



The Best Morning Mountain Music of the Spring

Story and photos by
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In the ebony darkness of a Botetourt County April morning, I look up at the barely discernible mountaintop – my destination before sunrise. Pondering the imposing task before me, I find it daunting, as always, to gaze upon a peak before climbing it. Yet I'm drawn to make the ascent because of a passion for spring gobbler hunting.

So the trek begins. Fifteen minutes into it, perspiration begins to drip down my face and roll down my back; twenty minutes more, and the sweat is coursing down both sides of my body. After another fifteen minutes, I reach the summit and stop to gaze down upon my surroundings. To my left and west lies a dairy farm, whose owner has allowed me

to hunt on his place for some fifteen years. Every time I kill a turkey or deer from his spread, I give the man and his wife a loaf of my wife's homemade sourdough bread – a small token of thanks indeed for the privilege of gazing upon the splendid panorama that is the mountain, its oak/hickory/pine/poplar hollows, and the farm below.

To my right and east, the first fingers of dawn are beginning to slowly illuminate the sky. The outskirts of Roanoke lie there, and even as night metamorphs into morning, this part of the horizon is brighter because of the city lights. Directly in front of me, lights wink on in the distance as families arise for the day. No doubt the inhabitants of these homes are struggling to shake off sleep, but high on the mountain, I am wide awake and my senses, especially my hearing, are keen.

Then the first bird songs of the morning commence. A cardinal sends forth its *cheer, cheer, wordy, wordy, wordy*, and next a Carolina wren belts out its *tea-kettle, tea-kettle, yettle, yettle, yettle*. A sole crow gives forth with the initial *caw, caw, caw* of the new day, and immediately several more of its species join in.

A few seconds after the crow announces its presence, a mature gobbler does the same. From high in a tree and to my left, the old monarch, after a few sec-



A hunter hearkens to the sound of a longbeard answering his calls from a distance. He then must decide the best strategy – move toward the bird or stay put and call him in.

onds' pause, rings forth again: *gobbbllleeetty*; its sheer majesty, volume, and authoritarian ring never fail to stir my sporting soul. That bird knows which creature is king of this particular mountain.

At the second gobble, I am able to pinpoint his position. The tom is some 150 yards to the west, and at that distance from my mountaintop perch, I would have to call him out of one hollow, across another, and onto the mountain ridge where I am leaning against a chestnut oak. The chances of my doing so (and the tom not attracting a harem of hens along the way) are slim. I have to move toward him - fast enough to outrun any hens that likewise have heard the turkey version of the call of the wild, yet be not so swift afoot that the sound of my scudding across the forest floor risks spooking the tom from his roost tree.

So my approach begins. I sprint down from the ridge top, then crest the next ridge and move down through the hollow below. As I start to climb the opposite side of the hollow, I slow my pace and try to lighten my footsteps. I stop about ten yards from the top of the finger ridge; for if I climb to its apex, the tom, still perched in his roost tree, may see me, likely ruining any chance for success.

I then hear the flapping of wings,

Taking a Virginia mountain gobbler is one of the great thrills that a Virginia sportsman (or woman) can experience.



as the old boy flies down. I immediately run to the top of the finger ridge, clear out a place to sit against the bole of a red oak, slap down a seat cushion and settle in against the hardwood. Both above and below me is a saddle, a low spot in a ridge that allows animals to easily travel back and forth between hollows. I am convinced that the longbeard will use the lower saddle to make his move toward me.

It is only now that I make my first call of the morning, a few light, tentative tree yelps on a slate call. The male gives a quick courtesy gobble, and I just as quickly yelp three times with a diaphragm. The turkey lets loose with a long series of gobbles, and I discern that he is now behind me and advancing toward my position from the saddle above.

I quickly move to the other side of the tree and lay my 12-gauge across my knees, which are tucked up against my body. The tom then gobbles again, and from the earth-shaking resonance of his testosterone-charged music, I can tell that he is on a flat (a relatively level place on the side of a ridge) on the other side of the ridge.

And then the unexpected occurs - as is so often the case when we mortals chase after the lord of the forest. Three gobblers come dancing through the saddle, intent on beating the gobbling longbeard to the very willing "hen" - me. Do I let this trio of hormonal gobblers pass, in hopes of luring the longbeard to my position?

The answer is no, as I have always followed the old axiom that it is better to have a bird in hand than a gobbler on the way. Closer and closer the trio stalk, their heads darting about and searching the forest for the hen that just a minute before was singing the siren song of the spring.

As fate decrees, all of the trio's heads simultaneously disappear behind various trees. I quickly shoulder the shotgun, snap off the safety of my Remington 1100, and train the gun on the other side of the lead bird's tree. When the tom in front reappears, I squeeze the trigger.

The gobbler crumples to the forest floor, the two trailing birds take flight, and, not surprisingly, the old monarch on the flat falls silent. I run twenty yards to the fallen gobbler, but there is no need, as the shot was true. I savor the experience for a long minute, say a prayer of thanks, and begin the long walk down the mountain - a Virginia mountain gobbler slung across my right shoulder.

A glossary of Virginia mountain terms

Hump - A high spot on a ridge or within a hollow, also known as a rise.

Hollow - A deep cove between ridges. Streams frequently course there.

Shelf - A long flat (for definition of a flat, see story) that may wind for hundreds of yards along the side of a ridge.

Finger Ridge - A narrow, gradually descending ridge off the main ridge.

Bruce Ingram is the author of the following books: *The James River Guide* (\$15.00), *The New River Guide* (\$15.00), and *The Shenandoah/Rappahannock Rivers Guide* (\$18.25). To obtain a copy, send a check to Ingram at P.O. Box 429, Fincastle, VA 24090 or contact Ecopress (800-326-9272).

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