepared, gun ready, in case the time comes to shoot. “A wild turkey’s eyesight is amazing. They blow away deer in terms of hearing and sight, and when they come into view, you literally can’t move at all,” says Boyles, who uses a diaphragm call when he hunts. “If you make any moves, they’ll run away.”

Whether a diaphragm or a box, slate, or wing-bone, these calls are arguably the most important part of any hunt. In this game of hide and seek, as hunters try to lure gobblers in with the voices of hens in spring and attract curious birds to similar sounds in fall, authenticity is key. The plain yelp, often referred to as the “love yelp,” is a sound a hen makes to a gobbler,

and it has a certain rhythm hunters try to follow as closely as they can. Hunters vary the pace and the intensity of these calls until they find the right cadence to bring the turkey running. It’s a delicate process and the diaphragm calls are especially complicated. Some sounds, like the bird’s typical cluck, are as simple to create as saying words like “puck” or “putt” into the call. Others, such as emulating a hen when she is flying down from her roost, are more complex. For these, hunters make fast, excited sounds using words like “kit” and “cat” to run air through the call’s reeds. “You can change the pitch and switch up the sound a little bit, but I don’t do the same thing every time,” Boyles says. “I’m trying to sound as desperate as I can. I want that gobbler to think I’m a lonely hen out in the woods, and I put a lot of feeling into it so I can get his interest.”

Of course, there’s a difference between hunting for turkeys in the fall and during the spring—one that is ultimately about how much a hunter uses his call. The mating season hasn’t hit during the fall, so the gobblers are usually less full of testosterone, and hunters have to be even smarter. Hunters will often take this time to mimic the calls of the target turkey and then move to where the birds will congregate—usually areas around available food sources like acorns.

Sometimes all it takes is one call to catch a turkey’s interest; and one call for hunters to find the moment they’ve spent all day searching for. The calm of the



CLOCKWISE: NIKKI BOWMAN (2), GLENN "TINK" SMITH

During turkey season, the countryside is filled with the sounds of wild

birds. Some are man-made imitations like that of a turkey call.

woods is disrupted with a gobble in response. The sound inches nearer until a turkey emerges from the brush, strutting carefully closer. "It's not the pulling of the trigger we're chasing the most, it's that feeling when you know you've got this bird where you want it," Boyles says.

It's the search of that feeling that gets a hunter started, and it's the realization of it that hooks them for life. Many say that moment is the best part of taking new hunters out and introducing them to turkey hunting.

Both Boyles and Krantz say their best memories as hunters have had nothing to do with a kill at all. For Krantz, it was the chance to take his daughters and an older family friend out for the first time and be with them when they started to fall in love with it. In much the same way, Boyles gets a certain thrill that is about making memories and building bonds through this exhilarating challenge. "You form such a great camaraderie out there with anyone you go with," Krantz says. "It's very enjoyable to be out there in nature." 🦃