

Whether running and gunning or sitting and waiting, understanding when and how to use decoys can contribute to your success

My first successful turkey hunt was a combination of a lot of things. There was a good population of birds on private land, my buddy Ed Wilkerson was calling for me and there was a weathered Flambeau hen decoy about 25 yards in front of us.

Ed and I eased in, placed the decoy in the field and set up in a pine thicket on the edge. Ed hit a couple of yelps on his slate call and immediately a bird gobbled from its roost. Ed called sparingly but each yelp was answered with a gobble, each one getting louder as the bird approached.

When the bird entered the field and saw the decoy, he broke into a run. As he stopped to strut, Ed hissed, “shoot!” The Mossberg 500 barked and my first turkey was on the ground.

Turkeys don't always come running in, and sometimes decoys can spook a bird. But decoys remain an important tool for turkey hunters to utilize. Knowing how and when to use one can make the difference in a successful hunt.

SEASONAL DECOYS

The National Wild Turkey Federation offers an informative section about different decoy set ups during different parts of the spring season on its website (nwtf.org). In early spring, NWTF recommends using a larger spread, like two or three hens. They recommend using feeding hen decoys as they represent a content flock; upright decoys may be interpreted as a flock that is alarmed. If you use a strutting tom or a jake decoy, pay attention to how an incoming tom responds to them and be prepared to pull

them if they make either hang up (refuse to come in).

In mid-spring, after flocks break up, NWTF recommends using a smaller decoy spread, featuring a couple of hens (one feeding) and a strutter or jake. Again, watch how the males react to the male decoys.

In late spring, when flocks have dispersed and many hens are nesting, NWTF suggests using just a hen decoy but have a jake or strutter handy to deploy as a tom may react strongly to what he considers competition.

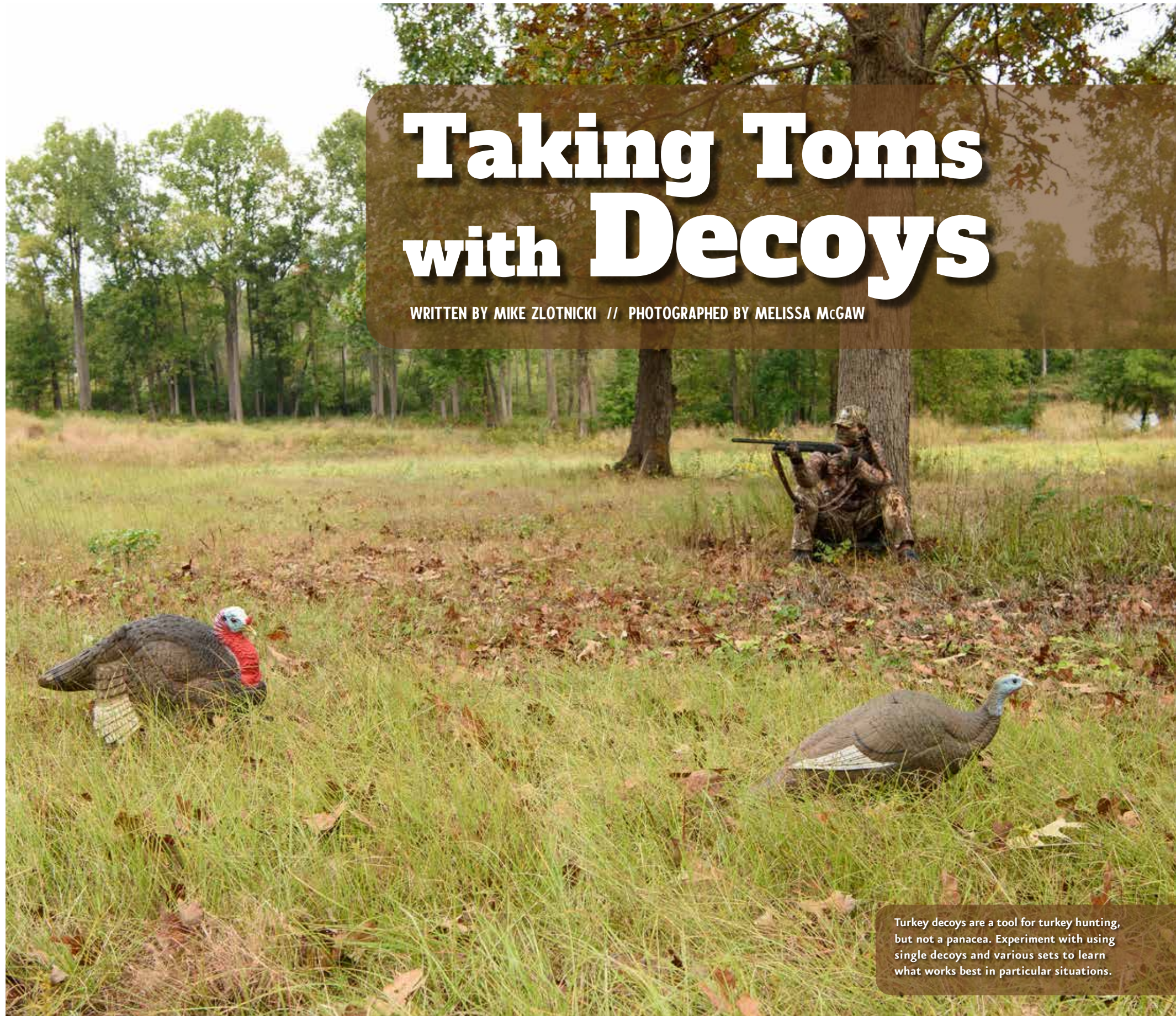
RUNNING AND GUNNING WITH DECOYS

To get a little more in depth on decoy usage, I talked to two veteran turkey hunters, the aforementioned Ed Wilkerson and N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission R3 Hunting Specialist Walter “Deet” James. James splits his time during alternating spring seasons hunting Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, his native state Pennsylvania and New York. His primary method of turkey hunting is “running and gunning,” meaning he is constantly on the move calling and trying to locate a gobbler. He employs decoys “about 25% of the time.”

“So typically, I'm carrying decoys in my turkey vest, folded in a little camo bag,” he said. “They're the cheap foam ones. People think they need the high-end ones, but you really don't. Although realism can be important, a realistic silhouette works. I'm moving and calling, moving and calling. If I strike a bird and he's close, no decoys, because you risk busting him. If I feel he's a good distance away by the sound, and I have time to set up decoys, then I will set up decoys.”

Taking Toms with Decoys

WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI // PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW



Turkey decoys are a tool for turkey hunting, but not a panacea. Experiment with using single decoys and various sets to learn what works best in particular situations.



RALPH HENSLEY

Above: A turkey hunter places a tail fan on a decoy as the sun rises behind him. Right: When carrying hard-bodied decoys, a blaze orange bag can be used to safely transport during hunting.

James said that he sets up his decoys to the opposite side of his gun shoulder, typically 15 to 20 yards away. The distance is important, James said, because you want a turkey inside of your maximum effective gun range should he decide to stop short of your decoys and moreover, placed so that you have a full range of motion should the gobbler decide to circle you.

“You want those decoys closer, not placed at your maximum effective gun range,” he said. “Although you might be able to kill

that bird 30, 40 yards away you do not want to place the decoys at 30, 40 yards. Simply put, if he hangs up short of them, if he gets suspicious at 30–40 yards, he may be out of range and the game is over because wounding, or a cripple is not worth the risk. Hence, placing decoys at 15, 20 yards, or even if he hangs up at the 30 or 35 [yards], you can still kill him.” (A point for which James is adamant): Don’t go turkey hunting until you’ve patterned your shotgun and know your maximum effective range!

James also likes to employ a fan (artificial tail feathers), either a jake or a tom. The jake fan may not spook another jake and a tom will still come to it. A full tom fan can lure in another mature tom looking for a fight (or love) but may spook a younger bird.



RALPH HENSLEY

James said one common mistake turkey hunters make regarding the use of decoys is getting busted because the bird is too close and already sees the hunter setting up. Another challenge he mentioned is that in open woods especially, you shouldn’t make a call until you’re by a spot where you could immediately sit down and set up. He used the example of a hunter going down a logging road or through open woods. In thicker woods, or later in the season when foliage provides more cover, a hunter has a bit of an advantage, but can get busted easily by a sharp-eyed gobbler.

“They’re moving and calling, moving and calling,” James said. “All of a sudden, they strike a bird that may have been coming in already. They have nowhere to sit. I mean, they can sit in a wide open [area]. It can still work. But always contemplate where you’re going to sit when you do make a call, especially if moving and calling.

“Worse yet are those silent birds. They don’t gobble, they may be coming, but the hunter doesn’t know it until it’s too late. A patient approach is your only option with minimal calling and minimal movement while scanning the surrounding area.”

James did say that as hunters get older and spend

more time in a blind or on a field edge, one can just put the decoys out and perhaps not even call, but just wait on a tom looking for love or a fight. It’s also a great method for the silent toms!

A SIMPLE APPROACH

A turkey hunter since 1981, Wilkerson estimates he’s taken about 75 turkeys in Virginia and North Carolina, where his family has had land since the late 1800s. He’s also a run-and-gunner but employs a hen decoy if he’s going near a field or food plots. A single hen keeps it simpler for him, but there are exceptions.

“So, I’m always walking and calling,” he said. “So, for that reason, if I had a set up where I was in a field corner, yeah, I might use a jake, I might use a gobbler, I might use a hen set up to get the whole competitive attraction thing going. But with walking, it’s just easier for me to carry one decoy in either the pack or in my hand upside down.”

Wilkerson uses inexpensive foam decoys, his favorite being a 25-year-old Flambeau hen. A nice piece of advice he provided is that he faces the decoy away from where he thinks the gobbler is going to enter the field. He wants it to come in from behind the decoy because a gobbler going to a hen goes against the grain of wild turkey behavior.

“The gobbler expects her to come to him,” Wilkerson said. “So, the problem is this: If you have just a narrow space, let’s say a food plot or any variation of where you’ve got a narrow shooting lane, if that gobbler comes out at 200 yards or 150 yards and he’s got a hen decoy facing him, he’s going to go into full strut immediately in a lot of cases. And then he’s waiting for her to close the distance, which isn’t going to happen. Then the turkey hunter is stuck. You can’t move. So, you’ve actually slowed down the whole hunting situation. And now you’re in a situation where you can’t move.”

When Wilkerson does deploy a decoy, he puts it out at about half the effective range of his shotgun (12 gauge, 3-inch shell, extra-full choke), which is about 55 yards. So, his decoy usually sits about 25 to 30 yards out.

As for common mistakes, the hunt described at the beginning of this story is one of them: The tom doesn’t always come running when he sees the decoy.

“One mistake is thinking that the decoy is going to pull them straight in and they’re going to come running,” he said. “And then

“If a gobbler thinks he’s being ignored, that tears him out of the frame.”

they’re going to go into full strut 10 yards away from the decoy. It’s not going to happen. What’s going to happen most of the time, as soon as they see the decoy, the gobbler’s going to go into full strut. And now, instead of running, instead of being interested in interacting with the hen, he’s gone totally visual because he thinks that she can see him.

“So now he goes into his visual display thinking that that’s going to pull her. Now you’re in a terrible situation where he’s waiting on your decoy and you can’t move a muscle because he’s got all of his attention on the decoy.”

Wilkerson often uses a cadence of a yelp, cluck, purr, whine and scratch with a decoy. By “scratch,” he means using one hand to stir up dry leaf litter to simulate a hen feeding.

“I’ve killed easily three dozen gobblers with nothing more than my gloved hand behind my back scratching the leaves,” he said. “If a gobbler thinks he’s being ignored, that tears him out of the frame.”

In summary, use decoys in conjunction with calling, especially in areas with long sightlines, then provide a reassurance with your calling. Transport decoys hidden in bags or cases, or with blaze orange if hauling by hand. You never know who else is in the woods. ♦

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