

Few things make your heart pound harder than calling a wild turkey into close range.

Talking TURKEY

by Matt Seek

If you're a nature lover, turkeys are endlessly entertaining to watch. And if you're a sportsperson, they're a thrill to hunt. But turkeys are wary birds, and trying to sneak up on one is a good way to learn what the south end of a northbound bird looks like. To get up-close and personal with this careful critter, your best bet is to fool it into thinking you're a friendly member of the flock. And to do that, you'll need to learn how to talk turkey.

Yelp

Squeaky, high-pitched yelps are the most-used words in turkey talk. Three to seven yelps strung together is how a turkey says: "I'm here. Come see me." It's also how a hen tells a gobbler: "Howdy, handsome! Let's go on a date."



Learn the Language

Turkeys are chatty birds that make many sounds. Next time you're near a flock, listen for these common calls.



Caw or Hoot

Aggressive gobblers can't stand letting other birds have the last word. So when a crow caws or an owl hoots, a nearby tom will often belt out a loud, defiant gobble. The next time you're in the woods, make a loud hoot and see if a nearby gobbler answers back.



Putt

Uh-oh! Something seems suspicious. A sharp, worried **PUTT!** is how turkeys warn others of danger.

Gobble

Adult male turkeys, called gobblers or toms, rip out a thunderous **GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE!** to attract hens and let other toms know who's boss.

Cluck

Turkeys often cluck like chickens while they're moving around looking for food. Happy clucking tells other turkeys: "Chill out. Relax. Life is good."

Purr

A soft, catlike purr is made — along with clucks — when turkeys feel safe or when they're feeding. It reassures other turkeys in the group that everything's OK.



Tools of the Trade

Turkey calls help hunters (and birdwatchers) cluck, purr, and yelp like a turkey calling to its friends. There are many kinds of calls, and each has pros and cons.



BOX Call

Most new hunters learn to call by using a box call, which is simply a small wooden box with an open top.

The lid, or paddle, is stroked over the edges of the box to make sound. By changing the speed of the stroke and the pressure on the paddle, you can create yelps, clucks, purrs, putts, and other turkey sounds.

Good: Box calls are easy to use, which makes them great for beginners. They're also quite loud and work well when the woods are noisy, like on windy days.

Bad: Box calls may work poorly in wet or humid weather. Some must have chalk applied to the paddle before they'll make realistic sounds. And, unless you have three hands, you can't hold a shotgun or binoculars and use a box call at the same time.

PUSH-BUTTON Call

A push-button call is the easiest way for a rookie to make lifelike yelps. All you have to do is push a spring-loaded button. This causes a pencil-sized rod to rub inside a small box, producing sound. By changing the pressure, speed, and rhythm on the button, you can make different sounds.

Good: Push-button calls are dead simple to use. You can work them with one hand, leaving the other free to reach for a shotgun or a pair of binoculars.

Bad: Push-button calls are one-hit wonders. They produce a few calls well, but they don't make the wide variety of sounds that other calls can offer.



SLATE Call

With just a little extra practice, you can use a slate call (aka pot call) to make a wider variety of turkey sounds than you can with either a push-button or box call. To make a slate call "talk," you scratch a pencil-shaped striker across a disc of slate, glass, or metal.

Good: With a slate call, you can make nearly any sound a real turkey can make.

Bad: Slate calls are a little trickier to learn than other hand-held calls. They're not as loud, either, so turkeys may have trouble hearing you on windy days. And it's hard to hold a shotgun or binoculars and work a slate call at the same time.

MOUTH Call

You use a mouth call kind of like how you play a clarinet: You put the call in your mouth and force air over a thin piece of plastic. By changing the shape of your mouth and varying how hard you blow, you can fool a turkey into having quite a conversation with you.

Good: A mouth call lets you shoulder a shotgun or peer through binoculars while also calling to a turkey. In the hands — oops, mouth — of an experienced caller, mouth calls make a variety of realistic turkey sounds.

Bad: The only downside to a mouth call is its steep learning curve. Beginners are better off using hand-held calls.



Help for Your Yelps



Talking turkey well enough to fool real birds takes practice. You can search online for turkey calling videos to help hone your skills. (For a quick lesson on using a box call, check out short.mdc.mo.gov/ZaX.) Or register for a turkey hunting class at mdc.mo.gov/events. But the best way to learn is to find an experienced caller who's willing to take you under his or her wing.



Make a Homemade Turkey Call

There's no need to rush out and buy a call if you're itching to try talking to a turkey. It's easy to make a call at home by recycling a few items you probably already have in your kitchen.

» Here's What You Need

- Empty yogurt cup (Make sure it's washed!)
- Drinking straw
- Scissors
- Duct tape
- Brown, green, or black paint



» Here's What You Do

- 1 Trim the straw so it's a couple inches taller than the yogurt cup.
- 2 Tape the straw inside the yogurt cup. Leave a space about the width of your pinky between the bottom of the straw and the bottom of the cup.
- 3 Paint the cup with brown, green, or black paint, or use camouflage duct tape to cover the cup as we've done in the picture.



» How to Use Your Call

Hold the tip of the straw in your lips and sip like you're giving someone a noisy kiss. With practice, you'll soon be able to produce a sharp yelp.

