

## THE COMMANDO CRAWL AND OTHER LATE-SEASON TACTICS

By Daniel Fortner

At 5:16 AM the alarm went off and woke me from warm sleep. Were it a school day, I'd have mashed the snooze button with the reflexes of a ninja and been snoring instantaneously. Turkey season in Southwest Georgia, however, is quite an exception. In minutes, I was fully clad in Mossy Oak and headed for the woods with dad, brother, and a family friend kind enough to lend us some land. Primarily because no one in my family was especially familiar with this particular tract, it was decided that the four of us would hunt as a group. Though doubtful that my eleven-year-old sibling had an extraordinary appreciation for stealth, I reluctantly agreed to team up.

Before the sun had even begun to shine through the Spanish moss which now surrounded our troop, a gobbler cautiously responded to the slate call in my lap. A half-hour or so of provocation, though, failed to lure him into range. His raspy voice eventually faded away, and we relocated. After hearing my hushed pleas to "Pick up your feet, Tommy" for several minutes, our squadron settled down twenty yards from a plastic hen, in a convenient patch of poison oak. But a duet of yelps orchestrated by myself and our host yielded no response. Anxious to locate a bird before the sun rose *too* high in the sky, we moved on.

Two more areas revealed numerous whitetails and a coyote, but not a turkey to speak of. Then, as we eased toward an empty field bordered by an inactive electric fence, a single gobbler caused my heart to skip a beat. Directly across the pasture was a lone tom casually gathering his breakfast. The four of us immediately set about the task of reducing his distance from 125 yards to thirty. Before long, the jelly head was responding to the box call and determinedly strutting toward my prepared brother. It seemed we would return to the house with a beard when we suddenly caught the attention of a curious group of cows. Not as gullible as the turkey, the animals effectively surrounded us, sending the tom right back into the woods. It took a considerable amount of self-control on my part not to test the effects of a 3" turkey load on a certain brown heifer.

Once it became evident that the gobbler would not be coaxed into the open, we started off through the oaks toward our final spot: a similar field which fortunately made home to no cows. We happened to be on a time-frame, so an afternoon hunt was not an option. This was the last chance of the season to take a gobbler, and as I walked, I kept my fingers crossed.

By 9:30 the meadow was visible. David, who'd been hunting this land for years, let loose a preliminary series of yelps. Without warning, two simultaneous gobblers rang across the field; two dark fans materialized sixty yards into the golden grass. I quietly moved to the edge of the hayfield and leaned my back against a sweet gum tree. Then, I reached into a chest pocket for my striker... only to find it had fallen out and was lying several feet away. With four big, black eyes focused in my general direction, I decided against retrieving it. Determined and improvised sign language managed to get David, who was hiding further back in the forest, talking to the toms on his own slate.

After employing virtually every possible calling combination for the better part of an hour, the big chickens actually began marching in the opposite direction. I was running out of time, and with nothing to lose, drew upon my last option. I lay down on my stomach and carefully began commando crawling toward the turkeys.

Worried that the 18" hay would not properly conceal my body, I inched along at a pace not even a snail would deem admirable. Now, instead of mentally referring to turkey tips and tricks from various magazine articles as I had done all season, I toiled to recall such wartime movies as Rambo and Saving Private Ryan. My Remington 870 effectively became a third arm, and as I crawled I labored to ensure that not one of the barrel's 28 inches protruded above the grass. I wriggled under the yellow canopy like a snake stalking its prey for fifteen minutes, at which point I warily poked my head into the air.

The two longbeards were surprisingly still too far away to take a shot. As I prepared to continue my commando crawl, I unexpectedly noticed several more birds which were coming to join the party. This group, which was at least 75 yards to my left, included multiple jakes and one mature gobbler. I lay back

down, attempting to tame the adrenaline which flowed in my veins and shook me sporadically, then resumed sliding along in the dirt.

At ground level, I could hear every cluck, drum, and purr that the birds let out. Slowly crawling another forty yards toward the muffled noises resulted in a thick layer of sweat on my camo clothing, and assuming by this point I'd be right on top of the two toms, I once again risked a glance. To my dismay, forty yards (too far to risk a shot from the position I was in) separated them from my shotgun. It seemed that every time I gained twenty yards, the birds strutted fifteen in the opposite direction.

Woefully aware that at this rate I would soon lose the toms into the woods across the field, I began calling them with a deliberate series of yelps using a mouth call. This served to slow the gobblers and allow me a chance to settle myself for a decent shot. After making my final advance, I shouldered the 870 Express from the prone position... and saw two folded tails disappearing rapidly. For the next few minutes I lay sprawled on my belly with clenched fists and not the slightest idea why the birds had fled. I had practiced no less caution in the last five minutes than I had in the previous hour.

I briefly scanned my surroundings and found that not even the third gobbler I had seen was still visible. He, like the other toms, had thought of something better to do than play cat and mouse with the weird hen in the grass. However, the five jakes I had seen were only half of a football field off and closing in. After a handful of purrs and some quiet yelps, the curious turkeys redoubled their pace. At twenty-five yards they stopped... The big jake stuck his head up... BOOM!!

When the smoke and feathers cleared, I saw that one of the most exhausting hunts of my life was over. As I had known well before I pulled the trigger, this bird was no trophy. The six inch beard was more than enough, though, to have me jumping for joy.

Suddenly, movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. A second jake had caught a few pellets and was lying belly-down in the grass! I had scored a double.



So next Spring, if yelps and purrs won't bring in a bird, and clucks and cutts fall short of that big gobbler's standards, perhaps an unorthodox method like the commando crawl will do the trick.