

# Even Closer to the Real Thing

NEW BREED OF TURKEY DECOYS OFFERS HUNTERS AN EDGE.

WRITTEN BY MARTY SHAFFNER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RALPH HENSLEY



YEARS AGO I HAD AN OLD FOAM HEN DECOY — I CAN'T REMEMBER WHO MADE IT, BUT IT WAS NOT THE MOST REALISTIC RENDITION OF A HEN TURKEY. I RARELY USED IT BECAUSE OF THAT REASON, AND BECAUSE MY FAVORITE TURKEY HUNTING TACTIC AT THE TIME WAS TO "RUN AND GUN."

The decoy was aggravating to carry around when covering a lot of territory and I mostly left it behind in the truck. Now, with a smaller population of wild turkeys in my area and because I'm older (and a little thicker), I have slowed down my turkey hunting tactics. I try to scout in the preseason more often and have a gobbler or two partially patterned by opening day.

This past season I began to think that a couple of new, better-looking decoys could be helpful when setting up in some of the small food plots on the property where I hunt. So I took a little road trip and looked at all of the



A turkey hunter sets his decoys in the predawn light. More and more lifelike decoys are available to hunters, including ones with real or artificial fans on toms.



decoys on display at a retailer. Even though I had a couple of gift cards burning a hole in my pocket, I am a little thrifty and like to get the most bang for my buck. So I purchased a half strut jake decoy and a hen decoy for less than \$75—a good investment for experienced hunters but not necessarily warranted for beginning turkey hunters.

I had devised a plan for opening day after pinpointing a couple of gobblers around one of the small clover patches on the property. That morning, under the cover of darkness in the clover, I slipped in my half strut jake just a couple of yards behind my alert hen decoy. I then settled in and waited on daylight.

As daylight broke on the cool and very windy morning, I was greeted to silence instead of gobbling. This very situation is why I bought the decoys, and after a few minutes I gave a hen yelp . . . and got no response. So I waited.

About 15 minutes later, I gave a more aggressive and louder hen yelp, but still got no response. Soon, though, things got interesting. I heard a turkey fly down off to my right and I held tight to feel things out. A few minutes later, I heard a gobble off in the hollow that was muffled by the wind. I yelled back three or four times, but the gobbler didn't answer.

Thinking I had nothing to lose and confident that no other hunters were nearby who might mistake my calls for the real thing, I gobbled back at him with my shaker call and immediately another tom fired back at me with a gobble that almost shook the ground. He was close but on the other side of the field from the first tom I had heard. I yelled back at him and followed it up with a gobble, but got no response from either, so I clammed up for a few minutes to see if he would come in silently.

In the meantime, the first tom gobbled again, and when I yelled back at him he cut me off with a gobble. He was slowly circling around and, from what I could tell, had made his way onto the logging road leading from the food plot up the ridge. I cut sharply at him and caught a glimpse of him strutting in the old road bed slowly making his way toward the field. He would take a few steps, then blow

up in full strut for a few seconds, then break strut and slowly walk toward the field. I could catch glimpses of him through the trees lining the road.

When he got about 100 yards out, the tom spotted the decoys and stopped to eye them. I could see him studying them as he cocked his head from one side to the other. He was standing in the early morning light with his feathers shimmering iridescently as the sun reflected off of them. It was a beautiful sight.



A set of decoys often includes a tom or jake with a hen, a setup that is meant to induce a nearby tom into investigating the interloper.

It is also at this distance when most gobblers hang up as they approach a field and do not see the hen that had been making all that racket. But he saw her.

Only a jake stood in his way from making the hen his new girlfriend. He broke into full strut, then a running walk in full strut and ran right into shotgun range before he stopped to eye the situation again. He sensed something wasn't right but it was too late for him. I touched the trigger on the Beretta and the gobbler walloped the ground without making a twitch.

I made my way over to the tom, and upon inspection, saw he sported an inch and a quarter spurs and a nice long beard—a mature

gobbler for sure. My new decoys had earned their keep on their first outing.

### Variety at All Prices

A few years ago, the market exploded with new decoys, more realistic than ever, in every configuration imaginable, from hens in the breeding stance to toms in full strut. Hunting shows on TV that feature hunters in blinds with decoys set up prompted many turkey-call companies to offer turkey decoys. I'm amazed at how realistic some of the higher-end decoys look, but I am also surprised at the quality of some of the mid-priced ones.

Here are a few decoys that stand out as the most realistic along with others that do the job at a lower price.

At the top of the line in realism and price are Avian-X and David Smith Decoys. Both create decoys that look real and are favorites among hunters. Personally, I prefer the looks of the David Smith hen decoys but like the Avian-X strutting tom a little better.

These decoys are on the higher-end of the price range. The David Smith Decoys hen retails for around \$119 and the strutting tom for \$199. The Avian-X hens retail for \$79.99 and the strutter for \$119.99. Both also offer a quarter-strut jake, a decoy variation which I like, for \$159.99 (David Smith) and \$99 (Avian-X).

If these are a little too rich for your blood (they were for mine), there are a couple of other brands that impressed me for their price. H.S. Strut, a division of Hunters Specialties, has a new line called the "Snoods." They have a quarter-strut jake, an alert hen and a feeding hen that are pretty realistic and have an air bladder inside that inflates to prevent creases caused by folding the decoys. The hens retail for \$59.99 and the jake for \$79.99.

One of the cheaper offerings that I consider the best bang for the buck is the Primos Gobbstopper jake decoy. It is a quarter-strut jake decoy that retails for \$39.99. I was so impressed with the price and how lifelike it looks that I bought one. They also offer a hen in the breeding stance but I preferred the jake.

If you are in the market for a decoy, be sure to look at them in person before you



make a purchase. Sometimes pictures just don't do them justice and doing side-by-side comparisons can be beneficial.

### Decoys in the Field

A seasoned sportsman knows that no piece of equipment meant to attract fish or game works every time. Just as a specific fishing lure is not the hot bait every day, so it is with turkey decoys. But the newer, more realistic decoys seem to work better than their predecessors. Not every gobbler that sees your decoy is going to charge in to his demise, but they can be a valuable part of your turkey hunting arsenal.

Decoys are especially effective when hunting fields and food plots where turkeys can spot them from a long distance away, allowing turkeys to essentially put a face to the voice. They also work well when hunting in the afternoon to set up and call sparingly, hoping to catch a bird sneaking in silently.



This trio of decoys features a jake on the left, a strutting tom in the middle and a hen on the right. Inset: This shot of a real tom shows the snood across the beak and the major caruncles at the bottom of its neck.



# Ask the Experts



Hunters Specialties Suzie Snood Hen Decoy

PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS PAGE BY MELISSA MCGAW/NCWRC

The turkey hunting “purists” out there will sometimes argue the ethics of turkey decoys, but it’s hard to argue their effectiveness. To put a finger on the pulse of the expanding market of decoy offerings, we made the quick trip down I-40 to Cabela’s in Garner, and talked to Austin Arnold, sales lead for hunting, shooting and optics. In addition to dealing in turkey decoys, Arnold is an avid turkey hunter.

“The most popular line is the Avian-X,” Arnold said. “As far as the turkey decoys go, David Smith makes very good decoys. The Hunters Specialties Snood line is good.”

Arnold pointed out that some of the higher-end lines like the Avian-X have air bags inside to keep the form full and increased. The upper-level lines are not cheap. A jake and hen combination package from Avian-X will run \$160; a flock of four costs about \$475.

On the lower end of the price scale, Arnold said the Primos decoys are good sellers, and that the new Gobbstopper line from Primos is a good choice. They run about \$50.

“I actually like this decoy,” he said. “It’s made really well and has a lot of detail. They don’t have any play at all in them. If a tom does get ahold it will be real easy to repaint because of its hard surface.”

Wildlife Resources Commission Hunting Heritage Biologist Walter “Deet” James is an avid turkey hunter who spends the month of March traveling the state while facilitating cooperative, conservation partner turkey hunting seminars. He uses decoys during roughly half of his outings but believes their purpose is more about creating a silhouette than actual realism. That is until the bird gets up close.

“By that time, he’s dead if we do our part,” James said.

James stresses that new hunters shouldn’t feel as if they have to spend a lot of money on decoys to be successful. He uses foam decoys that he picked up at Walmart for less than \$10.

“I use decoys 50 percent of the time,” James said. “In most cases, and I’m a run and gunner, there’s no time to set decoys up. Still hunts, or waiting and calling, is a better time to use decoys so as to take an incoming bird’s eyes off of the caller. Moreover, in my experience, they work about 50 percent of the time. They can either bring the bird right in or scare him off if he becomes suspicious.”

Like with most pursuits, James notes that nothing beats experience and skill. “Scouting, woodsmanship, patience, persistence, set up and being in the right place at the right time will bag

more birds than gadgets ... That said, I’ve got a lot of gadgets.”

In the field, Arnold said he usually includes a “breeder,” or submissive hen in his setup, as the spring is mating time and decoys and calling take advantage of concurrent passion and jealousy.

“People have their own opinions of the toms and jakes, but either one is going to bring aggressive males,” Arnold said. “A lot of people love the jakes because, no matter what, the tom is going to come in and want to fight the jakes. In my experience, a jake or a tom is going to work the same and that breeder decoy will work because of its stance.”

Arnold also mentioned the Flextone Funky Chicken (about \$30) as a big seller. This oddly shaped decoy is mostly neck and head. “People say they look so small and wimpy turkeys just come right in to beat them up,” he said.

A quick tip for those with the shell or hollow decoys: After pulling one out of storage, put it in a steamy bathroom for about 10 minutes to help reshape the body. Sometimes a blow dryer can do the same. Just be sure to clue your spouse in before taking a turkey decoy in the bathroom. It may look odd.

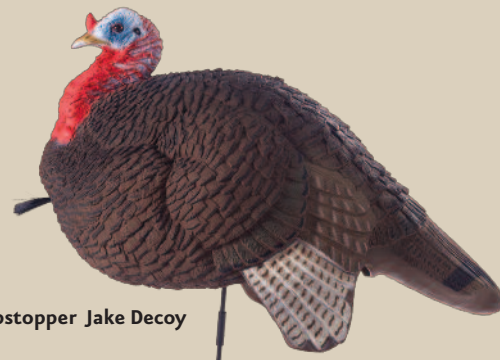
— Mike Zlotnicki



Avian-X Feeder Hen Decoy



Primos Gobbstopper Jake Decoy



A commercial blind set up near a decoy spread allows a hunter some manner of movement and concealment during the hunt. With any luck, a mature tom will strut into view and go home with the hunter.



Safety is paramount when using decoys. I witnessed a hunter shoot a decoy and thankfully no

one was injured. Always assume someone is around even if they aren’t supposed to be. Set up with this in mind and don’t hesitate to shout at any hunter you see approaching your setup to alert him that your decoys are not the real thing.

The only downside to the newer, more natural looking decoys are that they aren’t quite as lightweight and easily packed in as the older foam decoys, which can pose problems to the mobile hunter. This was the case when I blew my chance to harvest a second tom last season.

I knew there was another mature gobbler in the same area, but I couldn’t track him down. I eventually realized that he was roosted next to the food plot where I had harvested my first bird of the season and that I had walked within 125 yards of him in the dark while hiking to the far ridge. By the time I made my way back over to the food plot, the tom had already pitched out and I could only crawl my way up to the edge of the clover patch for fear of spooking him.

I thought to myself, as I nestled against a tree along the edge of the field, this would

have been a perfect setup for a decoy. But I figured the bird would come out into the field and strut anyway, giving me a shot. Well, as usual, what I didn’t have was exactly what I needed. After calling to the tom a few times, I could tell he was working his way to the field and after just a minute or two I spotted movement on the far side of the field. I could see the gobbler, shrouded heavily by mountain laurel, standing there looking out over the field, looking for the phantom hen he had heard. After he scanned the field for a few seconds, he gobbled one time before easing back the way he came.

Oh, if I had only had my hen decoy set up in the field I most likely would have punched my second turkey tag. But because I thought I would be setting up in the heavily wooded ridge top, I elected not to take my decoys with me. Nothing works every time but my new decoys could have worked twice in their first season.

Decoys are just like your calls, not every call you have works every time out, but you carry them because they might work on any given day. Turkey decoys can be an important piece of gear to add to your hunting arsenal and, with some in-field experience and proper planning, they can definitely earn their keep. ♦

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