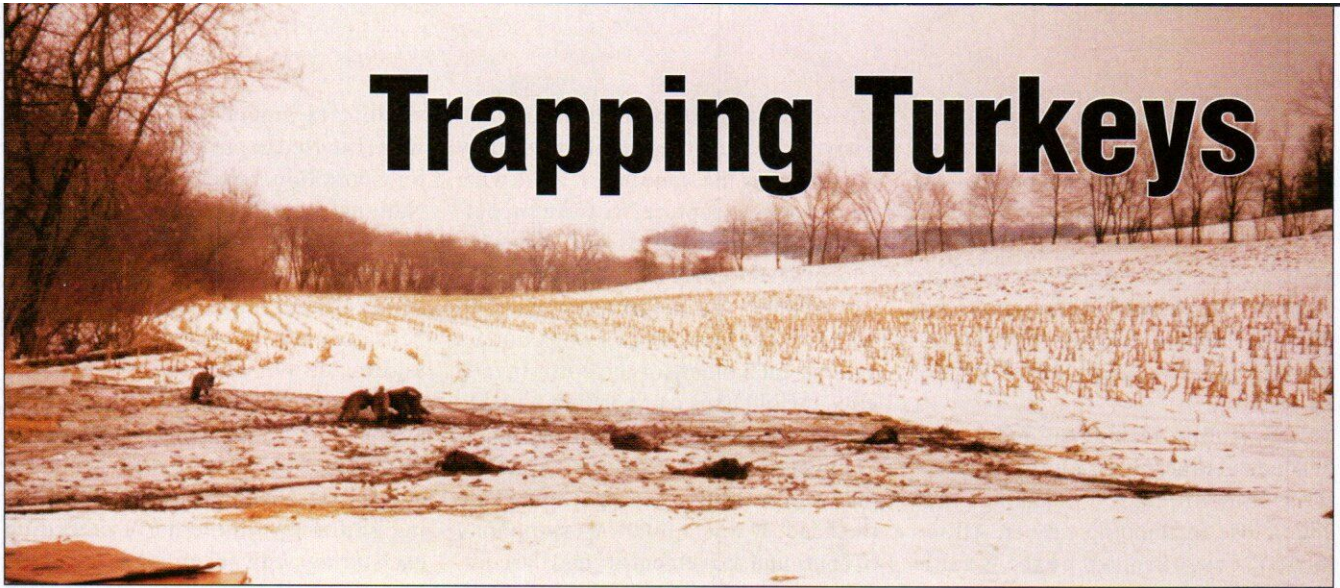


# Trapping Turkeys



**By Scot Dahms**

**W**here is Green Island, Iowa?" I wondered, opening an envelope from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). The letter confirmed that I'd been selected as a worker to capture turkeys there during January and February. I was about to learn that trapping turkeys would involve much more than I guessed it might.

I'd worked for IDNR at Pilot Knob State Park, then Beed's Lake State Park, during the summer while attending college. After that, I was lucky enough to get a student position with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Saylorville Lake, which resulted in a permanent seasonal park ranger position.

While in this position, I could be furloughed between January and March. My first year, I wasn't furloughed. The second year, I was furloughed for a month and a half. The third year, 1998, I was furloughed the full three months. Having used the brunt of my vacation time in November and December to trap furbearers, I looked favorably on my furlough. I could have continued trapping beavers and other furbearers. But I decided to trap turkeys for the experience – and receiving a definite paycheck. Unknown to me at the time, this would be my last furlough. I earned a permanent position with the Army Corps of Engineers in Texas in January of 1999.

IDNR trapped turkeys to use the birds in a wildlife exchange with two other states: The turkeys would go to Texas, Texas swapped another critter to

Louisiana, then Louisiana river otters came to Iowa. A dollar amount was assigned to the different sexes and ages. A tom was worth \$500, hens \$250 and jakes \$100. The value of the other species in the trade wasn't shared.

When I arrived at the Green Island Wildlife Station, I found it was at the base of the hills along the Mississippi River. This was a major elevation change for me. I grew up in northcentral Iowa's flatlands, where you can see for miles in all directions from one spot. At Green Island, hills and valleys were the order of the day, with lots of standing timber, the opposite of endless acres of corn and soybean fields.

The turkey trappers, all three of us, were housed in a building that included bunk beds, a kitchen, a bathroom and a television – all the necessities of life for my 27-year-old self.

The first day of work, I was instructed on how the trapping worked. The turkeys would be netted. Rockets would propel a net over the birds before they could fly away.

At the location where we intended to trap the birds, we stretched out the net, then laid it back upon itself in 6-inch-wide layers. The anchor points had to be on the bottom and the connections to the rockets had to be on top. Then the net was encased in a thin piece of plastic, folded in half. Holes for the anchor ropes were made in the fold and pulled through, then the ropes to attach to the rockets were pulled out where the two plastic ends met. These ends were stapled to each other. When finished, the folded net was encased in

plastic, the anchor ropes came out one side and the rocket ropes came out the side stapled together.

Next, we added explosive charges inside the rockets. The rockets were constructed from metal pipes about 3 inches in diameter and 8 inches long. The head of the rocket was welded shut. The bottom of the pipe was threaded. A threaded cap for the pipe had several holes in it. A piece of rebar with a chain was welded onto the cap. The explosive charge was already in a bag with a wire hanging out. The charge went into the rocket, with the wire placed through one of the holes and the cap was screwed on. Other parts included the posts (a fence post welded to a tire rim) the rockets were fired from, one per rocket. The finishing touches included wire, a blasting crank, turkey cardboard boxes and a blind for the turkey trapper to watch from and keep warm.

Each trapper had an IDNR vehicle to drive to the trapping location. Two were smaller, recent, automatic pickups. One was an older, red, manual transmission Ford F 250 4 x 4. Since I had the least seniority, I got the red F 250. This was exactly like my grandfather's blue farm truck, what he called "Old Blue." I had fond memories of Blue because I was allowed to drive it around the farm at a very young age. I dubbed the IDNR F 250 "Old Red."

We trapped turkeys during the coldest parts of the year for two reasons. The first was to keep them from becoming overheated while fighting the net, possibly killing the bird from heat exhaustion. Cold temperatures made heat dissipate.

The other issue was transporting them. In warmer weather, with the sun beating down on the transportation boxes – the boxes didn't have many ventilation holes – the birds could also overheat. Snow cover also helped to dissipate some of the impact of the net hitting flushing turkeys and the bird hitting the ground, assuming it was fluffy, not frozen over.

A wildlife technician and I soon headed out to set up a trapping location. It was chosen because it was along a field edge close to standing timber. All the locations were scouted by the wildlife station's permanent employees.

At the location, we unloaded our gear. We cleared the snow in a long trench to accommodate the plastic covered net. The anchor ropes were secured to the ground with rebar stakes. The rocket posts were placed. Wires were connected to main wires that ran to the blind, but not the blasting crank. That would wait until everything was ready, to prevent premature firing. The net was covered with a light layer of straw. And a 5-gallon bucket of corn was dropped in the center, close to the net.

Then began the long, cold wait for the turkeys to come in. Typically, toms came in smaller groups of about 10 birds. Flocks of hens could number in the hundreds. The goal was to get about 15 birds into the trap. If it was a group of toms, five to 10 birds were about right.

The flocks never arrived at the same time. A continual movement of birds through the area took place, and the goal was to shoot towards the end of the flock's movement. This aimed to decrease the number of birds that witnessed the net firing without getting caught. Turkeys that saw this wouldn't come back to that location.

We also tried to get as many turkeys with their heads down when the rockets went off as possible, to decrease the number that could be hit by the rockets pulling the lead line of the net. If a turkey's neck was extended upward, there was a good chance the bird would be harmed.

Turkeys had their own schedule, and usually, after watching a flock for a few days, I knew when they'd show

up, when the last bird would be through. They had a route they'd follow, usually not returning the same day. If there were more flocks to capture, we were encouraged to shoot more. If not, we were encouraged to wait for the perfect shot.

I found the perfect shot hard to come by. The various age groups worked against each other for the corn. Invariably, the old hens came in first with the younger hens in tow. If an old and a younger hen were at the corn together, the younger bird usually got pecked on the head. It was a hilarious symphony of continual movement around the corn. There was a distinct "pecking order."

Our blinds were simple boxes made from 4-foot by 8-foot sheets of plywood. They were 4-foot x 4-foot square on the ends, and 4-foot by 8-foot lengthwise. Small slits enabled the turkey trappers to see the bait and the birds. To stay perfectly camouflaged, only one slit was open at a time. If two were open and a turkey saw movement, the flock would flush, spoiling the trap.

With no insulation in the blind, the heater and a couple of chairs were critical equipment. The heater ran on a grill-sized propane tank. In the cold blind, a frost line was created. It was freezing below this line, way too hot above it, so the trick was to lay with your feet up and body extended right along this line. Staying in the blind for extended periods did not allow for much physical activity. A trip outside could alert the flock.

I fondly remember my first shoot. Since it was all new, I had no idea what the result would be. So, when a large flock moved through, and about 20 hens remained feeding, I did as instructed. I connected the wires to the blasting crank, waited for as many heads to be down as possible – no easy feat, because when one head was down, another popped up – then cranked the handle.

"KABOOM!"

The rockets were louder than expected, louder than a 12 gauge report. A conglomeration of feathers, net, snow and turkeys were thrown into the air. Some birds flew off, but many were under the net.

Outside the blind, I counted 15 in the net, a good number I thought the

wildlife technicians would be happy with. I started to put together the turkey transportation boxes provided by the National Wild Turkey Federation. And that's when I learned a valuable lesson.

As I watched, a few birds flushed, lifting the net high enough to let three hens run under the lifted edge. I'd been told to run out after the rockets fired and make sure each turkey was safely tangled in the net before putting the boxes together. To correct my mistake, I quickly ran out and tangled the remaining 12 turkeys in the net. I picked up each turkey with net on each side of the bird, then laid them on their side, which gave me time to put the boxes together.

After the boxes were assembled, each turkey was loaded into a box. Care was taken, working from the outside edge of the net in, to make sure no birds escaped or were harmed. I loaded the 12 boxed birds into the truck and returned to the wildlife station. The turkeys were kept at the station for a short time, then transported to a larger holding facility. One of the technicians was usually gone before I got back for the day to make these deliveries.

Another shoot I recall was the only time I got to shoot the net for toms. A group of seven gobblers frequented a field edge. I managed to get all seven in the net, remembering to run out and tangle them before any could escape.

We were only permitted a certain number of hours of work as turkey trappers. I remember my last day, more for driving Old Red than catching turkeys. It was a snowy, icy Friday. I didn't have an opportunity to shoot a flock and was on my way back to the wildlife station. I wasn't paying attention to the roads as much as I should have and slid into the ditch. I thought getting Old Red out wouldn't be a problem, but I was wrong. The truck was stuck by the frame. Four spinning tires caused no motion. Just then, an Iowa Department of Transportation plow came by and offered to tow me out. I accepted.

By the time I returned to the station, everyone had gone home. I filled out my timecard and left it with a note, "Completed my hours today, no turkeys, but I went in the ditch and got pulled out by IDOT." ■