

# TURKEY FLUSHES

Turn your bird dog loose on the toms and put more beards in the bag.

BY TIM BARTON

**E**xcited yipping barks and the sound waves of cackles, clucks and alarm putts surround me from somewhere off in the autumn woods. Was it 100 yards or more? My ears could not determine. Vic's barks indicated he knows, but will he tell me? Air ripples across taut wing feathers as a hen glides away overhead. She is separated from the flock and a smile crosses my face as I start walking toward the wild turkeys' commotion.

As I move in I wonder exactly where Vic is. Just as the whistle touches my lips, Vic is in sight coming fast; it seems he reads my mind. He has this knack of showing up just about the time I start to wonder where he is. Greeting me with an urgent bark as if saying, "Hurry, hurry!" Vic turns back the way he came and leads me deeper into the woods.

About 150 yards in Vic begins wide circles in a kind of walking point to show me all the bird scratching and to ensure all the turkeys have left the area. If there are stragglers around they'll start calling for assembly and lead the rest of the flock away from our setup.

Clearly, this is a good-sized flock and it is well scattered. Vic is now sitting like a statue by an inviting tree. I think nay, he's not picking the setup tree too. Or is he? I cannot

determine if this is the case, but in any event the tree is located in the center of all the scratchings and will be comfortable to lean back on.

As he's been trained to do, Vic takes his position lying on my left side tight against my thigh. This helps us stay hidden and I can feel when he picks up on the incoming turkeys.

it's my wing bone call making the assembly calls.

Vic's muscles tense and I can feel his trembling excitement at the approach of the turkey. Vic goes into a rigid lying point in the direction of the turkey's approach. My gun is up and as the turkey steps clear at 20 yards—bam!

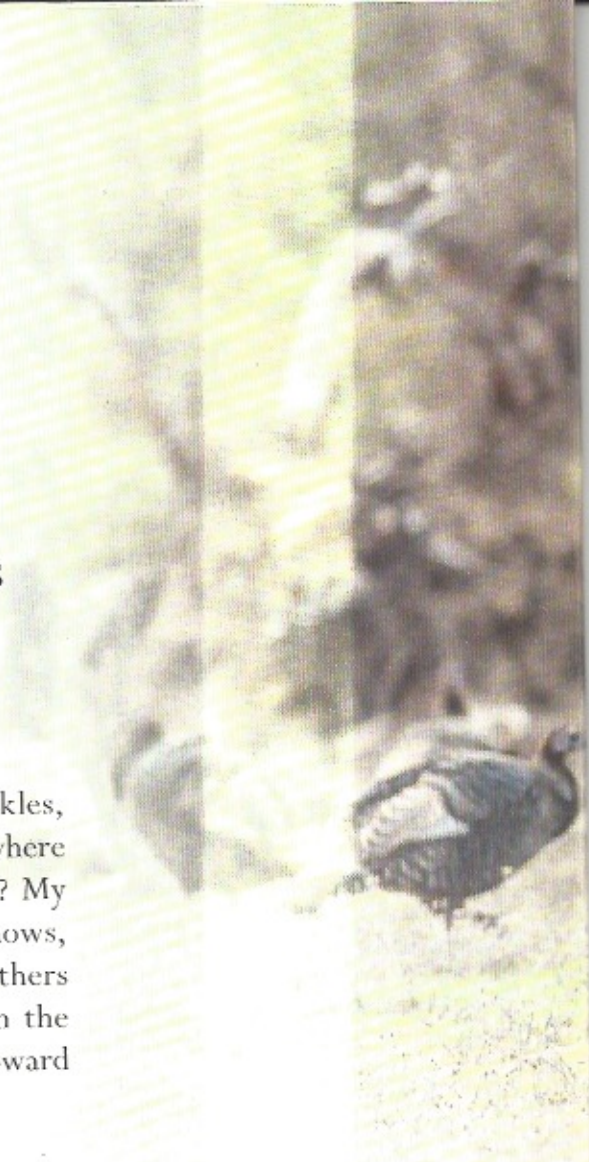
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This time it's not long before the *kee-kees* start. This is the call turkeys use to find the brood hen; in response the hen will assembly call (*kee-kee yelp*) also known as the *kee-kee* run call to regroup the flock. This time

All is quiet as Vic rolls his eyes to mine for permission to go get the turkey. I whisper "go get it" and join him at the kill spot as he is holding the turkey down from behind with a paw on each wing. Turkeys are too







big to retrieve and gobblers have long sharp spurs, so Vic is trained to approach from the tail, put both paws on the wings and grab the neck in this mouth until I arrive to take over. Vic really relishes this holding part.

Since this is a large flock, we return to setup and I call out the assembly again. It's not long before the turkeys start their kee kees and another turkey comes inside our 25 yard zone. On command, Vic races to the fallen flopping turkey, giving us our second bird of the day.

**BREAKING FLOCKS** Vic, a 2-year-old vizsla, performed perfectly as a turkey dog. I think of it as his graduation into turkey dogdom.

Turkey dogging is a niche hunt; there are not very many hunters with dogs who participate in the fall turkey hunts in the 27 states where it is allowed. Here in Wisconsin, turkey



A typical setup with Vic for turkey callback.

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dogging was legalized for the 2010 fall season. WDNR estimates about two percent, or 520, fall hunters use dogs. This means there is lots of room for more hunters to give it a try.

Wisconsin has the nation's premier fall turkey season with one of the (if not the highest) populations of turkeys. The season runs from mid-September to Dec. 31. A hunter can buy one tag per day until sold out in a unit. Prices are \$10 for residents and \$15 non residents. Here's the

secret: in units 1, 3 and 4: the tags do not sell out so there are thousands left unsold at season's end.

Turkey hunting with dogs is one of the original hunting methods of bringing turkeys to bag. In North America it dates back to the early 1600s when the residents of Jamestown, Virginia, began using dogs to hunt turkeys. Their dogs would locate a flock, flush the turkeys up into trees and bark while the hunter quietly moved into position for a shot. If the flock scattered, the

hunter would quietly sit with his dog at that spot and call on a wing bone to reassemble the flock.

Generations of devotees of turkey dogging have kept this form of hunting alive for more than 400 years. Hunters turn loose their dog to flush the turkeys into the trees so that the hunter will get a shot. In some quarters tree shooting turkeys is frowned on. However, it is legal in most states and should not be confused with roost shooting.

Turkeys are tough birds and require head/neck shots using a tight choke with No. 4, 5 or 6 shot. Mainly for safety, only a handful of states allow rifles for turkey hunting. Shooting at a flying or flushing turkey is not recommended, as they can take shot and fly or run a long way before dying.

My preferred method for bagging fall turkeys is to break up the flock and scatter them in different directions, then call my dog back in after he has circled the area to make sure all the turkeys have left. Pick a comfortable tree to sit against, leash your dog next to you and wait a few minutes or until you hear the turkeys calling to each other then call using an assembly call and kee-kees.

Most any bird dog can be trained as a turkey dog or at least as a dog that hunts turkeys. A turkey hunting dog needs to be able to range out 200 to 300 yards, check back with the master, find turkeys and then rush them so that they scatter or break. A bark from the dog as the turkeys break up is a welcome bonus and is better for the hunter to get focused on where the dog and turkeys are.

Ideally the hunter and dog need to set up at the point of break-up. To be more easily called back, the turkeys need to be scattered in different directions. Fall turkeys do not like being alone because they are in the process of forming into their winter flocks.

The fall turkey hunt is somewhere in between spring turkey hunting and upland hunting. The fall hunter sets up to call turkeys like he would during a spring hunt. Finding turkeys in the fall usually requires covering

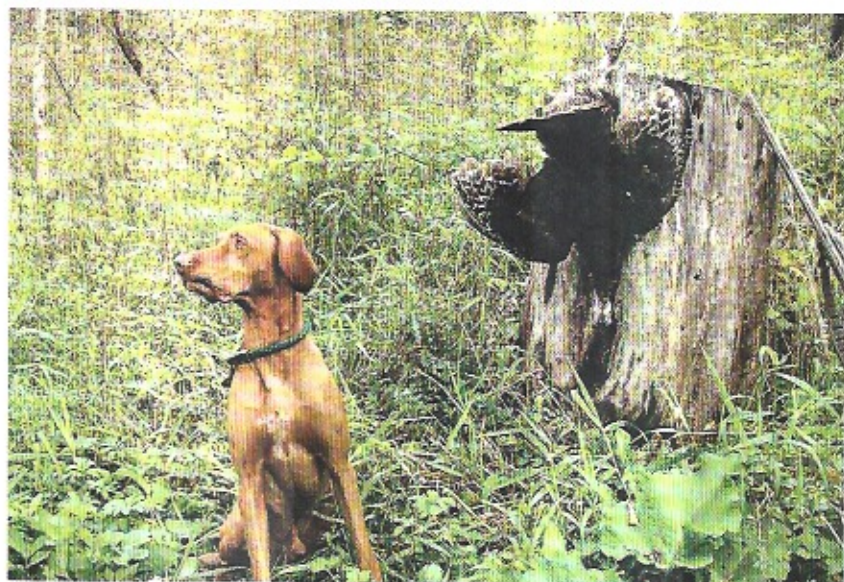


Vic was 9 months old when he had his first successful turkey callback. Vic is checking out the tag, wondering what that is all about.



Vic loves to hunt upland birds but once in a while we come across turkeys. On this day I had a tag in my pocket so I fashioned a makeshift blind, took off the orange and called this bird of the year back with my natural voice.





Never mind the pictures, there are more turkeys yapping!



Wisconsin turkey season is open until New Year's Eve each year. With the proper attire Vic can hunt successfully in cold temps.

a lot of ground. Unlike hunters who sit on stands or in blinds, upland hunters are on the move and this is one of the key ingredients for success in the fall turkey woods. Most turkeys encountered will be in family flocks during the early fall and these flocks will continue to increase in size as winter draws closer.

Compared to other upland game, fall turkey flocks are the mega flush where you get to relish the wave of preflight clucks and cackles while big wings are swirling in the air. For me, it's like the wings tick and pick at my heart. If you are close enough, you'll believe you can feel the

moving air and all of this without the interruption of a gunshot. The gunfire comes later, giving hunters the opportunity to enjoy their dog's good work. Instead of the flush marking the climax of the hunt as with traditional upland hunting, the turkey flush is just the first step.

**FILL THE VOID** Decades before Vic, I hunted all things with dogs until the dog that got into the deepest recesses of my heart died at age 6. With my heart irreparably torn I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life; I quit hunting with dogs—all because I could not bear

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another painful loss. So I immersed myself in big game hunting with a little spring turkey hunting. Hunting was good to me over those passing decades, but something always nagged at the edges of my conscience.

Off and on I would read old turkey hunting stories of hunters using dogs. Usually the settings of these stories were in the South where turkey dogging has more tradition. In 2004 Jon Freis started a campaign and founded the American Wild Turkey Hunting Dog Association ([turkeydog.org](http://turkeydog.org)) to legalize turkey dogs in Wisconsin. Being an avid spring turkey hunter, I felt a small spark of interest start to glow. I knew very little about turkey dogging then.

I started to fall hunt turkeys more often than deer. In 2007 Steve Hickoff wrote *Fall & Winter Turkey Hunter's Handbook*, describing his turkey dogging experiences with English setters. Then Wisconsin authorized a 3 year trial turkey dog hunt in nine counties.



On this hunt, Vic put it all together. He broke up the flock, came back to get me, and we set up twice to fill two tags.

That spark in me turned into a blaze. I badly wanted to add a dog to my fall turkey hunting experience. But what if I got a dog and trained

it for turkey hunting and suddenly there was no season? I decided it was best to wait for a permanent state-wide hunt before purchasing a dog.

#### ■ TRAINABLE GENERALIST

In the meantime I studied dogs, turkey dogs, and learned there was no perfect breed with which to hunt turkeys; a lot of different dogs can be trained to hunt turkeys. On Oct. 19, 2009 Wisconsin approved the use of turkey dogs starting in the fall of 2010. It was now time to decide on my dog and get to training.

I settled on a vizsla, a highly trainable generalist with long legs for running up the steep wooded bluffs and across expansive fields that are common in my hunting area. An upland breed made sense in case Wisconsin changed their minds about turkey dogging, we could always hunt grouse, woodcock or pheasant. After all, it's cruel and unusual punishment if you own a hunting dog and you don't hunt him as much as possible, cruel for both master and dog.

Fall turkey hunting with my best friend Vic is where we start fall. Later Vic hunts grouse and woodcock with steady points. Pheasants are also pointed; however, if a rooster tries to sneak away, Vic circles, cuts him off and flushes him back toward me.

That's a trick he learned from the turkeys. \*



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